Noon Creek schoolhouse was within easy eyeshot of Isaac Reese's horse ranch—and I wondered if he held horse memories of this stretch of country. "Skorp Yun, lad, what about that?" I inquired of him and patted his velvet neck. Scorpion's ears twitched up and I suppose that was my answer, as much as the horse clan was willing to tell a man.

A quick how-do here and home was my intention. This schoolhouse was much like mine—for that matter, so was its attendant pair of outhouses—except for standing all but naked to the wind, Noon Creek providing only a thin sieve of willows instead of the South Fork's broadback clumps of cottonwoods. Ask any dozen people passing and thirteen of them would tell you my schoolsite was the obvious superior.

Pleased with that and armored with the thought that however howlingly formidable Mrs. Battle-Axe Ramsay might try to be I was the senior teacher hereabout, I tied Scorpion beside the Noon Creek teacher's horse and strode to the schoolhouse.

"Hello, anyone," I called in, and followed my words through the doorway.

A woman did look up from the teacher's desk. A woman whose shoulders drew back nobly and whose breasts came out nobler yet. A woman my age or less. A woman with the blackest of black hair done into a firm glossy braid, and with perfect round cheeks and an exactly proportionate chin and a small neat nose, and with direct blue eyes. A glory of a woman.

She granted me an inquiring half-smile, the rest of her
expression as frank as a clock. "Hello," she enunciated, although what was being said was And What Is Your Business Here, If Any?

I told her me. And made about as much impression as a mosquito alighting on a stone fence.

"I am called Anna Ramsay," she stated in return, and I was going to need to ask Ninian what he thought a battle-axe talked like. Hers was a liltful voice which may have paused in Canada but only after fully flowering in Scotland.

"I'm the teacher at the South Fork school, over across, Mrs. Ramsay," I hurried to clarify.

"I am the teacher here," said she, "and it is Miss Ramsay."

Rob, Lucas, my unhearing father, my sorrowful mother, all who have ever known me and generations yet to come: did you feel any of this catchbreath instant together with me, this abrupt realization in the throat that said here was the end to all my waiting, this surprise swale of time while I traced step by step back to the brain of Ninian the Calvinian? Ninian Duff had told me Mrs. Ramsay was an old battle-axe. He had told me the new Noon Creek teacher could stand a cordial look-in. He had never bothered to tell me those two formulations did not add up to the same person.

"Yes, well. Miss Ramsay, now. I, ah, seem to have been misinformed," I understated. "In any case, I came by to say hello"—her look told me that had been more than amply done by now, and not in ribbonwinning fashion—"and to see if there's any help I can offer."

"That's kind," she decided. "But I know of none."
In that case, Miss-not-Mrs. Ramsay, help me and my dazed
tongue. What do you think the price of rice in China will reach?
And are you the absolute lovely thing you appear to be under the
crust?

"I'm trying to place your voice," I managed, true enough in its
way: trying to coax the sound of it into my ears for as long as
possible. "Your town in Scotland is--?"

"My town was Brechin." Brechin! Not all that far from my own
Nethermuir, in the same county of Forfar. The magic that life is.
She and I must have grown up sharing the same days of sun, the same
storms from the sea.

I at once told her of my Nethermuir nativity, which did not
noticeably set her afire with interest. "This Montana is different
from old Scotland, isn't it," I imparted.

She regarded me steadily as ever. "Yes."

"Although," I began, and had no idea where to head from there.

"Mr. McCaskill, you've just reminded me, there is one matter
you may be able to help me with." Anything, anything.

wheelbarrowing a mountain from here to there, putting socks on
snakes. "I find I'm in short supply of Montana geography books.
Mr. Reese promised me more, but he's away buying horses."

"I have loads extra," I offered as fast as I could say it.
Later would be soon enough to calculate whether or not I actually
had any. "You're more than welcome to them."

Anna Ramsay shook that matchless head of hers, but in general
perturbance at men who would see to horses before geography, rather
than at my offer. "I've had to put the pupils to making their own."

I was as flumoxed now as a duck in thunder. "You've--?"

"Yes, they're a bit makeshift but better than nothing," she said and gestured to the stack of them at the corner of her desk. They were pamphlets of as many colors as a rainbow, bound with yarn, with My Montana Book and each pupil's name bold on the cover. More than just that, the pamphlets were scissored into the unmistakable shape of the state of Montana—twice as wide as high and the entire left side that curious profile of a face looking down its bent nose at Idaho. I opened the pamphlet proclaiming Dill Egan, grade four, to be its author. Intently—not only was I curious but I was not going to forfeit this opportunity to hover in the near vicinity of Miss Anna Ramsay—as I say, intently as I could manage with so much distraction so close I started through the pamphlet pages.

Products of Montana, and Dill Egan's confident map of where gold, copper, cattle, sheep and sundry grains each predominated. Area and Population of Montana, 147,138 square miles and 132,159 persons respectively, and his enstarred map showing Helena, Butte, Bozeman, Missoula, Great Falls, Billings, Miles City and the now twenty-four county seats. Mountains of Montana and another map showing the western throng of ranges, Bitterroot and Cabinet and Garnet and Mission and Tendoy and Tobacco Root and on and on until the Bearpaws and Little Rockies and Big Snowys outposted the eastern majority of the state. Drainages of Montana and yet another map of all the rivers and what must have been every respectable creek as well, with the guiding message The Continental Divide separates the Atlantic
and the Pacific slopes of America. Minerals of Montana. Railroads of Montana—\underline{\textit{I had a sudden image of this brisk beautiful woman beside me as the goddess of geography, fixing the boundaries of this careless world as unerringly as Job's prosecutor or even the U.S. General Land Office. Anna Ramsay's ten-year-olds all too evidently knew more about Montana than I did. Every one of them a Crofutt in the bud.}}

\underline{\textit{I swallowed hard. I took a look around me. High on the blackboard behind us was chalked the majestically handwritten single word:}}

\textbf{chilblain}

\underline{\textit{Other than it, the blackboard was not only freshly cleaned, it shone black. The best I could scrape together to remark was: "Your chalk keeps talking after school, does it?"}}

\underline{\textit{"Yes, that's tomorrow's word in the air," she explained. "I write a different one up there for each day. That way, when the pupils' eyes go wandering off into air, they at least are looking at how one word of the language is spelled."}}

\underline{\textit{"A sound principle," I vouched sagely, wishing I'd thought of it the first day I stepped into my South Fork classroom. Contemplate the miracle of chilblain spelling itself, even approximately, into the mind of Daniel Rozier. My eyes moved on from the blackboard. Her schoolroom gleamed like the Queen's kitchen. This Miss Ramsay seemed to be a stickler about everything.}}

\underline{\textit{"You, ah, you were a teacher in Scotland, were you?" I entirely}}
unnecessarily asked.

"In a dame school, back in Brechin." It seemed to me a
magnificent beneficence when she tilted her head ever so slightly
and decided to add: "As you say, this is different."

I wanted to sing out to her, so are you, so are you. I wanted
to hang Ninian Duff from a high tree by his beard. I wanted to go
back out that schoolhouse door, turn myself around three times, and
start this anew. I wanted—instead I managed to draw in enough
breath to clear my head and free up my tongue: "I'll fetch the
geographies to you. Tomorrow, I even could. And if there's
anything else whatsoever you need—"

"Mr. Reese will be back from his beloved horses any day. It is
his job to see that I have what the school needs." Again that first
half-smile of hers and the simultaneous clocklike frankness, in
which I desperately tried to discern a momentworth more of warmth
than when I arrived. "Mr. McCaskill, I do appreciate that you came."

"It's been my pleasure, Miss Ramsay."

Riding home, I was the next thing beyond giddy. Scorpion must
have compassed his own route around the west shoulder of Breed Butte
and down to my homestead, or he and I would be circling there yet.

Astonishment. That was my word in the air. The coming of dusk
was an astonishment, the last of this April day coloring a blue
into the gray of the mountains as if sky had entered rock. My
homestead was an astonishment, in expectant welcome there beside the
North Fork like the front porch to the future. The greening grass,
the dabbed yellow of buttercups, the creek rattling mildly over smooth stones, the rhythm of Scorpion's hooves against the earth, the ever-restless air of the Two Medicine country traveling over my skin, the pertinent Burns: my heart was caught/before I thought, astonishments all. For that matter, I was an astonishment to myself--how fertile for love I was. Is this life? Just when you have lived long enough to think you know yourself, behavior such as this crops out?

But the braided marvel that touched alive all these others. Anna Ramsay. Where, really, did I stand with her, after an acquaintance that would have barely boiled an egg? I didn't know. I didn't even know how to know. Thunder tumbling out of an absolute clear sky, was the way this had fallen on me. The one certainty I held was that the women I had met in my life so far were no training for this one.

Oh, I tried to tell myself whoa and slow. And by the time I'd cooked supper twice--my first try burned conclusively--I had myself half-believing I was somewhere near to sane again. Steady, Angus, don't rush in brainless. For that matter, Miss Anna Ramsay did not look anything like a person who tolerated rushing.

But I did go to bed with the thought that tomorrow, nothing known on earth could keep me from delivering those geography books to her.

"This was kind of you"—she, even more glorious on second inspection. "To make the ride over here so soon again."
"Not at all"—myself, earnest without even trying. "If one
schoolkeeper can't lend a hand to another schoolkeeper, the world is
a poor place."

Just over Anna's head as she stood behind her desk was her
blackboard word for today, accommodate, which for the first time in
my life I noticed contains more than one m.

"Before you go"—I had no thought of that—"I do have something
further I wonder if you might advise me about, Mr. McCaskill."

"Miss Ramsay, if I can I will. What?"

"How do you keep the big boys from playing pranks that have to
do with"—she never blinked—"the girls' outhouse?"

With teacup delicacy I outlined to her the curative effects of
the boys having to go in the brush. Throughout, she regarded me
steadily. Then she swung to the schoolroom window and studied the
willow supply along the creek. As I watched her at this it came to
me that she was very much a practitioner of the Scottish verdict,
Not Proven, this Anna Ramsay. Guilty or Innocent could stand on
either side of a matter until their tongues hung out, but she was
going to do justice firmly from the middle ground of proof and
nowhere else. I also stored away forever the fact that her braid
gloriously swung almost all the way down her glorious back.

Evidently she judged the Noon Creek willows ample to their
duty, sufficient thatch of them to screen a boy but not enough to
thwart the chilly seeking nose of the wind, for she turned around to
me and nodded with spirit. "Yes, that should do it. Thank you for
that advice, Mr. McCaskill. Well. I have grading—"
"As do I," I put in, as accommodating as can be imagined. "But now there's a question I need to put to you. I've visited your school, and I'd much like you to visit mine. We're holding a dance, Saturday next week. Could I see you there?"

She grew as intent as if I'd thrown her a major problem in
multiplication. "It's early to say." Seeing my hope plummet, she provided me a half-smile to grapple it back up. "But possibly--"

"I could come for you."

"That won't be necessary."

"Oh, no trouble."

"But it would be." She was looking at me a bit askance, as if wondering how a grown man could not see that an extra stint on horseback equaled an inconvenience for himself. Anna Ramsay plainly could out-teach me in spelling and geography, but there was at least one variety of arithmetic she didn't yet understand.

"I'm sure others from Noon Creek will be attending," she elucidated for me, "and I can come with them."

Come in a congregation, come by your lovely lone self, come dogback or come in a purple carriage with wheels of gold, but just come. Aloud, I granted: "A sensible solution. I'll see you at South Fork then, on the night."

When I went to the lambing shed to relieve Rob that evening, he greeted me with: "And how is life among all you schoolkeepers?"

Already. The way news flew in a country with so few tongues to relay it, I never would comprehend.

Stiff as a poker, I retorted to Rob: "You seem to know at least as much about my doings as I do."

"Angus, Angus. Just because there's a fresh path worn this deep"--he indicated to his knee--"between the South Fork schoolhouse and the Noon Creek schoolhouse, I thought I might inquire."

"Well, you've done." But I couldn't stay miffed where Anna was
concerned. "She needed a bit of help on a geography matter."

"Geography," Rob mused. "That's the word for it these days, is it."

"Rob, aren't you on your way home to supper?"

"You're certain sure you know what you're getting into with all this geography business? From what I hear, Miss Noon Creek is a bit of a snooty one."

I was outraged. "Speaking of snoots, you can just keep your own damn one out of--"

"All right, all right. If you're not in a mood to hear wisdom, you're not." The words were light enough, although behind them Rob still seemed peeved. But a day in overshoes in the muck of a lambing shed will do that to a man, and he sounded thoroughly himself when he went on: "Probably this is nothing you'll find near so interesting as geography, but Lucas brought out today that wool is up to 12 1/2 cents and lambs are climbing fine, too. This is the year we've been looking for, man." Rob had it right, the world and its price of wool and lambs was not what I wanted to think about, only Anna. However far gone he thought I was down romance's knee-deep road, he didn't know half of it. I was Anna dizzy, in an Anna tizzy. These days there seemed to be fresh blood in my veins, potions brewed by the maker of hareem. But the relentless fact of Anna always in my mind also startled me constantly, if it can be said that way, and I will tell you it was a bit scaring, too. Everything I did any more was through a haze of Anna, sometimes a sweet blue mist that made any task light, other times a forgetful
fog. At the end here of what I thought was perfectly normal lambing
shed conversation, Rob cocked his head and asked: "Are you off your
feed this spring, McAngus? You'd better come by and let Judith tuck a few
solid suppers into you."

I said I would, soon, whenever that was, and Rob gave me one
last askance glance and departed.

You could have counted the next ten days on my face. I went
from remorse at how long it would be until I laid eyes on Anna
again, to fevers that I wouldn't be prepared when I did. One
morning I was gravely giving arithmetic when Susan Duff pointed out
that I already had done so, not an hour before. And I suppose all
my South Fork pupils were startled by the onslaught of Montana
geography that befell them.

One thing I did know for dead-certain, and this was that my
schoolhouse was going to be grandly ready to dance. At the close of
class that Friday I prevailed on Davie Erskine to stay after and
help me, and we moved the rows of desks along the walls and pushed
my desk into a corner. Davie took out the stove ashes while I
filled lanterns and trimmed wicks. There never has been a boy
enthusiastic about a broom, so I next swept the floor myself in
solid Medicine Lodge swamping style and put Davie to wiping the
windows with old copies of the Choteau Quill.

"But Mr. McCaskill, it'll be dark out, why do the windows need
to be clean?"

"On account of the moonbeams, Davie. You've got to let the
moonbeams in on a dance, or people’s feet will stick to the floor.
Did you not know moonbeams are slick as soap, Davie?"

Davie gaped at me as if I already was askate on moonbeams, but he did the windows fine. Next I had him wash the blackboard, then fill our bucket with fresh drinking water from the creek. I swept and hummed, dusted and hummed, I even straightened the pictures of George and Abraham and gave them each a hum of joy, they always looked as if they needed cheer.

"Do you know this old tune, Davie?" I asked, for it seemed to me an impossibly dim prospect that anyone should go through this wonderful thing, life, knowing only songs of Texans and horses. "You don't? That's odd, for it seems to be addressed to you."

"Me?"

"Surely. Listen to it.

Dancing at the rascal fair,
try it, Davie, if you dare,
hoof and shoe, stag and mare,
dancing at the rascal fair.

Davie whipped through the last of his tasks as if afraid my lunacy might be catching. "Is there anything more, Mr. McCaskill?"

"You've more than earned supper, Davie. And thank you the world, for your help here." I fished in my pocket and handed him a coin. From the size of Davie's eyes it was more of a coin than I'd intended, but no matter.
There was a thing more I wanted done, but I needed to be the doer. I went to the freshly washed blackboard and in my best hand, which was an urchin's scrawl compared to Anna Ramsay's, wrote large the next verse to come:

Dancing at the rascal fair,
moon and star, fire and air,
choose your mate and make a pair,
dancing at the rascal fair.

