

remember what we thought of it ourselves, when you and I walked into this country behind Herbert."

"By our lights, maybe it is scanty land," Rob granted.

~~no~~ "But to these 'steaders it's better than whatever to hell they've had in life so far, now isn't it? Man, people are going to come, that's the plain fact of the matter--whether or not we lead them by the hand, they're going to file homestead claims all through this country. They might as well be steered as right as possible, by knowledgable local folk. Which is the same as saying, us. In that way of looking at it, McAngus, we'll be doing them a major favor, am I right?"

"And charging them a whack for it," I couldn't help saying of Rob's version of favor.

"Are you so prosperous you can do it for free?" came back at me from him. "Funny I don't notice the bulges in your pockets."

"Lads, now," Lucas interceded. "Angus, we're not asking for your answer this very minute. Just put the idea on your pillow for a few nights, ay?"

Had they been asking my answer right then, it would have been No, in high letters. But. The prosperous problem. The perpetual problem with homesteads, with livestock, or maybe just with McCaskills: working yourself

gray, year after year, and always seeing the debt years eat up most of the profit years. To now, Adair had never said boo about the fact that where money was concerned we were always getting by, hardly ever getting ahead. So the dollar thoughts were delaying my No a bit, and I decided to leave matters with the Barclays at: "I'll need to do a lot of that pillow work, and to talk it over with Dair."

"You can save your breath there," Rob tossed off.

"She's thoroughly for it."

I gave Rob a look he would have felt a mile away.

"You know that already? From her?"

"I happened to mention it to Adair, yes. Angus, she is my sister. I do talk to her once in a blue moon. Not that I'd particularly have to in this case--she's bound to be for anything that'll fetch money the way this will. Who wouldn't be?"

"Angus, I know how you feel about this country and the 'steaders," Adair said that night. By then we had been thoroughly through it all. Adair's point that here was a plateful of opportunity on Varick's behalf, as easy a chance as we would ever have at money for his future, his own start in life and land in the years not far ahead now. My lack of any way to refute that, yet my unease about the notion of making myself into a land-locator. "But change always has to happen," she was saying, "doesn't it?"

"The big question is whether it happens for the better or the worse."

"Either case, what can you really do about it? You and Rob came as settlers to Montana. So are all these others."

"If they were bringing their own water and trees and decent topsoil, I'd say let everybody and his brother come. But good Christ, this dry-land craziness--Dair, they say there are 'steaders on the flats out north of Conrad now who haul all their water a couple of miles, a barrel at a time on a stone boat. They strain that cloudy water through a gunny sack as they bucket it into the barrel. My god, what a way to try to live. And these have been wet summers and open winters. What are those people going to do when this country decides to show them some real weather?"

"I suppose some will make it and some won't," she answered in all calmness. "It's their own decision to come here and try--it's not ours for them." The deep gray eyes were steady on me, asking me to reason as she was.

I could do that. What I wasn't able to manage was the waiting conclusion: that I ought to join in, bells, tambourines and all, with Rob and Lucas in putting people onto land that ought not have to bear any people.

"There's something more, Angus," my wife offered now. "It's not just Varick we need to plan for. It's

each other as well." Her silence, my waiting. Then from her: "Adair doesn't know if she can stay, after Varick is grown and gone."

So here it was, out. Adair and how long she would reconcile herself to Scotch Heaven, once it became a childless place to her again, had been in my mind with Anna at Valier and so I could not call this an entire surprise. Stunning, yes, now that it was here, openly said. But all the years since Angus, do you ever have any feeling at all to see Scotland again?, since Do you still want me for a wife, if?, all those years led here, if you were Adair.

I reached her to me, but there was too much in me to speak straight to what she had just said. Adair herself, myself, Anna, past, future, now--it all crowded me beyond any saying of it. No, only the one decision, the one I had to do at once rather than let the next years take care of, came to my tongue. If there were three McCaskill lives ahead that needed finance--mine of Scotch Heaven, Varick's of the Two Medicine country, Adair's of Scotland or wherever--then I had to find money.

"All right, Dair," I whispered. "We're in business with a couple of Barclays."