By last light of Saturday, the sun behind the peak called Phantom Woman and dusk graying the valley, people came. Rob and Judith. The Duffs and Erskines. I scattered oatmeal on the floor to help the moonbeams with our gliding. George Frew as ever was our fiddler, and the night began with the high beautiful tune of Green Glens of Strathpny. I took a diplomatic first turn with George's Mavis toward convincing her that while I might never run a school the way she did, my dancing made up for it.

The first time we stopped to blow, Rob glanced over his shoulder to be sure Mavis Frew nee Milgrim was nowhere in hearing and declared, "This place definitely dances better since you're the schoolkeeper, Angus. What, have you put bed springs under the floor?"

I was gazing around fondly, awaiting what—who—I knew would come. Must come. "Owe it to George, not me. He fiddles better as a married man."

Judith put in, "There's a lesson there for you, Angus."
"You mean if I married, I'd be able to play the fiddle? Judith, that's surprising. What would I need to do to be able to play the piano?"

Rob chortled and batted my shoulder while Judith mocked a huff and declared: "Angus, you are just impossible." Ah, Judith, but I no longer was. I was purely possible. I was possibility with its wings ready, these days. "You have me right," I mollified Judith though, "yet would you dance with me anyhow? Rob, there's paper and pen in my desk there, if you'd care to jot down for yourself how Judith and I do this."

"I'm lending her to you with two sound feet, so bring her back unbroken, hear?"

"Unbroken, nothing. She'll be downright improved." And Judith and I swung away together, Rob's two closest people in this world, who once had kissed hotly at one of these gatherings and could grin a little rue at each other that we never would again.

Archie and Grace Findlater came. The Shepherd's Schottische. The Hahns and Petersons and Van Bebbers came. The Herring Lasses' Reel. The Roziers from down the main creek, the Kuuvuses and Sedgwicks from town, they came and came.

"Angus, lad, you can hear this schoolhouse of yours a mile down the road." Lucas! And Nancy on his arm. This major night had brought even them.

"What, did you turn the Medicine Lodge over to the customers?" I asked incredulous.

"The same as. Toussaint showed up in town today and so he's
tending the saloon for me tonight. If you can call that
tending--giving away a drink to anybody who has a story Toussaint
wants to hear, which is to say everybody.” Nancy, brown beside
Lucas’s ruddiness, already was making heads turn here and there in
the dance crowd. “But there’s more to life than what you can put in
your pocket, ay?” concluded Lucas, squaring himself and casting a
resolute look around my thronged schoolroom. “Good evening there,
Ninian,” he called as that lanky figure capered past, “you’re as
spry as King David up on his hind feet.” I thought the beard was
going to drop off Ninian when he saw Lucas here. Then Rob and
Judith were beside us, a last dab of startlement on Rob’s face as he
said: “You didn’t tell me we were going to have this pleasure,
Lucas.”

“I didn’t want to spoil the surprise, Robbie. Nancy and I
thought we’d come learn how to shake a leg.”

When that didn’t bring anything from Rob except a smile as
neutral as he could make it, I rapidly inserted, “This is definitely
the learning place and they tell me I’m the teacher. Nancy, may I
have the first honor?” And next quick thing, out on the floor Lucas
was paired with Judith, one handless sleeve on her back and the
other meeting the grasp of her hand in the musical air, while Nancy
went into the swirl with me—she did not really dance but moved
quietly with me, a dark-eyed visitor from an earlier people.

After that tune, Lucas regathered Nancy and took her across to
greet Sedge and Lila just as if he hadn’t seen them a dozen times
that day. Evening proceeded toward night. On and on the music
flowed and the sweat rolled. Thank heaven George Frew’s fiddling
left arm was as oaken as the rest of him. Sedge taught us a square
dance called Bunch to the Middle and we danced it until the floor
would remember every step of it.

By the holy, I loved these people. This night I loved all of
Scotch Heaven, the Two Medicine country, Montana, America, the sky
over and the earth under. Who could not?

What I loved strongest of all entered now through my schoolroom
doorway in a dark blue skirt and white shirtwaist and an ivory
brooch at her throat. Anna. And her mother and father—
surprisingly unprepossessing, for a pair who had given mankind such
a gift—and others from Noon Creek, the Wainwrights and Egans and
Isaac Reese, all come in one wagon, and now entering our tuneful
school eager for the reward of that ride.

"Welcome across the waters to Scotch Heaven," Rob called out to
this delegation and drew a laugh from all. The South Fork and North
Fork and Noon Creek taken together, you could still skim your hat
across.

"Brung the Ramsays along to translate for us," gruffed the
rancher Thad Wainwright. "I damn well might’ve known, the only
heaven I'd get into I need to learn to talk Scotch to do it."

"God works in mysterious ways, Thad, yet we're pretty sure he
does wear a kilt," Lucas drily assured him.

That was more than the Duffs and a few others could listen to,
so onto the dance floor they stepped. They were right, too, for why
stand talking when you can be dancing?
Hoping for battle-axe avoidance this first night, I waited until Anna's mother and father took a dance together, then seized my chance to go over and greet Anna alone. "I see your chalk keeps talking after school, too," she said of my rascal fair verse in white on the blackboard. Which I took as approval, on the grounds that it didn't seem to be disapproval.

"That chalk must have caught the habit somewhere. Do you know, it took me by the hand as I was walking past and made me write that?"

"I suppose you objected strenuously all the while?"

"Objecting is a thing I try not to believe in, particularly the strenuous kind. Just for example, Miss Ramsay, I'm hoping you won't object to a turn around the floor with me right now? Sir Patrick MacWhirr wasn't meant to be stood to."

A flicker went through her steady eyes, but if that was hesitation I'll never mind a dose so small. Here came something else I'd hoped, her sidelong half-smile. Then up came her hand, writing in the air between us as if onto her Noon Creek blackboard. I waited, yes, astonished, while whatever it was got elaborately spelled into the atmosphere of my schoolroom. When done, she pronounced for me with vast amused deliberation:

"unobjectionable." And onto the dance floor I pranced with her.

To Noroway, to Noroway!

to Noroway over the foam!

the King's fair bride from Noroway --

oh, Sir Pat, Sir Pat, Sir Pat, Sir Pat!--

'Tis thee must sail and bring her home!
"I'll need to see whether there's a floor left for my pupils, after tonight."

"If there's not, you will have to teach outside as did the ancient Greeks."

"Outside, were they. Small wonder all they ever knew how to talk was Greek. Think the tongues they'd speak if they'd gone to school to the pair of us." She had to smile fully at that, and so did my heart. Anna was alive with loveliness, she was mine in my arms for as long as I could make the moment. "And what would they think of this at the Brechin dame school?"

I saw the new moon, late yester e'en,
with the old moon in her arm;
if we go to sea, oh my dear queen--
oh, dear queen, dear queen, dear queen, dear queen!--
I fear we must come to harm!

"They would think this Scotch Heaven of yours is a shameless place." My heart keeled sideways. "Cavorting in a place of learning. See up there, even your Presidents think so." The jounce of the dancing had tilted Washington and Lincoln toward each other, and they did look like two old streetcorner solemns, confiding the world's latest waywardness to each other.

"I hope that's not what you think," I hoped desperately.

"If a schoolhouse is the only place big enough for a dance, she postulated, "then the schoolhouse should be used."

"My own thought, exactly. And so we'll be dancing next at Noon Creek, will we?"
I particularly meant the two of us. She only granted, "The school board has the say of any dance. But I'll not object."

The sails were hoist on Monday morn,
the wind came up on Wednesday!
it blew and blew and blew so forlorn--

oh, Sir Pat and Queen, Sir Pat and Queen!--
blew Sir Pat and Queen from Norway!

I bided my time for a small eternity—it must have been fully the next two tunes' worth—before dancing with her again. But the wait was worth it, for during this circuit of the floor she sanctioned my suggestion that Miss Ramsay and Mister McCaskill might just as well be discarded to give Anna and Angus some wear. My aim this night was to dance with Anna enough times to begin to ratify us as a couple, yet not so many as to alarm her. So I didn't mind—much—when Allan Frew took a turn with her. From his doggish look toward me I knew that Allan knew I would pound him back to milkteeth if he tried seriously to get in my way with Anna. She even went a few rounds with Isaac Reese and made him and his drooping mustache look almost presentable. Then Rob danced with Anna to Brig of Dee while I did with Judith, and I saw Judith's eyebrow inch up at Rob's nonstop chat there, but I knew that was just him being him. I thanked my stars that Rob was not in the running with me for Anna. Indeed, peer along the lovelit road ahead as far as I could, I saw no one else who was. Which was wondrous and sobering and exhilarating and bewildering and intimidating and sublime all in the same pot together.
So spirited was *Brig of Dee* that it made Thad Wainwright come by and announce, "Angus and Rob, I got to hand it to you. You Scotchmen sure do know how to make feet move. Only one thing missing from tonight, so far's I can tell. How come no bagpipes?"

No drums, no bugles, no *tinsel tunes of war*. Lord of Mercy, when was the rest of mankind going to quit thinking of us as wild Highlanders? Past Thad I caught Rob's eye-rolling look, and if Lucas hadn't been across the room trading sheep theories with Willy Hahn, I knew he'd have given a response that would rattle the room. The soul of moderation, I only told Thad: "We thought there's enough wind in this country without making more."

"It's kind of disappointing though, you know? With all you Scotchmen here under one roof, the rest of us figured we were going to see some real flinging." The Noon Creek rancher chuckled a regret and moved on.

*Try it only if you dare, hoof and shoe, stag and mare,* my verse on the blackboard spoke to me over Thad's retreating shoulder. It made me remember aloud to Rob: "Fergus the Dervish."

Rob roared a laugh. "Fergus and his Highland whoops! He'd show old Thad some steps."

"Why don't we? The two of us saw Fergus enough times at the rascal fair."

"You think we can?"

"Man, is there something we can't do?"

"We haven't found it yet, have we. You're right, you're right, it will take Barclay and McCaskill to show these Noon Creek geezers"
what dancing is."

"McCaskill and Barclay," I set him straight, "but you're correct enough other than that. See if our man George can play Tam Lin, why not, while I tend to the rest."

Apprehensively, Judith began: "Now, you two--"

"No, love, it's we three, you're into this too. And whoever Angus can inveigle into risking her--"

I was across the room before my feet knew they were moving. I hadn't a wisp of a clue as to how this person Anna would react to a dancing exhibition. Here was the time of times to find out.

"It's all for the cause of education, of course," I prattled to her while those direct blue eyes worked on me. "Instruction for the world at large, think of it as."

The smile I wanted began to sidle onto her face. "I'll believe you," granted Miss Anna Ramsay and lightly grasped the arm I proffered, "but thousands would not."

With Anna gloriously beside me, I hadn't even a qualm about attempting the next impossibility across the room.

"Sing?!" Lucas repeated as if I'd asked him to shed all his clothing. "Angus, what in goddamn hell"—he stoppered that because of Anna's presence, but there still was considerable flame in his next try. "Angus, lad, I hate to say that your common sense flew out the hole in your hat, but asking for singing out of me..."

"Lucas, you're the only other one of us here who's been to the rascal fair and watched old Fergus. If Rob and I are going to step out here and show how it's done in Nethermuir, we need you to sing
Lucas was shaking his head vehemently when Anna spoke firmly: "Mr. Barclay, we in Brechin always heard that the men of Nethermuir are brothers to the lark."

That halted his head. "Well, yes, I know that was always said," Lucas confirmed without undue modesty. "We once in a while even said something of the sort ourselves. Tam Lin, did you mention, Angus?" I nodded. Lucas swallowed as if to be sure he had a throat there, then looked at Nancy. If answer passed between them I never saw it, but Lucas now said: "All right, all right, if I can remember any word of it."

Oh, you must beware, maidens all,
who wear gold in your hair
don't come or go by Linfield Hall
for young Tam Lin is there.

Dark and deep lay the wood of night
and eerie was the way
as fair Janet with hair so bright
toward Linfield Hall did stray.

I acknowledge that other nationalities are known to dance, but it is my hypothesis that they must have learned how from the Scots. You can't but admit that a land of both John Knox and Robert Burns is nimble, and we like to think that quality comes out on us at both ends, head and feet. Earlier that night I danced a reel with Flora Duff, who was wide as any other two women there, and
she moved like a rumor. And now Rob and Judith and Anna and I were the four-hearted dancer of all dancers, gliding to and from, following the weave of the tune, answering Lucas's unheavenly but solid voice with the melody of ourselves, saluting the night and life with our every motion and capping them all with the time-stopping instant when Rob and I faced one another, each with a hand on a hip and the other arm bent high abovehead, and our two throats as one flung the exultant Highland cry, hiiyuhh!

Her skirt was of the grass-green silk,
her cloak of velvet fine.
About her neck so white as milk
her fox-red furs entwine.

About the dead hour of the night
she heard Tam's bridles ring.
Her maidenly heart beat with might,
her pulse began to sing.

Put away geography and numeration and the Presidents from yon to hither, pupils of mine and of my partner in whirl, write for us books of that dance. Scissor her lovely profile down the left of your pages and in eternal ink say how forthright she is even when set to music. Miss Ramsay seems to look into the face of the tune in the air and say, yes, you are what music should be. Make an exact report, for from this moment on I will want to know the way she and I blend into a single dancing figure and then shift swiftly into two again and next meld with Rob and Judith. You will please
find a line somewhere there, too, for the heady Scotch Heaven
serenade this schoolroom has never heard before tonight: hiiiyuhhh!

She heard the horseman's silv'ry call,

'Come braid your golden hair
in the fine manse of Linfield Hall
for I, Tam Lin, am there.'

She went within that hall of Lin
fair Janet on her ride
and now you maidens know wherein
dwell Tam Lin and his bride.

HiiiiYUHHHH!

Our final whoop, Rob and I agreed, could have been heard by old
Fergus the Dervish himself wherever he was cavorting in Scotland
just then.

The crowd too gave us whoops and hoots and claps of
commendation as we two pairs of flingers vacated the floor to merely
mortal dancers and Lucas accepted bravos from all directions.

Escorting Anna off—I could have made a career of just that—I
asked, "Don't you suppose that changed their minds any about
schoolhouse dances, over across in Brechin?"

Where she held my arm I felt a lightest affirming squeeze. "If
anything could," was her voice's version.

When I reluctantly left Anna's side, I saw Rob gesture for me
to come over where he and Judith were catching their breath between
chat with Archie and Mary Findlater. Rob had a strange distant
As I came up, he gripped my shoulder. "I have to hand it to you, Angus, you do get an idea now and again."

I must have grinned like a moonchild, for Rob's head went from side to side and he expostulated, "No, no, I don't mean her. Any man with one eye that'll open could get that idea. What I mean is our Fergus fling. Angus, it made me think back to all our rascal fairs together and Nethermuir."

"What, are you growing sentimental in your old age?"

He gave me the caught smile of a mildly guilty boy. Whatever this was about, it had put that joyous shine on him of the day we stood on the Greenock dock. But he said only, "The surprises of this thing life. A person just never does know, does he." George Frew's fiddle began The Soldier Lad's Love's Lament. "And now that I've danced with you, McAngus, do you mind overmuch if I take a turn with my wife?"

I got myself beside Anna one last time as the goodbying was going on, and began: "You know, of course, tonight was a mark your Noon Creek dance will have to match."

"We will strive," she answered.

"It'll not be easy. Much of the music of the world got used up here tonight."

"We will dust off any that's left, you needn't worry. By now I know you are not a man for standing."

"There, you see? A mere few hours in my schoolroom and you've already learned a thing." Her parents were waiting at the door, I was drawing heavy looks from that mother of hers.

"Well. Goodnight, Anna," I finally had to say.

"Yes." A bit slow from her too, I noted with hope.
"Goodnight, Angus."

But before she could turn, I blurted: "Anna, I'd like to call on you."

That direct look of hers. "Then why don't you?"

A fly buzzed uselessly against the window of the Ramsay parlor, herald of my audience thus far with Anna's parents.

"So, Mr. McCaskill, you too are of Forfar," speaks the main dragon. "That surprises me." Margaret Ramsay, mother of Anna, looked as if she could out-general Wellington any day of the week. A drawn, bony sort of woman with none of Anna's adventurous curves, she seemed to have room in herself only for skepticism toward the male race. Beside her sat probably her prime reason for that. Peter Ramsay was a plump placid man who sat with his hands resting on his belly, the first finger of his right hand gripped his left, in the manner a cow's teat would be grasped. Ready to milk one hand with his other and evidently content to spend a lifetime at it. It stretched my imagination several ways beyond usual, as to how these two beings could have made Anna.

I was trying to be extra careful with my tongue, but: "I'd be interested to know, Mrs. Ramsay, in what aspect I look so different from other Forfar folk. My face, is it? I should have put on my other one."

If vinegar can smile, Margaret Ramsay smiled. "Of course I meant surprised to find someone else from Forfar so near at hand here in Montana." She paused a mighty moment to let me comprehend the utter justice of her viewpoint. Next she needed to know: 
"You were schooled where?"

"At a 'venture school in Nethermuir."

"I see. Anna and I both matriculated from the dame school in Brechin."

"So I understand. I am a famous scholar, see./Graddy-ated and trickle-ated, me./I've been to Rome in Germany/and seen the snows of Araby. I swallowed that safely away and put forth: "Education is the garment that never wears, they say."

"And what of your family?"

I looked squarely at her. "Dead," I said.

Margaret Ramsay regarded me. "I mean, of course, what of them in life."

My father the ironhand, encased in his deafness; my mother the mill worker; myself the tall alone boy treading the lightless streets of old stone town Nethermuir...Try sometime to put those into parlor speech. Anna was interested and encouraging--Anna could do me no wrong--but it was uphill all the way, trying to tell of the wheelshop years.

Sun lightened the room a half-minute, cloud darkened it, the day's weather restlessly coming and going up there on the Divide of the continent. This Ramsay place all but touched the mountains. Until humans learned to hang to the side of a crag with one hand and tend livestock with the other, here was as far as settlement could go. I hoped these Ramsays knew what they were in for when winter's winter, which is to say January and February, howled down off the Rockies onto them. From where I sat I could look right up into the
granite face of Jericho Reef through the curtain, the window where the fly was haplessly zizzing.

"You've seen the Bell Rock lighthouse," I thought of abruptly, "off from Arbroath?"

"I passed it close on a schooner once," spoke Peter Ramsay, his most extensive contribution to that day's conversation. "Surprising."

Well, he didn't know the half of it yet. I began telling of Alexander McCaskill of the Bell Rock. Of his day-by-day fear of his ocean workplace, of his daily conquer of the fact that a boat is a hole in the water. Of he and the other Arbroath stonemen encircling the engineer Stevenson as the first foundation block of the lighthouse was laid and its dedication recited, May the Great Architect of the Universe complete and bless this building. Of the fog-pale day the boat did not come and did not come, the floodtide rising to take the Bell Rock, dry-mouthed Stevenson drinking poolwater like a dog to try say bravery to his men, the random pilot materializing boat at last. Of the three-year rising of the round beacon tower there beside the verge of Scotland, a single bold sliver of sea brightwork in the ocean. And if the impression was left that my great-grandfather had been the right hand of the colossal Stevenson throughout that feat of bringing fire to the sea, I didn't mind.

"Interesting," granted Margaret Ramsay. "Interesting indeed."

"I'll walk out with you," Anna said when it came my time to go. Air was never more welcome to me. Whoof. Picklish Meg Ramsay was going to be something to put up with, but Anna was worth all.
As soon as we were out of sight around a corner of the house, I put her hand on the back of mine and urged, "Quick, give me a pinch."

She lightly did and inquired, "And what was that for?"

"I needed to be sure my skin is still on me."

Anna had to smile. "You did well. Even Mother thought so, I could tell."

"Well enough to be rewarded by my favorite teacher?"

Anna let me kiss her. Then she gave my arm a squeeze, and went back to the house.

A recess soon after that, I stepped from my classroom into the mud room for something from my coat. The outside door had been left open, and in from the girls' field of play was wafting the clear lilt of Susan Duff.

The wind and the wind and the wind blows high,
the rain comes scattering through the sky.
He is handsome, she is pretty,
boy and girl of the golden city.

I smiled at all that brought back, song of every schoolyard in Scotland. I bent to my coat search and hummed along as Susan sang on.
The wind and the wind and the wind blows high,
the rain comes scattering through the sky.
Anna Ramsay says she'll die
if her lover says goodbye.

That took care of my humming. What was coming next verse, I
could guess all too definitely.

The wind and the wind and the wind blows high,
the rain comes scattering through the sky.
A bottle of wine to tell his name--
Angus McAsker, there's his fame.

I wondered whether everybody on this cheek of the earth knew
the future of Anna and me except the pair of us. Maybe it was time
we found out, too.
Those next honeyed weeks. Anna and I, as spring wove itself around us in leaf and bud and the recess-time sounds of scamper by our unpenned school flocks. In earliest May the dance at her schoolhouse, where it all but took a pardon from the governor for anyone other than myself to be permitted a whirl on the floor with Anna. Evenings, as many as we could possibly find, of kissing and fondling and the talk that was the spring air's equivalent of those. And before I was even done wishing for it to happen, the momentous gift out of the blue, the departure of those parents of hers. They went north mid-month that May of 1897 with Isaac Reese and a great aggregation of his workhorses—Anna said it was like seeing a lake decide to move itself, the flow of manes and the slow patterned swirl of the herd—for a summer of building railroad crossings and plowing fireguard strips along the route of the Great Northern Railway. Peter Ramsay, wherever he hid the knack for it, was to be Reese's horse tender, and Anna's mother was to cook for the crew of teamsters. The single bit of grit for me in this fine news was that it encompassed Anna, as soon as school was out, she was to go up and join her mother as second cook. "This is our chance to get something ahead at last," she told me frankly of the rare Ramsay bonanza of three good wages at once. As I was to do much the similar myself by going into the mountains with my and Rob's sheep, there was no arguing the case, was there. I put aside pangs about a summer apart as best I could and concentrated on gaining every possible moment with Anna until then.

When May granted us its last Saturday night and the end-of-
school dance at my schoolhouse, it was a roaring one even for a South Fork event, as if everyone was uplifted by the green year grinning at us. The hour went to late and then rounded midnight into early, and jigged on from there. When the dance at last called itself done at nearly three in the morning, I was to see Anna home—we were a lovely distance past that essential rung of the courting ladder—as soon as my schoolhouse had been set to rights.

"Swamping is to sweeping what whaling is to fishing," I was enlightening her as I displayed my broom style.

"And where were you so fortunate as to learn the art of swamping?" she asked from where she was closing and locking the schoolroom windows. Lovely, to see that woman stretch to the window locks, her braid swaying free as a black silk tassel when her head tilted back.

"There's a standard answer to that among swampers," I informed her, "which I'll take refuge in: 'At my mother's knee and other low joints.'" This in fact wasn't a time when I particularly wanted to recount Rob and me arriving into the Two Medicine country and my subsequent career in the Medicine Lodge. I had seen again tonight what I'd begun to notice at the other dances, that while Anna plainly prized Lucas for the rare specimen he was, she was impervious to Rob. I knew I was going to have to sort that out at some soon point, but for now it merely seemed to me Rob's hard luck.

She turned enough from her chore to throw me a bright frank look. "I do have to say, history has a strange ring to it in your schoolroom."
Broom and I veered to her, and I leaned down and kissed her quickly but thoroughly.

"Is this part of swamping?" she wanted to know.

"When it's done right."

Banter and chores went along that way together as they should, until the South Fork school was tidier than it had ever been and the one task left was to take down the coal-oil lanterns from their ceiling hooks. I stood on a chair to reach each one down to Anna, and finally I was down myself with the last lit one, so we could find our way out to where our horses were tethered.

All night until then I had not bothered to see anything beyond Anna, so the moonbeams at the windows and across the schoolroom floor shone new to me. A right bright moonlight night. "Let's not go out just yet," I suggested to Anna before we were at the door. "We need to study this." I turned out the lantern and we were in the night's own soft silver illumination. In the moonwashed windows of the schoolhouse, the wooded line of the creek loomed like a tapestry of the dark. Above the trees stood the long level rampart of benchland between the North Fork and Noon Creek, and above that firm horizon flew the sky, specked with the fire of stars.

After a minute Anna uttered, "This country can be so beautiful, when it tries a little."

With my arm around her and the moon's exhibition in front of us, she seemed in no hurry to go. I was in none myself.

"Anna," I began, trying to find how to say it the best possible, better than anyone had said the great words before,
"I want to marry you. More than I've ever wanted anything, I want that. Will--"

Her fingers stopped my lips, as if they had come to trace a kiss there. "Angus, wait. Please. Wait with that--that question."

"Anna, love, I've been making a career of waiting."

"You've certainly waited in a hurry where I'm concerned," she maintained lightly but seriously. "We've only known each other a little more than a month."

Thirty-nine days! I thought indignantly, but let her go on. "What I really mean to say"--rare difficulty for her, making real meaning known--"you don't know me all that well. The person I'd be for you, I mean, Angus, for the rest of your life."

"You can let me worry about that."

"You don't show any sign of making an effort at it," she said gently. "You seem to regard me as the first woman you've ever seen."

"That's more or less the case," I vouched.

"Angus, we can see at the end of the summer. You know I need to go be with Them"--my term for her mother and father--"for this summer, and you have your own obligations with your sheep, don't you."

"Woman," I said to her as if she truly was the first, the only, of the species, "let's say to hell with the obligations and go get ourselves married. Right now, this very morning. We'll point the horses toward Gros Ventre and go roust the minister out of bed. The man'll need to climb out soon anyway to fluff up his sermon. Anna, what do you say?"
Do you know, for a long moment I almost won her to that. I could feel the halt of all she had been setting forth until now, the stop of her thought as this new proposal opened, enormous as the future, before her.

But after that teetering moment:

"I have to say life isn't that simple, Angus. It's a stale way to say it, but there are others we have to think of."

"Anna, just tell me this. While you're being dutiful daughter this summer, will you think about what I'm going to ask you the instant you get back?"

"Yes."

"Yes!" I shouted and the reverberation yes...es...es filled the darkened school. "Do you hear that, world? Miss Anna Ramsay knows the word Yes!"

"You great gawk," she laughed and this time laid a single finger across my lips. "They'll hear you everywhere along the creek."

I kissed that finger of hers three times and proclaimed: "I hope they hear it down in China. I hope every ear there is knows now that at the end of the summer I have this romantic prospect to cash in--"

"Cash in?" She gave me her half-smile, her straightforward way of teasing. "Is that your idea of the language of romance?"

"--and that this timid maiden--"

"Timid! Angus, you are absolutely--"

"--will have spent her every spare moment rehearsing the word Yes! and come to the not illogical conclusion that having said it
once in her life, she can say it again. And again and again and again, as many thousand times as I ask her to be mine."

She was looking at me bright-eyed, half ready to burst into even more laughter, half ready to fondly kiss me or be kissed. We could catch up on the laughter in our old age. I reached her even closer to me.

The darkness, the moonsilver, the night-morning that was both and neither, the two of us a chime of time together and yet about to be separated for an abyss of months; maybe because everything including ourselves was between definitions just then, bodily logic began to happen. Our kisses asked ever more kisses. Our clothing opened itself in significant places. Hands and lips were no longer enough.

I whispered huskily to Anna wait—entire new meaning to the word she had so recently used—and went out to Scorpion and fetched my sheepskin coat that was tied behind the saddle and then the coat was under us, us, on the schoolroom floor. I undid more of her dress while she was slowly and wonderfully busy at my neck and back with her arms, hands, fingers. Wherever I caressed her skin it was white elegance. Except where the bold twin pink nipples and their rose circles now bloomed.

You unforgottably feel the ache, the sweet ache. The deliciousness of thighs finding their way to thighs, the soft discovery of her body's cave place, the startling silkiness my hand was stroking there at the join of her, the curly tangle and stalk where her hand was searching out my own center. There was no eyes-
closed mooniness: we were both watching this.

"Anna," my voice thick. "If I'm the first, you know this may hurt a bit."

"It won't," she spoke with surprising clarity.

Atop the piled softness of the wool coat we moved as slowly as we could hold ourselves to. Anna knew things. I was not the first. I didn't care. I was the one now. Her eyes into mine. Mine into hers. All below, our locket of bodies. Slow was far too wonderful to last, now my straining to touch her as deep inside as love can thrust, her clutching to gather me in, us and the husking cries from our throats mingling.

After, I felt perfect. It seemed the perfect echo of the delirium we had just been through to murmur in a fond gabble to her beside me on the coat, "They must be wondering in China what's going on up here with the two of us this morning."

Anna laughed and perfected it with a gentle poke of me. "You do have to admit, it's unusual behavior even in a schoolroom of yours."

"I wish it was absolutely customary," I said and kissed between her perfect breasts.
An evening of middle June, Rob poked his head in on me.

"Angus, sharpen your ears. I've a proposition for you."

"It'd be news if you didn't."

"Now don't be that way. I'm here to offer you an excursion, free gratis for nothing, and all you have to provide is your own matchless self for company. What this is, I've to go up to the railroad--Judith's new cream separator came in by train. Ride along with me in the wagon, why not. It's our last chance for an outing before we turn into shearers and sheepherders."

Rob was expansive these days because commerce suddenly was. Prices of wool and lambs had sprung back to what they were before all the buckets fell in the well of 1893. With their abundance of wethers to be shorn Rob and Lucas were looking at a real payday ahead, just as my lamb crop would raise me to comfort; to where I wanted to be for Anna and me to begin our married life.

I said my first thought: "Why don't you just have the next freight wagon bring the thing?"

"That'd be weeks yet, and I want this to be a surprise for Judith. I'm telling her you and I are going up to talk sheep with the Blackfeet. Come along, man. You've been keeping yourself scarce everywhere but Noon Creek. See some more of the world for a change. This'll be the ride of your life." Rob smiled that

blame-me-if-you're-heartless-enough-to smile of his. "Well, maybe not quite. Men," he pulled his chin into his neck for the croaking tone of the freighter Herbert seven years before, "there's no hotel like a wagon. Warm nights your room is on the wagon--"
“--Stormy nights it's under it,” I couldn't help but complete the chorus. Our first prairie night out from Helena was beginning to seem another life ago. I still wasn't ready to relent to Rob. Jaunting for jaunt's sake was not something I was in the mood for, having better moods to tend to, and to the railroad and back was a journey of three days. "So your clinching argument is the opportunity to sleep out with the coyotes, is it?"

"Angus, Angus. Trust me to carry more than one motive at a time. I thought we could spend the going-up night there on the Two Medicine at Toussaint Rennie's place. You won't pass up the chance for a dose of Toussaint, now will you? The two of you can gab history until you're over history until you've overwritten your ears in it."

As Rob full knew it would, this cast a light of interest. Visiting Toussaint on his home ground would be like seeing where they put the music into fiddles. Besides, Rob was indubitably right that after shearing next week there would be a long summer in the mountains, stretched all the longer by Anna being away. The two weeks since she left had taken at least twice that much time to pass. Anna and the railroad, though. Here now, as Lucas would have put it, was a pregnant thought. Maybe, if I had the luck that love ought to have, just maybe the Reese crew plowing fireguard strips would be somewhere on the section of railroad where Rob was headed. A bonus chance to see Anna, however slight--

"You'll come, certain sure?" Rob specified. When I agreed so, he assured me: "Herbert would be proud of you."
"You know that Nancy," said Toussaint in making the introduction of his Blackfeet wife Mary Rides Proud to us the next night. "This is another one."