Squint as hard as you will, you can't see to tomorrow. Had I been told in the wheelwright shop in

Nethermuir, Angus, the day will arrive when you trace the hopes of homesteaders onto the American earth with a wagon wheel...when the turns of that wheel become the clock that starts dew-fresh families on three years of striving...when the wheeltracks across the grass single out another square of earth for the ripping plow...I would have gawped and gulped out, You have the wrong Angus. Yet there I was, that summer and the next, on the wagon seat with a white handkerchief tied around a wheelspoke to count revolutions by, counting the ordinations of wheelspin. Fifty. Seeing the craft of my unhearing father, the band of iron encircling the spokes, holding all together to write the future of 'steaders onto Montana. That's a hundred. Conveying, in a single day, lives from what they had abandoned to where they had dreamed of being. A hundred fifty. Here is your first corner of your claim, Mr. and Mrs. Belgium. Mr. Missouri bachelor. Miss Dakota nurse. Mrs. Wisconsin widow. Then to the next corner, and the next, and the next, and the square was drawn, here was your homestead utter and complete: SE $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec. 17, Tp. 27 N, Rge. 8 W: the land has been made into arithmetic. A sort of weaving, wasn't it, these numerated homestead squares, the lives threaded in and out. The weaving mill was America, Montana. But these bare dry-land patches amid the mesh of homesteading... It was said there were twice as

many people in Montana now as five years ago. The growth, the 'steader-specked prairies and benchlands and coulees, the instant towns, they were what Lucas dreamed of and Rob calculated on, and I was earning from. If I could dance ahead into time yet to come, what would I see in this procession of 'steaders that ought not have been let to happen, and what ought to have been encouraged instead? But we never do dance ahead into time, every minute is a tune-step of ours to the past. Say it better, the future is our blindfold dance, and a dance unseen is strangest dance of all, thousands of guesses at once. That was what my 'steaders amounted to, after all. Say that each of these people beside me on the wagon seat was a flip of the coin; half would turn up wrong. And so for two summers I watched Montana's 'steaders, Rob and Lucas's 'steaders--my 'steaders--and wondered just which of them were wrong tosses, which would meet only distress and failure and maybe worse here on this free dry land which was not costless, not nearly.

—

It was a Saturday early the next May that there was the Hebner occurrence.

The family of four was Rob's first delivery to me, this new season of 'steaders. As Rob and the Ford receded back down the road to further depot duty, the newcomers and I sized each other up. † The man was loose-jointed, shambly, with a small chin, a small mouth, small nose, and then a startlingly high and wide forehead. The woman was worn, maybe weary after their journey from wherever to Montana, maybe just weary. Two children thin as stick^s, the boy a replica two-thirds the size of his father, the girl small yet. Both children and the man stared at me as openly as hawks. As to what they saw in all this eyework on me, I do not really know, do I.

I introduced myself, and received from the man in just less than a shout: "Our name's Hebner, but you got to call me Otto."

I invited them into the wagon, and after an odd blank little pause while the rest of the family looked at him and he fidgeted an untrusting look at me, up they came.

The ride into the south benchlands was a few miles, and would be longer than that without conversation. I inaugurated:

"Where is it you're from?"

The man peered at me in dumb dismay. Hard of hearing, the poor pilgrim must be. Deaf and a 'steader too ought to be more hardship than any one soul rated. I squared around to the fidgeting Hebner and repeated my question louder and slower.

Relief came over him. In a braying voice, he responded: "Couldn' cut through your brogue, there that first time. A feller gets ^{so} ~~to~~ used to hearin' American he gets kind of spoiled, I reckon."

I gazed at Hebner hoping that was what passed for a joke wherever to hell he had been spawned, but no. He rattled on: "Anyhow, we come from Oblong, Illinois. Ever hear of it?"

"Illinois, yes."

"Oblong is only a couple days' travel from Normal."

"Is it truly. I wouldn't have thought so."

Having had my fill of conviviality Otto Hebner style, I whapped the team some encouragement with the reins. Delivering this man and his wan family to their 160 acres of delusion couldn't come too soon for me.

Atop the rim of the benchland, I halted the wagon. Beside me Hebner kept his head turned in a gawk toward the mountains and the North Fork for so long that I truly wondered if he and I both belonged in the human race. Now he gesticulated for his family's benefit to the hay-green

valley of the North Fork, the newly-lambled bands of sheep on its ridges around, the graceful wooded line of the creek and its periodic tidy knots that were our houses and outbuildings.