I'm sure as anything I saw a flick of curiosity as Mary looked at Rob. About a heartbeat's worth. Then she moved to the stove and the fixing of supper, as if she were a drawing done of her niece at that moment in the kitchen of Lucas's house, but with blunter pencil.

The household's indeterminate number of leather-dark children eyed Rob and me with wariness, but Toussaint himself seemed entirely unsurprised at the sight of us, as if people were a constant traffic through this remote small Reservation ranch. I see now that in Toussaint's way of thinking, they were; in his mind, time was not a calendar bundle of days but a steady unbroken procession, so that a visitor counted equally whether he was in front of Toussaint's eyes at the very moment or long past. Ocean's ebb and ocean's flow/round and round the seasons go. Never more true than in this walnut-colored man whose only sea was the river named Two Medicine outside his back door. Another unexpectedness out of life's deep pocket of them, Toussaint always was to me.

"That Agency, Angus," Toussaint said to me now of the Blackfeet Reservation headquarters as if it was our customary topic. "Tomorrow you can see. If the Agency goes for a walk. It does, do you know. Every so often. The Agency was there by Choteau. Then it walked north to Birch Creek." I remembered now, Toussaint once having told me of watching the bull teams bring the Agency's disassembled log buildings through Gros Ventre to their next site when the
diminished Reservation's boundary was moved to Birch Creek. "Then it walked north to Badger Creek. Then it walked north to where it is. But that railroad, maybe it will scare the Agency into walking again. One day maybe it will walk to Canada and see the Queen."

Toussaint ended this travel narrative with a chuckle.

"Toussaint, this Reservation opened my eyes for me today," Rob put in. "There's a world of grass up here."

"The buffalo thought so," agreed Toussaint. "When there were buffalo."

"Now there's a thing you can tell us, Toussaint," Rob the grazier speaking now. "Where did those buffalo like to be? What part of this country up here was it that they grazed on?"

"They were here. There. About. Everywhere." Another Toussaint chuckle. "All in through here, this Two Medicine country."

The knit of Rob's brow told me he was having some trouble with a definition of here that took in everywhere. I tried another angle for him. "What, Toussaint, were they like the cattle herds are now?" I too was trying to imagine the sight the buffalo in their black thousands made. "Some here and there, wherever you looked?"

"The buffalo were more. As many as you can see at one time, Angus."

Supper was presented on the table to us the men, but Toussaint's wife Mary ate standing at the stove and some of the children took their meals to a corner and others wandered outside with theirs and maybe still others went up into the treetops to dine, for all that Rob or I could keep track of the batch. Domestic
arrangements interested me these days, but this one was baffling. So far as I could see, Toussaint and Mary paid no heed to one another. That must have had limits, though, because somehow all these children happened.

The supper meat was tender but greasy. After a few thoughtful forkfuls Rob let fall: "Now you have me asking myself, Toussaint, just what delicacy is this we're eating?"

"Bear."

Rob cocked an eyebrow to me. Then swung half around in his chair and called to Toussaint's yokemate in life, "Absolutely the best bear I've ever eaten, Mary."

"This cream separator," wondered Toussaint about our tomorrow's cargo, "is it a Monkey Ward one?"

Rob took a slow sip of coffee, in what I knew was his way of hiding a smile, then exclaimed: "The exact very make, Toussaint. See now, Montgomery Ward and anything else in the world is right out on our doorstep with this railroad. What a thing it's going to be for this country," he went on, sounding more and more like the echo of Lucas. "Homesteaders can come straight from anywhere to here, they can hop from the train into a buckboard and go find a claim without even needing to set foot on the ground. Not quite like when you and I hoofed in all the way from Augusta, Angus."

"Jim Hill's haywagons," Toussaint summed the Great Northern railroad and its builder, and chuckled. "One more way people will bring themselves."

People and what they are. As Rob and Toussaint talked I was
thinking of the expanse of country-to-be-peopled that Rob and I had come through that day, I was thinking of Anna out there somewhere under its waiting horizon, summerlong her erect presence beside the fresh steel road of rails, I was thinking of the intricate come and go that weaves us and those around us, of how Toussaint inexplicably was partnered in existence with Mary Rides Proud, Rob now with Judith, Lucas with Nancy—"The winter of '86, Toussaint," I suddenly found myself at. "What was that like, up here?"

"That winter. That winter, we ate with the axe."

Rob made as if to clear an ear with his finger. "You did which?"

"We ate with the axe. No deer, no elk. No weather to hunt them in. I went out, find a cow if I can. Look for a hump under the snow. Do you know, a lot of snowdrifts look like a cow carcass?"

Rob was incredulous. "Toussaint, man, you mean you'd go out and find a dead cow to eat?"

"Any I found was dead," Toussaint vouched. "Chop her up, bring home as much as the horse can carry. West wind, all that winter. Everything drifted east. You had to guess. Whether the horse could break snow far enough to find a cow." Toussaint seemed entertained by the memory. "That winter was long. Those cattlemen found out. I had work all summer, driving wagon for the cowhide skinners. That was what was left in this country by spring. More cowhides than cows."

"A once in a lifetime winter," Rob summarized, "And I'm glad enough I wasn't here to see it. Now we know to have hay and sheds, anyway. It's hard luck that somebody else had to pay for that"
lesson, but life wasn't built even, was it."

Mary Rides Proud rose from her chair by the stove and went out, I supposed to the outhouse, if there was one. By now Nancy is part us and part them, Lucas's voice that day we arrived to Gros Ventre and all this, and you never quite know which side is to the front, when. They say when Toussaint rode into town with her, the two of them wrapped in buffalo robes, they had so much snow on them they looked like white bears.

"That winter must've made it hard to get to Gros Ventre," I said to Toussaint. He gave away nothing in his look to me. Rob glanced over at me, curious about my curiosity, nothing more. "If you ever had to," I added.

"When I had to, I did that ride," said Toussaint. "One time was all."

Setting out from Toussaint's to the railroad the next morning, Rob and I traveled the brink of the Two Medicine River's gorge for several miles to where the main trail crossed it by bridge. It was as if the earth was letting us see a secret street, the route of its water below the horizon that customarily stopped a person's looking.

"Now why do you suppose they put a river all the way down there, Angus? It'd save us a lot of hill grief if it was up here with the rest of the country." The Two Medicine would have needed to flow in the sky to match Rob's lofty mood this morning.

"Talk to the riverwright about it," I advised him. Below us in its broad canyon the Two Medicine wound and coiled, the water base
for all the world that could be seen. Anna, you need to see it with me, I vowed that June morning on the green high bluffs of the Two Medicine. Sometime we must come, just the two of us, and on a morning such as this watch summer and the earth dress each other in light and grass.

"No help for it that I can see," Rob announced as he peered down the long slope to the river and up the longer one on its north side. "Here's where our horses earn their oats." Down we went and across, beside sharp stark bluffs.

The buffalo cliffs, Toussaint had indicated the heights along the river with a nod. They were good ones. These Blackfeet put their medicine lodge near. Two times. The river got its name. Looking at the gray cliff I could all but see the black stampede in the air as the Blackfeet drove the buffalo over. Eyes whitely mad with flight, legs stiff for shock they could never withstand, the animals would have been already dying in mid-air. Lucas's little recital off an English tombstone that first-ever night Rob and I spent in Gros Ventre, in the Two Medicine country: I fell through life... That had been one of the sagas here too, in a time of other people, other creatures. Maybe epitaphs were the same everywhere.

At the summit of the lofty grassy ridge above the Two Medicine, the land opened again into billowing prairie with mountains filling the western horizon. It took some looking as we rattled along in the wagon to spot our destination. This was before Browning was a town, and before it was even Browning. Willow Creek, the site had been dubbed for its stream, and what differentiated it from the
absolute prairie was the depot and the new buildings of the Blackfeet Indian Agency. Those and the railroad, a single thin iron trellis across all this prairie, bringing the world to Montana, taking Montana to the world. From here at wan Willow Creek, Browning-to-be, now you could go straight by train to either ocean. Those years ago Rob and I had come into Helena by train and then onward to Craig, but this was our first view of naked track from horizon to horizon, trellis to the future.

Rob may have been thinking of the wool that would travel these tracks to the mills of Massachusetts in a few weeks, of the lambs that would go to Chicago at summer's end. For once he did not speak his thoughts, but sat there next to me looking royally satisfied. I was the opposite of that, for nowhere along the miles of railroad in sight was there any dark turned earth of plowed fireguards, no crew of teamsters. No cook tent. No Anna. She was somewhere east beyond the grass horizon, at Kremlin, Harlem, Malta, places as distant as they sounded. Had I known to a total certainty that there would be no sight of her, I would have passed up this wagon jaunt with Rob as if it was cold gravy. But even love can't see clearly over the curve of the earth. Rob clucked to the team and we headed for the depot.

Now that there was no prospect of Anna, I was anxious to head home and begin using up the days of this summer of waiting. Rob was showing impatience too, at the lack of whoever ought to be in charge of railroad freight.

"What do they do, put coats of vanishing paint on depot agents?" he pronounced annoyedly.
give a look for the rascal inside and I'll try the freight room, why not."

I stepped quickly into the waiting room. The sole person there was a young woman, auburn-haired and bright-cheeked, likely the out of place daughter or very young and trying-not-to-be-abject wife of some Blackfeet Agency clerk. A fetching enough girl, but not a fraction of Anna. "Hello," I tossed with some sympathy, still glancing around for the depotman, and then turned my eyes back to this other to ask whether she'd seen him. She was looking at me pertly, as if expecting answer from me instead. And then uttered:

"Hello yourself, Angus McCaskill with a mustache."

Nethermuir. Nethermuir in the voice. That shined-apple complexion and her gray eyes. She had to be but couldn't possibly--

"Adair?" I got out. "Are you, you can't--"

Uproar burst in on us then, Rob laughing and hooting and hugging his sister and pounding me, "He never guessed! Adair, we did it to the man! It was perfect as can be, he never had a clue you'd be here! Angus, wait until they hear in Scotch Heaven how you let a slip of a girl sneak up on you all the way from Scotland!"

By now I had enough wit and wind back to enlist in the laughing, and Adair gave me a quick timid hug and asked, "Do you mind the surprise, Angus? It was this dickens Rob's doing, he suggested we not tell you."

"Mind, how could I mind. It's a thing I never expected, is all--finding you in a Montana train station, Dair Barclay. But, but what're you doing here?"
"What, you can't tell by the sight of me? Adair is a tourist," she defined herself with a self-mocking small smile. Of course I knew in my mind that Adair had grown from the scrap of a girl she was when Rob and I left Nethermuir. She was, what, twelve then. But knowing that was different from understanding, as my eyes were having me do, that she now had reached nineteen and was certifiably more than a girl in every way that I could see. "It was Rob's notion for me to come spend a bit of time. To see this famous Montana of yours."

"Rob is definitely a wonder," I said with a trickle of suspicion beginning in me. "And so how long are you here for?"

"The summer," was Adair's all innocent answer, "to keep Judith company while Rob and you are out being shepherds." But Rob had his own expanded version as he gave his sister the fifth hug of the past minute: "She's here for as long as we can keep her. The lads of Nethermuir will just have to cry at the moon."

The former lad of Nethermuir who was me looked those words over, looked over their source as thoroughly as I could and still keep a reasonably pleasant face for Adair. I had major questions to put to Rob Barclay as soon as I could get him alone and he knew it, he oh most definitely knew it.

"See now, McAngus, I did bring you along for a reason," he said brightly, "to help load Adair's things. Then we'd better make miles before dark, hadn't we?"

"One of your better thoughts recently," I told him and set off for the luggage. As I went I heard Adair ask, "What, we won't reach
Scotch Heaven by tonight?" and Rob answer, "No, not quite." So far, Dair Barclay and I were even in the day's surprises.

After we started across the prairie, Adair kept up with the first rush of talk from Rob while I mumbled and hummed in the spots between, but I could see her glancing around restlessly at the land,
the grass, the Indians, and for that matter at Rob and myself. Time and again she turned her head toward the mountains. After a bit she said of herself: "Forgive Adair for the amount of green in her, but she has to ask. You don’t mean those are the mountains where the two of you will be with the sheep?" Myself, I thought the Rockies looked particularly stately this calm sunlit day, purple old widows at tea.

"The very ones," Rob and I chorused.

"But they're nothing but cliffs and snow. Where is there even a place for you to find a foothold?"

"Just the country for sheep and Scotchmen," Rob assured her.

"Angus and I will come down from the top of the world there in a few months with our fortunes trotting in front of us."

Adair continued to study the vast jagged line of mountains as if they might pounce out at us. Well, well. This sister of his whom Rob thought was a Montanian in the making might hold a surprise for him as well.

"Do the full recitation of them for her," Rob urged me.

"Adair, what this person on the other side of you doesn't know about the Two Medicine country isn't worth knowing."

Adair turned to me with a wisp of a smile. "Are you guilty of all that?"

"He's greatly worse," Rob declared. "I've only told you the top part about him. This is a coming man, this McCaskill person. Even I have to say so."

"I am in trouble," I agreed feelingly with Adair, "if I'm in the good graces of our Rob. But our mountains, now, since you're keen to know." I took her through the catechism of the peaks and crags
rising above Scotch Heaven: Jericho Reef, Guthrie Peak, Phantom Woman Mountain, Rooster Mountain, Roman Reef, Grizzly Reef.

By the time I finished, Adair had turned from the mountains toward me again. "You say them as if they were lines of verse," she remarked almost in a questioning way.

"Now you've gone and done it, Adair. You have to watch your step all the time around this man," Rob enjoined, "or you'll give him the excuse to start spouting--"

"--Burns, did I hear someone start to say?" I thrust in.

"Beware a tongue that's smoothly hung, for instance? Now there's a major piece of advice, Dair, for being around this brother of yours." Pick the bones out of that for awhile, Rob, why don't you.

Adair laughed, a pretty enough sound, fully half as melodious as Anna's. "You mean you haven't been able to change him at all in seven years?"

"Thank heaven I can recognize jealousy when I hear it," Rob gave us equably and slapped the reins lightly on the team's rumps. "It's time to let the wheels chase the horses," he emulated our stagecoach driver from Craig to Augusta those years ago. "Next stop, Badger Creek."

At least I knew better than that. Any schoolteacher could have informed Rob that unless girls of Nethermuir grew up with iron bladders these days, a stop was imminent somewhere in the hours before we would reach Badger Creek. Nor did Rob help his own cause by being too busy with talking, when we crossed the Two Medicine, to think of offering Adair a pause within its sheltering grove. So when we topped the Two Medicine gorge's southern rim and Adair took
her first look at the naked world ahead, no concealment higher or thicker than a spear of grass for miles in any direction, I truly believe I discerned her first squirm of realization. Forgive me this, Dair Barclay, I thought to myself, but you may as well meet the bare facts of Montana sooner than later. And both of us were going to be the better off the quicker I could get Rob alone and wring out of him what he was up to in bringing her here.

Grant Adair a high mark, she did about as well as could be done with the situation. "Coachman," she eventually ventured to Rob with only a minimum tone of embarrassment, "are there any conveniences at all along this route of yours?"

He looked startled and cast hurriedly around for a coulee. There was one about half a mile ahead, which he promised her—"They're, ah, they're of an airy construction in this neighborhood."

When we reached the brow of the coulee and I stepped off to help Adair down from the wagon, I saw her nipping her lower lip against having to ask the next question. That fret at least I could spare her. "No snakes in this grass," I assured her.

"Except," I began on Rob's instant Adair had passed down from view, "maybe one major one. Just out of curiosity, Mister Rob, how long have you had this little visit of Adair's in the works?"

"Not all that long."

"Not all how long?"

"Not long at all."

"How long is that?"
"Angus, I don't carry a calendar around in my hand."