"Hannah, honey, those're what I been tellin' you about," he resounded to his wife. Noticing that the boy's stare was still fixed in my direction rather than onto the Scotch Heaven homesteads, Hebner added sharp to loud in telling him: "Garland! You listen up to what I'm sayin' here, you hear?" The boy's gaze slowly drifted from me to the North Fork. His father by now had reached his proclamation point: "Those're what our homestead is goin' to be like before you know it."

Bring that moment around to me again and I would utter what I furiously kept myself from uttering at the time. Hebner, you major fool, you're looking at twenty years of stark work down there. Twenty years of building and contriving and fixing and starting over again. Twenty lambing times, twenty shearings, twenty hayings. Twenty Montana winters, each of them so long they add far beyond that. You're looking at the stubborn vision of Ninian Duff, you're looking at the tireless ambitions of Rob Barclay, you're looking at the durable routes Scorpion and I have worn into the ground back and forth between sheep and schoolchildren, you're looking at choreworn wives who

put up with more isolation and empty distance than anyone sane ought to have to. You cannot judge this country by idle first glance. I am here to tell you, you cannot. But no, I was there to guide the Hebners of the world to available acres, such as they were now. Try to dike this 'steader flood with myself and all I would get was reputation for being all wet.

I drew a steadying breath. My own gaze down into Scotch Heaven helped. On the shoulder of Breed Butte between Rob's homestead and mine, a rider had come into motion: Varick, on his way up to check our sheep, while I was in the midst of this Hebnerian episode. Varick on a horse now looked as big as a man. Already his first year of high school was nearly behind him. His school year of boarding in town with Lucas and Nancy and returning to Adair and me only on weekends was his first footprint away from home, and this summer would bring his next--he had asked Stanley Meixell for, and received, the job of choreboy at the ranger station until school began again in the fall. Not many years now, not many at all, Angus, until this son of yours would need to find his own foothold in this country, and so I swung back to the task of delving with 'steaders.

"Those of us in Scotch Heaven do have a bit of a head start on you, Mr. Hebner, so there's--"

"Otto," he corrected me with a bray.

"Otto, then. As I was setting out to say, there's no real resemblance between a settled creek valley and a dry-land homestead. So I don't want to startle you, but here we are at the available land for you to have a look at."

Hebner hopped down and gawked south now, across the flat table of gravelly earth sprigged with bunchgrass, his son duplicating the staring inspection while I took the girl down from his wife and then helped her out of the wagon. We stood in a covey at the section marker stone, the wind steadily finding ways to get at us under and around the wagon, until Hebner strode off twenty or so paces toward the yawning middle of the benchland as if that was the favored outlook. After a long gander and kicking his heel into the soil, what there was of it, a number of times, he marched back and took up a stance beside me. Still scrutinizing the benchland, the shanties and chicken coops and pale gray-brown furrows of the Keever and Thorkelson homesteads, he demanded: "You're dead-sure this here is the best piece of new ground?"

Anyone with an eye could see that the benchland was equally stark, stony, unwelcoming, wherever a glance was sent. "None of it is fair Canaan, is it," was all I could answer Hebner. "But if here in this dry-land end of the Two country is where you truly want to homestead, right where we're standing is as good as any."

Not a lot of satisfaction for him to find in my words. He leaned away from me and turned a bit so his silent wife would see the shrewdness of what he asked next: "How deep is it to water?"

The question I had been dreading. "I can only tell you this much: the Keevers and the Thorkelsons dug about forty feet to get their wells."

"Forty! Back in Illinois we could dig down fifteen feet anywhere and get the nicest softest vein of wellwater there is!"

"Then you ought to have brought one of those matchless wells with you." I faced around to his wife, on the chance she might not be so hopeless a case as him. "Mrs. Hebner, you had better know too--the water up here is hard." She made no reply. "Just so you know, come first washday," I tried to prompt, "and you won't cuss me too much." Still nothing from her except that abject gaze at her husband. By the holy, if she could stand here wordless and let this Hebner commit her to a homestead eternity of clothes washed out stiff as planks and of a sour grayness in every teaspoon of water she ever used, why then--

"Seems like you ain't overly enthusiastic about this here ground," Hebner now gave me with a suspicious frown.

"Mr. Hebner, listen--"

"Otto," the man insisted thundrously.

"Otto, then. Listen a minute. None of this is going to be easy or certain, for you and your family. Even at its best, homesteading is a gamble, and it's twice that in these benchlands. A dry-land homestead is just what it says it is, dry."

"I didn' notice as how you left us any room back down there along the creek," he retorted, making only small attempt to smile around the resentment.