"No, anyone with your armload of schemes of course couldn't.

Just tell me this: it was back this spring before I met Anna, wasn't
you now didn't up you?

"Angus, Angus. Which would you rather hear--yes, no or maybe?"

I could have throttled him there on the wagonseat. An
instructive scene for Miss Adair Barclay of Old Scotland when she
came up out of the coulee, mayhem on the wild prairie. "Your idea
was to get Adair over here and marry her off to me, wasn't it?"

"If it worked out that way, I wouldn't mind, now would I.
Though I do have to say, Angus, your attitude this afternoon is
starting to make me have second thoughts about you as a brother-
in-law."

"For God's sake, man. Do you think you can just take lives and
tie them together that way?" Whatever his answer was I didn't give
him a chance to polish it and bring it out. "At least why didn't
you let her know about Anna and me? Why'd you let Adair come, after
that? Now here she is, looking at me the way a kitten looks at her
first mouse, and there's nothing in it for her."

"You and Anna, that did arrive as a surprise after I'd already
written to Adair," he admitted. "But who knew, maybe you'd fall off
a horse and come to your senses." Rob must have seen the incitement
that was going to bring down on him, because he quickly put in,
"Just joking, Angus. Man, I know how you feel about Anna. It's
written all over you. But if you're not the one for
Adair, there are other possibilities wearing pants in this world,
aren't there

What harm can it do to bring her here for the summer and let her find out what her prospects are? You and I found our way out of that life over across there. Adair deserves the chance too, doesn't she?"

"Damn it, Rob, her chance at Montana is one thing. Her chance at me is totally another. You're going to have to tell her that."

"And I will, I will. But just let me get the girl home to Breed Butte in peace, can't you? Is that so much? Whup, here she comes, looking improved. You could stand to, too, if you know."

The dusk began to catch us as we came down into the broad bottomland beside Badger Creek, and we quickly chose a willow-sheltered bend with the trickle of the creek close by. In the slow sunset of that time of year, the mountains stood out like silver-blue shards of rare stone. The western half of the sky was filled with puffy clouds the same shade as the mountains, but with their bottoms ember-lit by the setting sun.

"Angus and I ordered that up special for you," Rob was quick to assure Adair.

"You're a pair of old profligates then," she retorted, gazing at the emberglow sky and the miles and miles of mountains.

We rapidly made a fire of our own, for Montana has a chill in its night air even in summer.

"You ought to have seen where Angus and I spent last night," Rob was reporting to Adair about Toussaint's household. "The crowd there was enough to make you thankful this prairie is so empty."
"This isn't as empty as it looks," I put in purely out of peeve at Rob. "We're camped near history here."

Rob cocked his head and peered into the last of the dusk.

"What color is it, Angus, I don't seem to see it."

"Actually it ended up red," I said, "which history seems to have a bad way of doing."

"You mean the man Lewis that Toussaint was on about?"

Meriwether Lewis. Do you know of him, Angus and Rob? He was a bad sign for these Blackfeet. Came up the Marias, looking. Came to the Two Medicine, looking some more. There where Badger Creek runs in, he found something, do you know. These Blackfeet. Eight in a party, horse takers. Lewis and his were four. Lewis smokes the pipe with those Blackfeet, nothing else to do. They all camp together that night near Badger and Two Medicine. "Adair, this one," Rob inclined his head toward me, "will teach at you day and night if you don't watch out for him."

She was watching me with curiosity. "Lewis was the first white man to explore through here," I tried to explain. If she was here to taste Montana, she had better be aware of its darker flavors.

"He and another led a group across Montana almost a hundred years ago. Burke? Not quite it. Clark, that was the other with Lewis."

In the night, do you know, the Blackfeet grab guns from Lewis and his three. Everybody fights. These Blackfeet knew how to fight then. But Lewis and another get their guns back. BOOM! One Blackfeet dead. BOOM! One more Blackfeet dead. But they say that one combed Lewis's hair with a bullet first. The rest of the
Blackfeet ran off, go away to think it over a while. Lucky for Lewis they did, or maybe no more Lewis.

"McAngus," Rob proclaimed, "you're a great one for yesterdays."

"They've brought us to where we are," I retorted with an edge to it. Noticing Adair blinking at this session between Rob and me, I toned matters down a bit. "But Rob's right, you didn't come across the ocean for a history lesson, did you."

"No, it's all interesting," Adair insisted. "Go on, Angus." But go on to what. I gave a lame version of Lewis and the Blackfeet struggling in the night, then shrugged. "Toussaint has it more or less right, this Reservation we're on grew out of that and these Indians have had to give way ever since."

"To the likes of us," Rob intoned. "Peaceable men of attainment, in pursuit of cream separators."

A round of laughter for that which I made myself join, promising Rob a time soon when he would have to laugh out the other side of himself. But then Adair said: "So much land here, and"--she sent me an apologizing look--"so empty. It's hard to think of men killing each other over it."

"A great mighty struggle," Rob said solemn as a knell, "with two casualties."

"I suppose they died as dead as any," I observed to him. Man at war is maggots' meat/dished up in his winding sheet. Adair at once sided with me--but then she'd have to, wouldn't she, I reminded myself--by chiding Rob, "What if we were the Indians and they were us? Who'd be joking then?"

"Anyway it wasn't the Battle of Culloden, now was it, you two," Rob closed off that direction of conversation. "Angus, have you ever seen anything like this grass up here. If we could ever manage
to get sheep onto this, we'd have found the front gate to heaven." He was not wrong, the grassland of the Blackfeet Reservation indeed was a grazier's dream. Led by Rob, our talk turned now to the Two country's prospects this bountiful year, our prospects as sheepmen. There but not spoken were also Adair's prospects as a Montana wife, although I doubted those more and more as I watched her try to keep a brave face to this overwhelming land.

Eventually bedtime, and Rob telling her, "The lodgings are simplicity itself, Adair. Ladies upstairs"—he indicated the wagon, with its bed of robes—"and others downstairs."

As we settled in for the night a coyote sent its song to the moon. "We hired music for the occasion too," Rob said up through the wagon to Adair.

"Cayuse," we heard her try very softly to herself. Then: "Papoose." Next: "Coyote. Rob, Angus," she raised her voice, "is our serenade coming from a coyote?"

"Nothing else," we assured her, and then the night went still, as if the song dog had simply come by to test whether Adair could name him.

I had just begun to drowse when Rob's snoring started. Then came a cascade of giggles overhead, and my own grudging laughing as I was reminded of so many other nights of Rob's nose music, from the steerage bunks of the Jemmy to now.

I moved where I lay so that my head was out from under the wagon and spoke softly upstairs to Adair, "You ought to have heard him when the pair of us were on the old ocean. He drowned out the whales and all other challengers."
"Do you remember our tall narrow house, Angus?" I did, although I had not thought of cramped River Street in a long while. "When I was little and sleeping in the gable room, I would wake up and hear Rob sawing the dark below me and know that nothing had carried us off during the night."

And now he's carried you off here, under a misapprehension at least as big as any Scottish night. But I said only, reassuringly, "He's vital here in Montana, too. We need him to give singing lessons to our coyotes."

She giggled again, then went quiet. I was remembering now that first vast black pit of Montana night when Rob and I started for the Two Medicine country with Herbert and his freight wagon, six, no already seven years before. This time of year Adair at least ought to be safe from waking into a snowstorm as Rob and I did, although in Montana you couldn't be entirely sure ever. I hoped too that she would not be too hurt by the disappointment of this "visit," this bedamned misbegotten matrimonial outing Rob had gotten her into; I hoped that this Adair would find at the end of the dark the life she wanted, as I had now that Anna was in my life.

To be saying something in that direction without alarming Adair, I brought out: "None of this is exactly Scotland, is it?"

"No. But then I thought that's why you and Rob are here."

"Good night then, Dair Barclay."

"Good night yourself, Angus."
The next day's miles went back and forth between fleet and slow—the team and wagon urged snappily toward home and Rob's confession to Adair whenever it was my turn at the reins, lapsing into a determined saunter whenever Rob held them. At whichever pace, our passenger between us in her clothes of Scotland and her larklike smallness looked like someone unexpectedly being carriaged along the banks of the Congo. But true to yesterday Adair still avidly responded to any word I said, on those occasions when Rob managed to gouge one out of me, and that was what led to it.

Rob had the reins when we came south out of the cattle-spotted hills of Double W rangeland to the shallow valley of Noon Creek and that strange bold view of Breed Butte, so gradual but so prominent, ahead on the divide between this valley and Scotch Heaven's, and Rob would not have been Rob if he hadn't halted the horses to begin extolling his homestead pinnacle there to Adair. She seemed to be listening to her brother a thousand percent, but suddenly she was pointing west along Noon Creek to the base of Breed Butte where two small white dots and a less small one stood out. This Adair had eyes that could see. "Angus, there. Is that your schoolhouse?" she asked as if already deeply fond of it.

"No," I answered, not looking toward her, not looking toward Rob. "No, that one is my fiancee's."

All but true, that word fiancee. I propped it up with the others I had been wanting to say into the air all of this journey from the depot. "Her name is Anna Ramsay. We met early this spring." In me, And I love her beyond all the limits, but Adair did
not need that added to this necessary revelation. At the tail of my eye I could see her make herself hold steady, make herself keep that defending look she had had when she first saw this land of raw mountains and unpeopled vastness. From beyond Adair I could feel Rob's hot dismayed—betrayed?—gaze on me. But fair is fair, square is square, Rob. I had waited with it until we were within sight of home, I had held it in despite every doubt about when and how and if and whether you ever were going to say it to Adair yourself.

"Why, Angus," Adair managed, after a long moment. "I hadn't heard." Nothing was ever more true. "Congratulations to you. And her."

The source of guilty silence beside Adair spoke now in a strained version of Rob's voice, "Our lad Angus has had a busy spring."

Past that as if it never existed, Adair queried: "When is the wedding then?"

"We haven't named the date," I responded and explained the circumstances of Anna's absence. "But summer's end."

"You sound so happy," spoke Adair. Then again: "Congratulations to you." Plucky. Every Barclay ever made was that.

Done and done, at least my part of it.

"Rob," I said innocent as a choir note, "hadn't we better move on to Gros Ventre? Adair has yet to meet Lucas."

Apprehension comes in various sizes, and Rob had his next quantity of it by the time we came down off the benchland to Gros
Ventre and could see past the trunks of the cottonwoods the sky-blue sign proclaiming Medicine Lodge.

"Adair, I'd better tell you," from him as if this was a hard day in the business of telling, "Lucas is not quite what a person expects an uncle to be."

Adair gave him a look of what next? "You mean because of his hands? But we at home have known about that for years."

"No," answered Rob, "I just mean Lucas."

"So now Montana can boast another Barclay!" boomed Lucas when Rob fetched him out of the Medicine Lodge. I swear, Lucas had figured out the situation to the last zero, just by the look on Rob's face, and for Dair's sake was being twice as hearty as usual. "Come down here for a proper hug, lass!" and she did, stepping gamely from the wagon into an embrace between Lucas's armstubs.

"Adair, welcome to Gros Ventre," he bestowed on her with enough hospitality for several towns this size. "By Jesus--excuse my Latin--you can't know how pure glad I am to lay eyes on my very own...niece!"

If Lucas hadn't been facing down the street toward Wingo's; if his last word hadn't shot out with an unexpected ring as the years of habitual talk about Wingo's "nieces" chimed in him; if Lucas hadn't started roaring, I never would have laughed. And Rob wouldn't have reddened into resemblance to a polished apple if it hadn't been for the uncontrollably chortling two of us.

Adair blinked in mystification.

"Nothing, nothing, lass," Lucas assured her. "Just a private
joke. Maybe Robbie can explain it to you when he has time, ay, Robbie?"

There ensued a fast stew of family chitchat, ardent questions from Lucas and mettlesome tries at response from Adair and infrequent mutters from Rob, which I carefully stayed out of. If I knew anything by now I knew that the Barclays were going to be the Barclays, and the rest of the race may as well stand back.

"Now you have to come around to the house," Lucas ultimately reached, "and meet Nancy."

"Nancy?" responded Adair, further bewildered.

"Sometime, we can," Rob inserted rapidly. "But we need to head home just now, Angus and I have chores and more chores waiting."

"No matter." Lucas waved an arm stub that Adair's eyes could not help following. "We'll be out to see you shear next week. It's past time all of us in the sheep business got a chance to watch something that'll make us money instead of taking it from us. We can have a Barclay gathering and welcome you proper then, Adair. In the meantime, make this awkward squad treat you right."

"And how is Adair taking to Scotch Heaven?" I sweetly asked that famous matchmaking brother of hers a few days later when he and I had to begin readying the sheep shed for shearing.

"Fine, fine," Rob attested stoutly. "She's having just a fine time."

"Getting used to the wind, is she?" I asked with solicitude. The last of our wagon journey home from Gros Ventre after Adair's niecehood coronation by Lucas had been into a bluster which
steadily tried to blow the buttons off the three of us, and at the
creek crossing set Adair's sunhat sailing. I had gallantly held the
team's reins while Rob waded to retrieve the hat from its port of
willows fifty yards downstream.

"She never even notices the old breeze any more," Rob responded
and impatiently waited for me to lift my end of the next
shearing-pen panel to be carried into place.

"I imagine seeing shearing will be a major thrill for her," I
went on, straight as a poker but enjoying myself immoderately,
"don't you think?"

"I'm sure as anything it will," responded Rob as we grunted and
carried. "And that reminds me of a thing," he galloped to the new
topic, "the Leftover Day. I'm going to keep back a bunch of
yearling wethers for it, enough to make a real day of shearing. Why
don't you pair with me and we'll take on those Frews again?"

This startled me twice at once. First, that Rob was asking me
to pair-shear, so soon after making myself less than popular with
him by unfurling my news of Anna to Adair before he could prepare.
But one of the problems of a partnership is the difficulty of
staying steadily angry at someone you have to work side by side
with, and I supposed Rob's peeve at me simply had worn out in a
hurry. The further unexpectedness, though, was that Rob intended a
big event of what was usually merely the do-whatever-is-left-
to-be-done final day of shearing. It of course had been Ninian
Duff, back when we all entered the sheep business, to discern that
if we ourselves did the last odds and ends of shearing--the
lambless ewes who hadn't borne that spring, our bell wether we called Percy and the handful of less fortunate wethers destined to be mutton on our own tables, the crippled sheep and the lame sheep and the ill sheep and the black sheep, all the "leftovers" there ever are at the fringe of raising sheep—if we ourselves did Leftover Day we saved a full day of paying the hired shearing crew. Too, Leftover Day had come to be not just the finale of shearing but also as much of a bit of a festival as you can make from an occasion such as the undressing of sheep, with four of us taking up the wool shears ourselves, and the rest of Scotch Heaven to wrangle the sheep remnant and provide commentary. But this was new, that some of Rob and Lucas's fine healthy yearling wethers would be in with the hospitalers and other raggletaggles of Leftover Day.

I studied Rob. It was a clear economy for the Barclays, to get those wethers shorn free by neighbors instead of the hired crew. But as to how Rob was going to justify this to those neighbors—

"What it is," he enlightened me without delay, "I thought maybe Adair would enjoy seeing a real shearing contest. So I challenged George and Allan Frew to one on Leftover Day. They went for that like a pair of fetching pups!"

I had to hoot. "You're a generous man, to show your sister how you get the whey beat out of yourself"—and myself too; I didn't miss that interesting implication—"shearing against the Frews. I can hear Allan crow now." I could, too. Other shearing times Rob and I had paired to try, Ninian and I had tried, Ninian and Rob had
tried, every set of Scotch Heaven men with any contest blood in them had tried and fully failed to tally more sheep than the Frew cousins on Leftover Day. The damn man Allan simply was a woolmaking machine and George was almost as bad.

"This is the year we'll put a plug in Allan Frew," maintained Rob. "What do you say to that?"

"I'll say the plain fact, which is that we've never even managed to come close yet. Rob, the two of us have about as much chance of outshearing the Frew boys as we have of jumping over this sheep shed."

He smiled and then shook the smile at me. "This year, we've got a card in our hat."

"Do we. And what's that?"

"These."

Rob stepped over to where his coat was hanging, reached under, and with a beam of triumph brought forth two gleaming sets of wool shears.

I had seen my share of wool shears before. But not these. Each of these shears had a pair of elongated triangular blades which faced each other with sharp expectancy, their bottoms linked in graceful loops of handle.

"Just listen to these lovelies sing," Rob urged me. Experimenting dubiously I put my hand around the grip of the shears he'd handed me and squeezed the hafts of metal. The faces of the blades moved across each others like very large scissors that had just been dipped in oil, steel crooning ever so gently against steel. Zzing zzing, they chimed a soft chorus with the identical
blades Rob was clapping and releasing, *zzzing* *zzzing*. Truly, here was a shears that seemed to coax my hand to keep working it, keep discovering the easy buttered whet of the blades as they met. Here was just the thing to make wool fly, right enough. I made my hand stop eliciting the whicker of the blades, so that I could read their tiny incut letters:

Manufactured in Sheffield, England

"Finest steel in the known world," proclaimed Rob. "Sheffield stuff holds an edge like a razor."

"These don't grow on Montana trees. Where'd you get them?"

"I had Adair bring them. See now, McAngus, these're our ticket over the Frew boys."

I saw, and then some: saw through Rob here as an open window. The winning shearing team were the heroes of Leftover Day, which was to say, stolid and effacing as George Frew was, Allan Frew was the perpetual hero of Leftover Day. But this time, this time Rob wanted me up there on the woolly cloud of triumph, for Adair to see up at. The damn man was still trying to fan up ardor betwixt here and me, exactly as if Anna did not exist. You had to credit him for persistence, moments when you didn't want to wring his stubborn Barclay neck. But rather than spend the rest of the day in steaming argument with Rob, I held myself to pointing out the hole in the bottom of his scheme:

"Rob, it's a clever notion and all. But I can't say I'm going to be that much faster a shearer even with blades such as these. Allan came out of his cradle shearing faster than I can even
dream about."

"Fast isn't it, man. Come on now, think sharp." He paused significantly. "The afternoon recess. Do you see the idea now, or am I going to have to paint it red for you?"

I saw again, this time with my every pore, down to the small of my back. I can swear that there was not a shearing muscle in me not alarmed by what Rob was proposing. Yet it might work. Outlandish enough, it just might. More than that, even. Gazing at Rob there in the shed, as innocently luminous with scheme as he had been when he lured me to the depot and Adair, I had the thought that Allan Frew was not the only one eligible for getting a plug put in him, come Leftover Day.

Life missed a major step in efficiency by putting fleece onto sheep instead of directly onto us. There is no other harvest like shearing, the crop directly from the living animal, panting and squirming, the shearers stooping daylong in sweat and concentration as they reap greasy wool. Everyone had work. Most often I was gate man, scurrying to operate all the waist-high swinging doors in the cutting chute that sluiced the sheep into the shearer's catch pens six at a time—each penful the pantry the shearer went to for sheep, so to say. Behind me, Rob and Allan Frew customarily were the wranglers—wrangling consisting of steadily shoving the band of sheep to the end of the corral where they funneled single-file into my cutting chute—but as Rob and Allan performed wrangling, lengthy wrangles about theories of sheep and sheepdogs and sheepherders also
went on between them as if it was coffeetime conversation. If you would think of shearing as an hourglass of work, Rob and Allan and I and the unshorn sheep were the supply bell of sand grains at the top. The hired crew of shearers who traveled from job to job of this sort—my back ached to think of their season of stooped-over labor—made the neck of the hourglass: from the shearing floor where twelve or fifteen of them did their clipwork, naked sheep and fleeces of wool steadily trickled. Then on the other side of the shearing crew, the catch-chamber of all this effort of shearing: Archie Findlater the tallyman, Donald Erskine the brander who daubed the sheep owner's paintmark onto each ewe's newly naked back, one boy or another as doctor—Davie Erskine had just enough concentration to manage it—who swabbed on disinfectant whenever a sheep was nicked by the blades; and finally, untimately, Ninian Duff as wooltromper stomping the fluffy fleeces down into the long woolsack hung like a giant's Christmas stocking through a hoop in the high little tromping tower. It always seemed to me fittingly festive that as each woolsack filled with its thirty-five or forty fleeces, Ninian within the sack gradually emerged out its top like a slow, slow jack-in-the-box.

All this to undess a sheep, you may say. But it wasn't the naked affronted ewe, stark as glass knickers, that was the product of this. No, it was the rich yellow-white coat she had been separated from. Wool. The pelt that grows itself again. I for one could readily believe that when man started harvesting his clothes from tamed animals instead of shopping wild for furs, then true
civilization began. The wool of our Montana sheep went off to Massachusetts mills with abracadabra names such as Amoskeag and Housatonic and transformed into shirts, dresses, trousers, blankets. You cannot overlook the marvelous in that.

"Man, this is the year we've been looking for under every rock." Rob was built on springs, this shearing time. A tremendous wool crop at a good price, Adair on hand, the Sheffield shears waiting to trim Allan Frew down to size--every prospect pleased.

"The sky is about to rain gravy," I agreed with him and grinned. I was in great spirits myself, Anna and our future always right there at the front of my mind. Adair I was aware of only at meals, when the entire shearing gang of us trooped into my house to eat off the long plank-and-sawhorse table Rob and I had put up. Odd to see, there in my kitchen, her and Judith--particularly Judith, whose presence there always reminded me that with a small veer of fate those years ago she might be in my kitchen all the time--but odd is part of life too. Yet I wondered what Adair made of all this, our Montana and its infinity of sheep and its mountains the size of clouds and its clouds huger than mountains.

I had my one chance to find out midway through that shearing time. We had just finished with the Erskine band and I was helping Davie drive them west from the shed, toward the start of their summer in the mountains. As we shoved them past my house and bare buildings, the sheep blatting comparisons of indignation to each other and Davie and I and our dogs answering them in full, out from the house came Adair to empty a dishpan. She stopped to witness
the commotion, as who wouldn't. Once the sheep were past the buildings I called out, "They're yours, Davie," and dropped away to return to the shearing shed. But my spirits were so thriving, with how well the shearing was going and, yes, with thoughts of Anna someday standing there in my yard where Adair now stood, that I veered over to Adair to joke: "Whatever you do, don't count these sheep as they go past or you'll be asleep a year."

"They look so--so forlorn without their wool."

"They'll have a fine fresh coat of it by the end of summer. By the time you go back to Scotland, you won't recognize these ladies." Or by the time, Dair Barclay, I am the husband of Anna and you're married to some Montanian conspicuously not me. One or other. But not that result which Rob dreamed up and still was trying to puff life into, not that result for which he brought you innocent from Nethermuir: not the altar halter tying together Angus and Adair, thank you just the same.

"Yes, I know they'll get new wool," Adair answered. "It's just that they're so plucked right now. Like poor old chickens ready for the pot."

I noticed she was flinching from the wind trying to find its way into her through her eyes. "What you have to do, girl," I instructed as I moved around to stand between her and the breeze's direction, "is learn to get in the lee of it. I make an A Number One windbreak, if I say so myself."

"That helps," Adair concurred. "Thank you." She took the chance to look past me to the mountains, high and clear in the
June air, and then around at my house and outbuildings and down the
creek to the sheep shed. While she was at that I did my own bit of
inventory. Not so bad a looker, this Adair, actually. Slim and
small-breasted, but I had seen less consequential examples. Then
those Barclay rosettes in her cheeks, and the auburn crinkle of her
hair, like intricately carved ornamentation. Anna of course was an
Amazon cavalcade all by herself, but in the rest of womanhood's rank
and file this Adair was no worse than midway. Something I had
forgotten from her face when she was a Nethermuir tyke; under each
eye she had a single dark freckle, specks that repeated the pupils
just an inch above. As if there had been earlier near-miss try at
siting her eyes in her face. Interesting. Odd. Now in that
recital way of hers, as if providing information to herself, Adair
was saying: "You and Rob have built all this, here and at Breed
Butte."

"And the others their own places, Ninian there and Donald and
Archie." I thought to scrupulously add, "And the Frew boys, they're
as solid as people come, too. But yes, we had to build ourselves.
This Montana is where work is."

"For you it must be like being born a second time, is it?
Coming into the world again, but already grown."

"Something of that sort, I suppose. If you can call me grown."
Standing a foot taller than she did, I meant this to cheer her with
a chuckle. She only smiled the minimum and went on, as if still
trying to get to the fact of the matter: "I don't see how you could
do it all, you and Rob."
"Main strength and ignorance," I attributed. "Dair, speaking of work, that's what I've got to get back to. I hope you're taking to Scotch Heaven all right."

She gave me a glance in which she seemed to be seeing something of herself instead of me, not a Barclay declarative look at all. "Adair is not to be fretted about," she quietly advised.

Leftover Day. The morning of it was sheer hospital work, George and Allan and Rob and I laboring our way with our clippers through ill and lame sheep, we trying to be as tender as they were fragile, poor old dears. Life perked up measurably just before noon when we reached the first few of Rob and Lucas's big yearling wethers. It was always the case, that older sheep who had been through the shearing process before knew what lay in store for them and did not like it one least bit. Even that morning's wheezers and geezers squirmed and writhed to the best of their ability. Yearlings on the other hand, virgin wool on their broad young backs, were greatly easier to shear because of their undefiled ignorance. Even as you held a yearling wether down and began working the shears over his body, he had a dazed disbelief that what was happening could be happening. And being wethers they had on them no hazards of udder and teats for us to be extra careful of--the easy of the easy, these innocent sheep who now were meeting our shearing blades.

"Those were just enough to get us going," Rob announced to the world and Frews at large, and with a wink to me, when we halted for noon dinner, "Barclay and McCaskill can hardly wait until we start
counting." I grinned, but only half meant it. Already shearing was taking a toll on my back and whatever others parts of me it could reach. The afternoon ahead looked long.

Allan Frew of course was as fresh as froth. "You're ready for the shearing lesson this afternoon then?" he piped out, with a particular glint my way to remind me I was a schoolteacher. But it wasn't news to me that Allan had beef where his brains ought to be, and so I let pass everything of that noon hour except the constant thought that my shears were going to have to do a lot of talking the rest of the day.

"Ay, you're ready, both pairs?" declaimed Ninian from on high, atop his woolsack platform. "As you know, Archie will tally and call out the totals of each team every hour. Set then, are you, Allan and George? Angus and Robert?"

Receiving our four nods, Ninian lowered himself into the woolsack until just his head and half his beard showed, and boomed his starting call:

"More wool!"

We dove to the work. Four amazed sheep emerged from the woolsack curtains between our catch pens and the shearing floor, being dragged by us and then before they knew it being half sat up, half held against our bodies, like stunned cats pressganged into a children's game. Worse came next, as the suspicious sound of snipping started circling their bodies and did not stop. Here was the moment for each sheep to declare its character. Some bleated in consternation and tried to wriggle free, which earned them only a
tighter clamp of the shearer's legs and a possible gash if they did
their worming while the blades were moving to meet them. Others
seemed to try to sink through the shearing platform, ooze away from
the alarming problem. Either case, the unfleecing relentlessly
proceeded to happen to them, and their eyes became like doublesize
marbles, hard glaze of fatal acceptance there now. As the
yellow-white wool, oily and rich, began to fall away like a slipping
gown, you could all but feel the young sheep's innocence of life
sliding off with it.

Both Allan and George were left-handed. With them opposite
that way to Rob and myself, the two pairs of us down in labor must
have been like a mirror reflection. Except that the left-side image
little by little, inexorably and inevitably, produced a greater
number of shorn sheep than did my and Rob's version. Leave the
pairs of us there shearing for centuries and it would go on and on
that way, always the left-side Frews manufacturing a few more naked
sheep than we ever could. From experience and all else, Rob and I
knew this would be the case. I am overtall to be any kind of an
ideal shearer, having to get through the endless stoopwork in
whatever spurts I could manage. Rob, as a person lower to the
ground, could go about it much more ably, and with his deft hands he
was a
proficient workman with the shears, fine to watch. But George Frew was as relentlessly regular as do-re-me-fa-so-la in disposing of a catch pen of six sheep, while the damnable Allan had several rhythms, all of them casually swift, for undoing the fleeces off his animals. Spirited infantry in the attack on wool, Rob and myself; the saber cavalry, those damn Frews.

As was confirmed by Archie Findlater's tally at the end of the first hour: "The Frew boys, ahead by two sheep." Actually, Rob and I could take heart from that. Other times, they outsheared us by twice that in the opening hour.

"We've got them just where we want them," Rob imparted to me in an undervoice as he dragged his next wool victim past me. Maybe so, but my muscles had elsewhere they wanted to be.

The next hour Allan and George gained another two sheep on us, again a heartening loss for Rob and me in that it could have been so much greatly worse. By now the women were arriving from the house to watch the finale. Rob tossed a wave to Judith and Adair between finishing one wether and diving into his catch pen for the next. I wasn't sure I could lift an arm high enough for a wave, so I called out--panted out, really--my greeting. Long since had these big broadbacked wethers, absolute fields of wool, stopped being the easy of shearing.

"By Jesus, lads, we could see the wool flying from a mile off," now Lucas arriving grandly, Nancy's brown inquisitive face beside his broad bearded one. "Angus and Robbie, a little faster if you can stand it, ay?" Not even Rob could muster the retort that
deserved. It had to come instead from the squirming dismayed sheep between my knees: bleagh!

Half an hour until the momentous mid-afternoon recess. My arm and wrist and hand were becoming a sullen rebel band from the rest of my body. I wondered how many other parts of myself there were to be contended with in the half of an afternoon still ahead.

At last, it seemed days, Ninian climbed up out of his woolsack and called, "Recess, both pairs. Time to see to your blades."

From the corner of my eye I could see Allan and George stretch and arch their backs, then walk over to the grindstone to bring an edge back onto their blades, while Rob and I labored to finish the sheep we were on. A streak of sparks flew as a Frew blade face met the whirling stone, kzzzkzzzkzzz. Rob released his shorn sheep, straightened for a glance at the Frews in their leisure of shear-sharpening and a quick cocked glint of reassurance at me, then dove to his catch pen and brought out a next sheep. I swallowed hard and followed his example.

"Angus, Robert, have you lost your ears?" came the next call from Ninian. "It's afternoon recess. Time to take a rest halt and sharpen your blades."

"Work is all the whetstone we need, Ninian," Rob answered in gulps of breath as he clipped rapidly around his sheep. I saved air and wordlessly labored ahead on my own wether. The Sheffield shear in my hand still felt nearly as sharp and gliding in its clipping as when we'd started.

Here now was the famous card in the hat, the bone for the craw
of those Frews. Now we were gambling, Rob and I, that by forfeiting the stop to rest and sharpen we could gain enough sheep to offset George and Allen's skill and speed. The thought was that by keeping stoplessly at it we might just eke in ahead of them—a sheep, a half a sheep, any portion of a sheep would be pure victory—by the end of the day. The thought was that Barclay and McCaskill
(McCaskill and Barclay, I had had to correct Rob's formulation) were
hardy enough specimens to withstand a recessless afternoon. The
thought was...I tried not to think further about our forfeit of
blessed rest.

From beside the skreeking grindstone Allan Frew hooted to us.
"You pair had better hope your fingernails are sharp, so you can use
them when those shears get dull as cheese."

"Up a rope, Allan," Rob gritted out, sulphurous for him, the
rest of that phrase involving an unlikely hydraulic feat by Allan.

We sheared like fiends. Meanwhile George and Allan with
apparent unconcern went on with their blade-sharpening, interrupting
to refresh themselves with swigs of water, which from Allan's lip-
smacking testimonial, you would have thought was the king's brandy.