Roust yourself twenty years ago from Lopside or wherever it is that spawned you, and there was room along the North Fork, along the South Fork, room everywhere across the Two Medicine country. And in the same thinking of that I knew that I would not have welcomed Otto Hebner even then; that anyone who did not come accepting that the homestead life was going to be hard, I did not want at the corner of my eye.

"Let's call this off," I said abruptly. "We're not doing each other any good here."

"Call it off!" Hebner blinked at me, thunderstruck. "This's a funny doggone arrangement you're pullin' on us, seems like," he brayed. "Leadin' us out to this here ground and then givin' us the poormouth about it. This's doggone funny exchange for the money we paid, is what I say."

"I thought you might want to know what you're in for, trying to homestead country such as this. I was obviously wrong. I'll give you your money back and take you in to Gros Ventre. If you're still set on finding a site, someone in town can do your locating for you."

"Nothin' doin'." Hebner did not look toward his wife and children, did not look around at the land again; he fixed his gaze onto my face as if defying me to find any way to say him nay. "This here's what I'm goin' to claim, right where we're at."

"Even against my advice, you want me to mark off the claim?"

"That's what we come all the way out here for."

I wrote HEBNER on four corner stakes, climbed into the buggy and counted the one hundred and fifty wheel revolutions north, east, south, and finally west to the section stone again.

By the time that day was done, I knew my crew could not hold any more Hebners, ever. All 'steads from here on were going to have to dry-land themselves to death without my help.

In bed that night, I said as much to Adair.

"We're back where we started, then," she said as the fact it was. "Back to just getting by, and putting nothing ahead."

"There may be a way we can yet," I offered to her in the dark. "Dair, if I'm going to get us and Varick anywhere in life, it's going to have to be some way where I savvy and believe in what I'm doing--something I know the tune of." I could feel her waiting.

"Sheep," I announced. "If we were to take on another band of sheep, the profit from that we could set aside for Varick."

Silence between us. Until Adair spoke softly: "You've never wanted to take on more than the band you and Rob run."

"I'll need to try stretch my philosophy, won't I." Try, for Varick. For you, Dair. For myself?

"Do we have the money for another band of sheep?"

"No. Half enough, maybe."

"Lucas would have it," she contributed.

"Lucas took his turn in backing me with sheep, long since. Besides, he's in up to his neck in land dealings these days. No, I think I know who would be keener than Lucas for this." Although I didn't look forward to hearing it from him: I never thought I'd see the day, McAngus, when you'd start sounding like me--'More sheep, that's the ticket we need.' "Dair, I thought I'd see if Rob will partner with us on another band."

Adair spoke what I was counting on, from her, from her brother. "He will."

What I had not counted on was Rob's notion of where we ought to put a new band of sheep. "Angus, I won't go for putting any more sheep up there in Meixell's hip pocket, even if the damn man would let us." If not on the national forest, then we'd have to rent grazing somewhere else, I pointed out to him--maybe in the Choteau country, not that there was that much open range left there or any--

"Give me a couple of days," Rob said. "I just maybe know the place for those sheep, where Meixell or some Choteau geezer either one won't have a hoot in hell to say about them."

The couple of days later, Rob's announcement was pure jubilation.

"The Reservation! Angus, you remember that Two Medicine grass--elephants could be grazed on it. The Blackfeet don't know anything to do with it but sit and look at it."

I stirred. "Rob, hold your water a minute here. You know as well as I do why the Agency fenced the cow outfits out. That old business of 'borrowing' Reservation grass--"

"'Borrow', who said anything about 'borrow'?" We'll be paying good lease money to the Blackfeet--you can ask your pocket whether there's any 'borrowing' to this. No, this is every-dot legal, Angus. The agent will let us on the big ridge north of the Two Medicine River with the sheep the first of the month. Man, you can't beat this with a stick! A full summer on that grass and we'll have lambs fat as butter."

I gave it hard thought, sheep on the Blackfeet grass. Sheep were not plows that ripped the sod, sheep with a good herder were not cattle casually flung Double W style. Prairie that had supported buffalo herds vast as stormclouds ought to be able to withstand a careful load of sheep. If Rob saw this band as a ladle to get at the cream of Reservation grass, so be it. With Davie Erskine as herder, I could see to it the summer of leased grazing was kept civil and civic. I wanted it begun right, too.

"Those are some miles, from here to the Two Medicine," I pointed out. Forty or more, in fact.