At recess end, Archie announced the new tally: "Rob and Angus
are ahead by three sheep." I thought I saw Allan's eyebrows lift a
fraction of an inch at that, but immediately he was mauling wool off
a sheep and George was too, and Rob and I set ourselves to be chased.

But across the next hour the Frews not only did not catch us,
they gained only a sheep and a half. With one last hour of sheep
left, that pace by both pairs of us would make the outcome as narrow
as a needle. Rob was shearing valiantly, even-steven with George's
implacable procession of fleeces. I wasn't faring that well with
Allan, or rather my hand wasn't. Going into this day I thought my
hands were hard as rasps, toughened by every kind of homestead work
since I took off my winter mittens months before. But shearing is
work of another magnitude and I was developing a blister the size
of a half dollar where the haft of the Sheffield shears had to be
gripped between my thumb and first finger. Between sheep I yanked
out my handkerchief and did a quick wrap around my palm to cushion
the blistered area—Allan seemed to gain half a dozen swooping
strokes on me in just that time—and then flung myself back to
shearing.

In the effort of that final hour, I swear even my mustache
ached with weariness. My shearing arm grew so heavy that the labor
of dragging each fresh sheep from the catch pen was perversely
welcome. Even through the wrap of the handkerchief I could still
feel the hot blotch of pain that was the blister. And I noticed Rob
lurch a little—yes, you can imbibe too much work just as you can
too much liquid leisure—in his trips past me to his catch pen. Our
salvation was the Frew cousins were having the blazes worked out
of them too, challenged more mightily this day than they had ever
been before.

The afternoon and the supply of sheep drew down together. Our
audience beyond the shearing floor had not uttered a word for many
minutes. The snick of four sets of blades was the only sound now.
I thought maybe Adair would enjoy seeing a real shearing contest.
She was seeing, right enough, Rob. Nethermuir eyes were going to
get a Montana education this day, if it killed me. Which it just
maybe was about to.

Finishing with yet another mammoth sheep, I lurched groggily to
my catch pen. The fog of work was so heavy in me that I had an
instant of muddle when wool did not meet me everywhere there in the
pen. Only one sheep, looking defiant and terrified and indignant and piteous, was there. Rob's pen next to mine was empty. George's next to his was empty. Allan's had one sheep left.

Dear God. This close. This far.

I sucked breath. Grabbed the lone last sheep and dragged.

As I burst out through the woolsack curtain with my sheep, I saw Allan hurl past me to catch his final wether.

I had mine's head shorn and was working desperately along his side when I heard the coarse slicing sound of Allan's blade go into action.

"Good, good, Angus," from Rob with hoarse glee. "You're almost there, man. Just keep on and you've got it made."

My yearling seemed vast, long as a hog, enough wool on him to clothe an orphanage. Sweat streamed into my eyes. My hand seemed to work the clippers without me.

I turned the sheep for the final side. Only moments later, I heard Allan grunt as he turned his own sheep.

Now I had to do this just so.

Hand, keep your cunning. Do as bid. Slow yourself just enough, while seeming to speed for all you are worth. Work less than you know you can, aching faithful hand, for the first time this day.

As my shearing hand was performing its curtain scene, the tail of my eye caught a movement of Allan's head—he was throwing a desperate glance to see how much wool was left on my sheep. I met his eye with mine, I could not have resisted for a thousand dollars:
I gave Allan the briefest instant of a wink. And then nearly regretted it, for it made him falter in surprise between his mighty strokes with the shears. But hand, you were in on the wink too, you were ever so little less busy than you made yourself seem, and now, there, cut air instead of wool, now the fleece again, what little is left, drive the blades but not too—

A scrape of steel on steel. No wool between in that noise. Allan's shout of it, "Done!"

As his word finished in the air, my own blades shaved free the last of my wether's fleece.

I stood up, as far as my outraged skeleton would let me, and met the face of supreme disappointment that was Rob.

"Angus, Angus," he shook his head in a mix of consternation and commiseration. "I'd have bet every nickel that lumberjack wasn't going to catch you on that last sheep."

"You'd be on your way to the poorhouse if you had, then," I managed to provide, trying to look properly downcast. Now that we were being joined by the Duffs and Erskines and Findlaters and Lucas and Nancy and Judith and most of all Adair, I spoke out with what I wanted in all their minds and that last one in particular: "Did you ever see a man shear the way of that Allan? He can't be beat, I'm here to tell you." I caught the instant of regret, in Adair's gray eyes as I waved widely to my conqueror. "Come over here, man. Let me shake that hand of yours."

Which I did, blister and all, with the last shred of fortitude in me. Allan by then had convinced himself he hadn't seen a wink.
from me, I must have been merely blinking sweat from an eye, and by
the time I found an excuse to get away from the throng, much was
being made of him, not a little of it by himself.

And so it went later too, at the dance that put away Leftover
Day for another year, where I assiduously romped the floor with
Judith, with Flora Duff, with Jen Erskine, with any and everyone
other than Adair. Not that I maybe had to be that circumspect, for
by then she was being squired to the hilt by Allan.

Dearest Anna--Although they are no competition to a certain
lovely product of Brechin, I can tell you that a few thousand ewes
and lambs do provide absorbing company. In point of fact, they
absorb time from me as if it was water and they were sponges. One
minute the band will be grazing as peaceful as picnickers and I
think to myself, now here is the way herding is done--the sun
mothering the fresh grass, the ewes butting and nuzzling their lambs
in an epidemic of affection. Then the next minute, reality intrudes
when one of the rearmost sheep is spooked by her own shadow, she
bolts in alarm, alarming the next few around her, they race pell-mell
into the others, and before I can say an appropriate word or two the
tail-end of the band is wrapped around its lead, a sudden colossal
knot of sheep....

Dear Angus--Here where we are is called the High Line, in
defference to the Great Northern as the northernmost, "highest," of
railroads. The towns along the railroad have been named out of a
gazeteer: Havre, Malta, Kremlin and such. Considerably eastward
there is even a Montana version of Glasgow....

Try as I did to give them their due for scenery and the healthy hermit life, the days of that mountain summer were merely stuffing between the too-short time Anna and I had had together and the rest of our life together that would begin in autumn. In telling her goodbye, I made her pledge that we would write copiously to each other throughout the summer. "A number of times a day," I stipulated earnestly. "As often as possible," she concurred, and with one last kiss—remarkable how much more a kiss means when the two of you have done all it promises—we went our ways for the vast months of summer.

Dearest Anna—I have been doing my utmost to make this a monumental summer. By now I have built several of them—sheepherder's monuments, cairns about as tall as I am, to serve as landmarks and boundary points between the area of the mountain where I graze my band and the one where Rob is herding his wethers. So, Miss Noon Creek Schoolkeeper, the topic is history: did old Alexander McCaskill, stone mason of the Bell Rock, ever have the thought that a great-grandson of his would be piling stones into miniatures tower in far America?...

Dear Angus—It would be gratifying to tell you that I can look out from this cook tent to the distant Rockies and imagine you there at work on your monuments, but the actuality is that the mountains are not within sight from this section of the High Line. All is prairie here. This is quite another Montana from your Scotch Heaven or my Noon Creek, and I wonder how many Montanas there are, in all....
Everything of life we ever find or are given ends up in the attic atop us, it is said. I have no cause to doubt it. During those high summer weeks my head stored away new troves all the time. My final season alone, this. The point at which the trade was to be made, my solitary wonderment at life and where it was taking a person, for becoming half of two. You, I'd say, need the right partner in this old life, Angus. You spoke it first, Lucas, and now it was on its way to happening. Even after the marriage there would be the everlasting astonishment of how Anna and I had coincided, from a handful of miles apart in Scotland, where we had not met and may well never have, to coming together in this far place Montana. And now there would be McCaskills derived of Nethermuir and Brechin. I could imagine waking beside Anna every morning the rest of our lives and gazing at her face and thinking, how did this come to be? And then she would blink awake, meeting the day and me with her appraising half-smile, The lily's hue, the rose's dye,/the kindling lustre of an eye, and naturally we would

"McAngus, do you let a visitor onto your cloud?"

Rob had ridden so near he could have tossed his hat onto me, that noontime in early August, without my noticing.

"Some of us are intent on our flocks," I maintained, with a gesture to my band serenely shaded up in a stand of lodgepole pine, "while others of us have nothing better to do than go around sneaking up on people."

"The Ecclefechan choir and all its geese could sneak up on you these days," he said with a mighty smile down at me.
I doubted that he had ridden all the way across the mountainside just to test my alertness. No, he admitted, he saw this as an errand of mercy. He had come to see if I wanted to take a turn at camptending—"Man, from the look of you, you'd better go down for air," Rob urged.

Well, why not. The day's ride down to Breed Butte and back up with a pack horse laden with our groceries would stir the blood around in me, right enough. When I told Rob I'd do it, he suggested with a straight face that I take along a second pack horse for my High Line mail.

When I rode in to Breed Butte that next day, it didn't take a bushel of brains to figure out that mine wasn't the only well-being Rob had in mind when he suggested I come instead of him. Ordinarily Judith wasn't the kind to get nettled unless she sat in them, but one look at her told me she had been storing up opinions for Rob about his absence from the homestead's remorseless summer tasks. All she said to me—it somehow sounded like a lot more—was: "How quick will you two be bringing the sheep down?"

"Another three weeks," I proffered as if it was overnight, and began lugging groceries out of range of her. And almost waltzed over Adair, coming up onto the porch as I was starting to step off it.

"Hello you," I sang out brightly, and received a lot less than that in exchange. As I went on over to the pack horse, she stood on the porch steps and watched.
"So.  How are you liking Montana by now?" I asked her across
the yard.

"It's--different," I heard back.

"Getting acquainted some, are you, with this Scotch Heaven
tribe?"

"A bit." Not exactly bright as a bangle, a report of that
sort. I sallied on anyway:

"Seen or heard anything of our champion shearer?"

Those gray eyes of hers sent me a look as direct as a signpost.
"Angus," she said levelly, "you know as well as I do that Allan Frew
is stupid as a toad."

I made my retreat from the Breed Butte garrison of women and
headed gratefully back to mountains and sheep. The Barclays. What
an ensemble. Rob ought to have his head examined for plopping Adair
over here from Nethermuir in the first place. It would be saner all
around when she wrote off this visit of hers as one of Rob's follies
and returned to Scotland at summer's end. Well, I at least had done
what I could to pair Adair with a Montana mate, so long as it wasn't
me. I couldn't help but agree with her about Allan Frew, though.

The last day of August, down I came from the mountains with fat
lambs and plump profit everywhere in front of me, and beyond those
the precious prospect that waited for me at Noon Creek. As soon as
the sheep were putting their noses to the first bouquets of grass on
the slope above my homestead, I aimed Scorpion north as fast as he
could trot. On hunch, I went not to the Ramsay place but to the
Noon Creek
schoolhouse. With the beginning of school so near I'd have bet hard
money, Anna, that you would be readying your classroom. And I'd
have won, three times doubly. I patted your sorrel saddle mare
rewardfully as I stepped past and toward the schoolhouse door.

"Is this where a person comes to learn?" I called in.

You turned around from the blackboard so quickly your braid
swung forward over your shoulder, down onto the top of your breast.
"Angus! They said you were still in the mountains, I wasn't
expecting you yet!" I'll tell you again now, that braid was the
rope to my heart.

"Yet?" I answered. "It's been forever, whatever the calendar
says." I went to you and held you at arm's length and simply
looked, drank you in. Your gaze was steady on mine, then you put
your face against my shoulder. "You look as if the mountains agreed
with you," you said warmly. After my summer of not hearing it, your
voice was as rich as a field of buttercups.

"They were good enough company, but I desperately need to hear
a Brechin voice."

"You do, do you."

"I do. And I want it to tell me every minute of itself since I
last heard it, back in Napoleon's time."

"That's an extravagant expectation," you gave me the half-smile.

"A mighty word, extravagant. What's the spelling for it?
Write it for me, Miss Noon Creek Schoolkeeper."

"You are the Angus McCaskill who can read the air, are you? We
shall see." You began tracing lovely maneuvers of alphabet before
my eyes.

"An unfair advantage," I protested. "You can't expect me to read your old word backwards." I moved around behind you, peering down over your right shoulder, my cheek against the black silk of your hair, my hands along the twin bone thresholds so near to where your breasts began. "Now then. Write your utmost, Anna Ramsay."

You stood stock-still. Then, "Angus..."

Suddenly what we were saying to each other was with lips, but words were nowhere involved. Our kissing took a wild blind leap. The next thing I knew my lips had followed your neck down, the top of your dress was open and the feminine undergear was somehow breached—your breasts were there, bare as babes, and I was kissing the beautiful whiteness and twin budding nipples. Your hand was under my shirt, your fingers spread and moving back and forth on my spine.

I looked up at you and your other hand came to my face, to the corner of my mouth. You looked intent, Anna, ready to say something. My urge was to keep on with the kissing and the divesting of clothing, and yours evidently was too. But instead, "Angus, we can't. Not—not here."

"We can," I answered gently. "And sooner or later we will. But for now just let me hold you." Your hands hesitated where they had begun to close the front of your dress; and then they were clutching my back again, the two of us snug together, just being there clasped. We rocked gently against each other or the schoolroom floor was swaying on a gentle tide, we didn't care
which. Out of my spell of sheer happiness I heard myself say:

"Talk, we were mentioning. It seems to me a poor second-best to
this, but yes, let's talk some more. I'll even begin. Anna, marry
me now."

I felt you tighten even more against me, the twin globes of
your breasts wonderful in their pressure. You said into my
shoulder: "I have to tell you, Angus, you're not the first to ask."

"I suppose not. If the male half of the world has any sense at
all, it's been trooping to you in regimental file with that question
since you were the age of twelve. But Anna, love, first isn't what
I had in mind—I just want to be the last."

While I was saying it all you pushed herself just far enough
away to look me in the eye. You didn't smile, not even the half­
smile I loved so. "Isaac has asked me."

I nearly chuckled and asked how many words of how many
different tongues he did it in. But your face stopped me. Lord of
mercy, Anna, had you been so overkind as not to tell him outright no?

"Angus," you said.

"Angus," you said, "I've told Isaac yes."

I rode away doomed.

Not around Breed Butte toward home, because I could not face
the new everlasting canyon of emptiness waiting for me there. Down
the Noon Creek road toward Gros Ventre I reined Scorpion. In
ordinary times it was a pleasant straight-as-a-rope route along the
benchland, roofs of the Noon Creek cattle ranches below, but this
day I wouldn't have given them a glance if they were the castles of
the moon. The tatters that were left of me had all they could do to
cling there onto Scorpion's back, hang in the saddle and be a sack
for the disbelief. **Angus,** Anna saying, there in the schoolhouse and
endlessly in my mind, **I am fond of you, I enjoy you.** You know I
find you attractive—the memory of her open dress came into the air
between us. **You know how we were, Angus,** that last night there in
your schoolroom. **I have to tell you.** Isaac and I have been that
way together all this summer. The moment of pause as that news
pierced every inch of me. Then even worse words. **Angus, I'm afraid**
it's Isaac I feel actual love for.

Scorpion's ears pricked, his horse view of life alert to the
stark lone outline standing ahead of us on the benchland. The pole
gateframe of the Double W ranch, gallows-high. As we passed the
lofty gate I turned my head to the other side and looked back to
where the misery began. The Noon Creek schoolhouse was a square
white speck now, under the mountains with their evening roof of
cloud and beside the longsail rise of Breed Butte and nearest of all
to a spacious creekside ranch that was Reese horseland.

**Angus, I'm afraid it's Isaac I feel actual love for.** Just that
way. As if we two men were jars of jam on the table and she was
saying, **this is strawberry, this is plum,** I'll have plum from now on.
Anna was marrying him for the sake of those parents of hers, to tie
the leaky boat of Ramsay finances to the ark of Isaac. She was
marrying him because she felt sorry for him, damned Dane gabbler
him. She was marrying him because she had temporarily lost her
mind. Amnesia. A blow on the head she couldn't recall. The
instant she came out of this sad mad drift of her senses...

She was marrying Isaac because she chose to. Because she wanted to. Because some form of the love infection that had happened to me had now happened to her. I knew that, to the bone. Knew it indelibly and with no possible mistake because Anna Ramsay in her honesty made plain the difficulty of her decision. **Angus, you are a rare man. Maybe the rarest I've ever met.** Her half-smile seemed wistful, or did I imagine. The frank faction of her, though, the Not Proven verdict-giver, went right on to say: *But I think you don't know yet what you want of life.* But I did, did, did. Everything I wanted was standing here telling me she was marrying someone else.

**And you do, I raged, and it's name is Isaac?**

**How can I ever say it as well as you deserve?** Angus, you are one who wants to see how many ways life can rhyme. I just--I just want it to add up as sensibly as I can make it do. And while I didn't at all intend it to, this summer told me how much I want to be with Isaac. Her perfect face looked at me with steady regret. **Angus, I'm so sorry. I am sorrier for you than can ever be said.** She put her hand gently on my wrist, half a grasp which she must have thought was better than none. **I can tell you this. If I ever see that Isaac and I are not right for each other, I'll know where to turn for better. Any woman would do well to marry you, Angus.**

Scorpion was snorty and nervous, our shadow a restless one on the road in front of us from his head-tossing and twitching. If truth could show itself as sunlight throws down our outlines, there
would have been a third form there in our composite shadow—the
dread that rode me. There is nothing else to call it, a dread as
harsh and bottomless as the smothering one I had felt in the
steerage bunk those first Atlantic nights out from Scotland. For
what was tearing at me was not simply that Anna had turned me down.
No. No, the greatly worse part was that even now I could not stop
with
myself from siding with her, defending her against myself even as I
derided her reasons in favor of mumblejumble Isaac. I still loved
that woman. And if this day had not changed that fact, what ever
could?
"By Jesus, Angus, you look as if the dog ate your supper."

I gave Lucas an answering eyeshot that sent his stubs reaching for a large glass for me. Lucas Barclay, author of my homesteading venture, commandant of the Medicine Lodge and the tall house behind and Nancy in that house. All this without even having hands. Isaac Bedamned Reese barely had approximate English. Yet here was I, supposedly complete but womanless. Less the exact one woman I wanted.

I explained to Lucas in the one word: "Anna." Misunderstanding the situation as something that could be mollified he said: "A spat, ay? Don't be so down, lad, you're not the first--"

"She told me to go chase myself," I told him. I told him about the Anna-Isaac wedding-to-be, told him my bafflement, told him a couple of rapid drinks' worth.

"Bad," he agreed. "But you will mend, you know."

I wanted to blaze to him that this wasn't like Rob being infatuated with Nancy, he'd sing a different tune if he were me right now. For that matter, something of the sort must have flared, because Lucas now was steering me to the weaning corner of the bar and casting keep-away looks at the few other customers as they drifted in. "Another glass or so will do you more good than harm, but that's the end of the night for you then."

Harm, did I hear him say. From that day when Rob and I walked into this Medicine Lodge and Lucas laid his lack of hands before us to see, I had wondered what so harmed a life was like, how Lucas must feel, true and deep, about enduring the rest of existence as
less than he had been. Now Lucas was the one who did not, could not, know anything near the full sum of damage I felt. Come put on my bones, Lucas. Come and wear Angus McCaskill like borrowed clothes, let our hearts pump in tune, our eyes sight together at this rascal thing life. Come stand here under my skin and find what this is like, I will learn your loss and you mine.

"Angus, Angus. Take it slow, now. Both on this whiskey and yourself."

Slow, is it. My whole life is slow as anything can be now, indeed it's halted, bogged, stranded...This was my Bell Rock. My time of stone, with obliteration all around. The ocean was coming to cover me, ready to put salt pennies on my eyes, and it may as well, why live if this was what living amounted to. I'm here to tell you. No boat on the reef and none in sight anywhere. Land stood a dozen miles distant from Bell Rock; yes, that was the ever same unswimmable distance, from here in the Medicine Lodge to that Noon Creek schoolroom where Anna had told me no, Isaac yes.

"Angus, man, you're full. No more of the wet stuff for you tonight. Sedge and Toussaint, each grab an end of him, can you, and take him around to the house. Angus, here now, just let the lads lift you, there's the way. You'll be different in the morning."

Let the tide come. The Atlantic, the Annalantic. Take my ankles, shins, knees, rise, damn you, bless you, sweep me off this reef, blanket me with water, arms and throat and eyes and higher yet, the whole hopeless thing I am.
What followed, an exact month from that day Anna said no to me, even yet seems the kind of dream a puppet must have, each odd moment on its own string of existence, now dangled, now gone, no comprehension allowed between. Around the wedding pair a cloud of faces, high nimbus and low, years-married couples remembering with faint smiles and their children curious but fidgety. Inevitable breeze, blowing the few strands of the Gros Ventre minister's gray hair down into his eyes as he begins to read the ceremony, We are gathered... Mountains up over the valley in their eternal gather. The couple, in voices as brave as they can make them, reciting vows for life. The thought caught up with me: Life. That could be a long time. Then moved on through my slowly registering mind. Here the last of the dreambead instants, this tardy and this soon, the ring being handed by the brightfaced best man.

I shifted slightly, turning to the woman beside me. Onto Adair's finger I slipped the ring warm from Rob's grasp and it was done. We were wed.

The minister gave out that last intonation to us. "You may kiss the bride." Leaning my head down to Adair's I saw she had her eyes closed, as if casting a wish. It all revisited me—the pieces of time that had never really passed, simply drifted from corner to corner within me, dreamlike yet never with a dream's innocence—Rob's voice beginning by saying Her Highness gave you a wave of her handkerchief, I hear, when I rode home the morning after my night of forlorn souse and found him there, crossing the yard to feed my indignant chickens. Those Ramsays think their God's first cousins,
though where they get it from I can't see. Angus, she's not the only woman in this world. No. There was another. In three days, when I hoped I was some semblance of a human again, I rode to Breed Butte, asked Adair to walk with me to the brow of the butte, and there my words came out with cloppety boots on but they came out. 

Dair, you know what's happened with me. She: I know about Anna, Angus, and I'm sorry for you. She did not entirely know, though, nowhere nearly all. Could not know how thoroughly the lovespell for Anna still gripped me, that neither disappointment nor anger nor reason nor laughing at myself nor crying with myself nor anything else among the storms going through me seemed to loosen at all. Nor did I dare even try to bring out my hopelessness for Adair to see, because the bargain we needed to make could not withstand full truth. I spoke fact instead: That's the past now, Dair. And I'm asking you not to go back to Scotland. I'm asking you to stay and marry me. Further fact silent but plain behind each line aloud: I no longer could stand to face life by my solitary self, could not reverse myself into the awaiting watcher I was before Anna changed me; Adair who had come across an ocean believing I was awaiting her did not want to return empty-handed to a stone Scottish town: we two together at least were a different sum than either of those awkward results. She made her choice, more pity to her, Adair said softly without touching Anna's name. Then said the rest in that lofty little way as if outside herself, speculating. And Adair has made hers. Angus, I'll marry you any number of times over. I: We can start with once. And Rob again, exultant: 'Angus, man, this is the
best news in the world! Have the wedding here on Breed Butte, what do you say? We'll throw you two a shindig that'll not be forgot.

Someone of the crowd calling out now, "That kiss ought to more than do the job, you two. You'll be married a couple of hundred years on the strength of that!"

Adair looked as if I had taken every bit of breath from her, she looked as if she'd heard a wild rumor prove true. In front of us the minister hemmed and hankered as he wished us well. Faces of my pupils had been astounded into giggles.

"I thought all the kissing had to be done at once," I alibied to the world at large and drew Adair snug against my side. "You mean to tell me there's more of that to come, Dair Barc--" I stopped and laughed with the rest until I could manage the correction--"Dair McCaskill?"

I heard giggles, shushes, whispered bulletins, as if echoing ghostly up the butte from my schoolroom. Then unmistakably Susan Duff announcing, "We have a song for Mr. and Mrs. McCaskill." I turned and Adair with me, to the every-sized choir that had crept behind us; my pupils in slicked-down hair and stiff Sunday clothes, descending in grinning disorder around the central figure of Susan Duff, Susan long and tall, Susan princess of my classroom, Susan of that silvered voice that now soared out and coaxed the wavery others:
"Dancing at the rascal fair,
Adair Barclay, she was there,
gathering a lad with red hair,
dancing at the rascal fair.
Angus McCaskill, he was there,
paired with a lass named Adair,
dancing at the rascal fair.
Feel love's music everywhere,
Fill your heart, fill the air,
Dancing at the rascal fair."

"Some people," I declaimed after the applause died and Adair
and I thanked Susan Duff to the limit, "will try anything to get on
the good side of their teacher." Laughter met that, Adair met my
pupils one and all, and after them it would be their parents and
everyone. The song had helped, I told myself. Maybe I did know
what I was doing, maybe Adair did too, maybe we were going to be a
good fit. But tell myself whatever I would, the other refused to
leave my mind. I tried and tried not to think any of it, which only
incited the factions up there all the more. Anna, come today. No,
don't come, not this day that is by every right Dair's day.

Married life was proceeding from there. Congratulations from
the men filling my ears, Adair receiving bushels of advice from the
women about how to perfect me. Lucas at one point provided me brief
rescue with a generously full glass captured between his stubs.
"Have a drop of angel milk," he directed. "You look as though you need it, ay?" It was a lovely whiskey, like drinking the color off a ripe wheat field. "This is the house brand in the Medicine Lodge now, is it?" I advocated. "Don't get wild ideas, it happens to be a bottle that's a precious commodity. Only the advent of good sense in you, marrying a Barclay, makes me crack it open." Lucas's face did not live up to our banter either; he was eyeing me in a diagnosing way. And so he knew, knew for certain now that my tongue had just vowed for one woman but my thoughts still chose another.

I waited for words from this man who always could see through me and out the other side. For once, there were none. Lucas gravely nodded—was it simply acknowledgment? or lodge greeting of the maimed?—and left Adair and me to our congratulators.

Scotch Heaven was here without exception, and nearly everyone from the South Fork and down the main creek as well, and many from Gros Ventre and several from Noon Creek, although not the two most on my mind. Seven days ago, Anna and Isaac had gone through this same ceremony at Fort Benton on one of his horse-merchant trips.

Anna, come. No, stay away. Anna, I just want to see you, before Adair and I make our life, to ease you from my mind. No, I want to see you because that is what I always want, the hunger I always have, and so Anna, don't—.

I felt Adair startle, startling me. A round walnut-colored face, crinkles of amusement permanently at the corners of its eyes, regarded the two of us as if we held the secrets it had forever wanted to know.
"I came to see the cream separator," spoke Toussaint. "She looks like the good kind."

All simultaneously I was exclaiming in relief and shaking hands hello with Toussaint and introducing him to Adair, who was looking as if she'd encountered a feathered Zulu. When Toussaint had paid us his chuckling respects and gone she asked, "Who on earth was that?"

"The king's remembrancer, except that Montana doesn't have the king. I'll try to explain Toussaint later."

As much to herself as to me she said softly, "Adair has much to get used to in your Montana."

"And she will," I said with a heartiness based on my own need to believe that. "First, though, she has to meet all these Montanians who admire my taste in wives." Countless more introductions were undergone to the tune of Angus, we wondered who you've been waiting for.

When the next chance came I asked her, low, "Dizzy with names yet?"

"At least," she said, close to breathless again. She looked a bit abstracted too, as if having stepped off a sudden little distance from the proceedings. Deciding that since I was now a husband I'd better undertake to be husbandly, I announced to our assemblage: "Time for our first war council. We'll be back before you can get your whistles wet." I led her up the butte a little way, just far enough to be by ourselves.

Adair asked in wonder, "Do people flock out this way for every wedding?"

"Only the ones I'm in," I vouched.
"Angus." She put her hand on my arm. "Angus, I'll try with whatever's in me to be a good wife. I don't want you disappointed in me."

"Dair, what's this about?" The unexpected note of doubt in her voice hit deep in me, colliding with my own fears. But I made the words light enough to float away. "It's been most of an hour already since the vows and I'm not ready to trade you in yet."

"I want you to know. I'll be all I can for you."

"Then that ought to be more than enough."

"A person just doesn't know..." Her words faltered. "Or least this one doesn't know."

In my chest the sound thudded in echo: know...know...know... or was it no...no...no... I made the fatal little round sound become her word again: "Know? Know what, Adair?"

"I don't know how I'll be. Amid all of this." She swerved from my staring quiz of her, and the two of us looked out over as much of all as eyes can ever see. The homesteads along the creek, the unpopulated miles all around the cluster of people for this occasion, our occasion—Rob with Judith, Lucas and Nancy, Ninian Duff and Flora, Toussaint, the children of my school, people and people—and the mountains patiently propping the sky.

"We have the rest of our lives to find that out, Dair," I at last offered. "Let's not worry about ourselves until we have to."

People were calling to us from the tables of wedding supper.

Here now, the lovey-dovey stuff just will have to wait a bit...

Angus, you've got the ring on her finger now, you can afford to
share her with us... Rob's voice emerging over the others: We're moving on to important matters such as food and drink, you two, so bring yourselves on down here.

"Hadn't we better?" Adair said and tried to give me a smile. I manufactured one in return and confirmed, "By popular demand." And in me that desperate double chorus I could not be rid of. Anna, come. No, don't.

Anna.

And Isaac. Just arriving. The sight of Adair and me coming down the butte to join the wedding crowd halted the two of them at the far edge of the throng as though it was a wall.

There wasn't a chance in this world to know what Isaac Reese was thinking above that drooping mustache, behind those horse trader's eyes. As well go read a fencepost as try to decipher that Dane. But Anna registered on me exactly, instantly as a mirror reflection. I saw in Anna a great carelessness, a holding back as she met my gaze with hers, and understood at once that this was the total of our meeting today, these exacting looks across the wedding crowd: a man beside his yet-to-be-known bride, casting every glance he can toward the woman he knows every inch of. Propriety was delivered now by Anna and Isaac being here, now there could be no behind-back talk as to why schoolkeeper Anna was absent the day of schoolkeeper Angus's wedding, weren't they seeing one another, for a time? You don't suppose...

And now I had my private answer as to whether the sight of Anna here, unattainable, the past in a glorious glossy braid, would begin
to heal my pang for her or make it worse. Seeing her did absolutely neither. Not a candleworth of difference one way or the other in the feeling for Anna that burned like a sun in me. That heartfire had persisted past her choice of Isaac for a husband, it was persisting past my vow to this new presence at my side, my wife. But it couldn't persevere on and on in the face of all the rest of life to come, could it? Could it, Angus? I drew breath. I had to hope not. I had to make it not.

I put my hand in a reassuring clasp over Adair's where it held hard to the corner of my arm. "That brother of mine," she was saying, "You never know the next from him."

Rob had climbed onto a chair. He stood amidst all of us of the wedding crowd, half again as tall as anyone. A glass of Lucas's magic whiskey was raised in his hand. "A toast!" he called out. "In fact, many more than one toast before this day is nearly done, but this one first."

Rob turned toward Adair and me, his eyes met mine and our looks locked as they had so many times. Of everyone there on Breed Butte--Adair, his own Judith, Lucas, Nancy, the many of Scotch Heaven and Noon Creek and Gros Ventre--of this day's entirety of people, Rob was speaking straight to me. "Angus, man, you and I have been all but family." He held his glass as high in the air now as he could reach, as if toasting the sky, the earth, all. "And now we're that."