"Sheep have feet," retorted Rob. As I knew, though, the days it would take to trail the sheep were not going to be his favorite pastime. "I hate like the dickens to lose that many days of the locating business, but I suppose--"

Without needing to think I said: "I'll take the sheep up. Varick and I can, with Davie along." I felt Rob study

me. Probably it was all too plain that I didn't want to see his next crop of 'steaders. Then from him:

"Angus, you're made of gold and oak. If you can handle the Reservation band until shearing I'll make it right to you when we settle up this fall."

They were a band of beauties, our new sheep: the top cut of ewes and their ~~six~~^{eight}-week lambs from the big Thorsen sheep outfit in the Choteau country. And confident grazers, definitely confident. The morning Varick and Davie and I bunched them to begin the journey from Scotch Heaven to the Reservation, making them leave the green slopes above the North Fork was sheer work. You could all but hear their single creed and conviction in the blatting back and forth, why leave proven grass for not proven? That first hour or so it seemed that every time I looked around, a bunch breaker was taking off across the countryside at a jog trot, her lamb and twenty others in a scampering ~~trail~~^{tail} behind her. Relentlessly Varick and Davie and I dogged that foolishness out of them, and the band at last formed itself and began to move like a hooped cloud toward the benchland between the North Fork and Noon Creek, toward the road to the Two Medicine River.

Telling Varick and Davie I'd be with them shortly, I rode back down to the house.

"Varick and I ought to be no more than a week, Dair. Four days to get the sheep there, a day or two to help Davie settle in, and then the ride home."

"I'll look for you when I see you coming," she said.

"We're going a famous route, you know. A wife of mine came into this country by way of it," I said from high spirits. "My expectation is that there'll be monuments to her every mile along the way."

Adair smiled and surprised me with: "I hope there's not one at a certain coulee south of the Two Medicine River." Coachman, a so-young Adair to Rob at the reins, are there any conveniences at all along this route of yours? Myself ready to throttle Rob as she disappeared to piddle: Your idea was to get her over here and marry her off to me, wasn't it? The inimitable Rob: If it worked out that way. Rob's was the way it had worked out, although whether life after the wedding vow was working out for Adair and me seemed ever an open question.

"Dair?" The impulse of this felt deeper, truer, even as I began to speak it: "Come along with us, why not. To the Two Medicine."

Now the surprise was hers. "To christen the monuments?" she asked lightly.

"I'm talking serious here. You can ride the wagon with Davie, or have a turn on Scorpion whenever you feel like.

But just come, why don't you. See all that country again." With me who is your husband, even if the country and I are not what you came expecting. With our son of this country and its namesake Two Medicine River. Come and make us the complete three, the McCaskills of Montana, America.

She watched me as if sympathetic to what I was saying, but then shook her head. "I suppose I think I saw the country as much as I am able to that first time, Angus. No, I'd better stay." She lifted her head in the self-mocking way and pronounced: "Adair will take care of here while you and Varick have to be there."

"Well, I tried. But if you can't be budged without a crowbar--" Surprising again, how strong my pang that she wouldn't be sharing this Two Medicine journey with me. "Goodbye, Dair."

This wife of mine came up on tiptoes and kissed me memorably. "Goodbye yourself, Angus McCaskill."

The bell of the lead wether, the latest Percy, led us all. A thousand ewes and their thousand lambs, and Varick and Davie and I and two sheepdogs to propel them across forty miles to the northern grass. By all known rules of good sense there was much that I ought to have been apprehensive about. Weather first and last. The very

morning we started, the mountains looked windy, rain-brewing; one of those restless days of the Rockies when a storm seems to be issuing out of every canyon, too many to ever possibly miss us. Well, we of Scotch Heaven had seen weather before. The under-the-sky perils that sheep invite on themselves were another matter. Fatal patches of death camas or lupine could be hiding ahead amid these grass miles that neither Davie nor I had local knowledge of. Alkali bogs that lambs could wander into, which would be their last wander. Of course, coyotes. Cayuse...Papoose...Coyote. Rob, Angus, is our serenade coming from a coyote? Badger Creek two days ahead, and Birch Creek a day before that, creeks usually lazily fordable but if spring runoff was still brimming them.... Things left, right and sideways all could go wrong, but they were going to have to do it over the top of me, weren't they. I had never in my life felt so troubleproof. This I know the tune of, conviction sang in me from the first minute of that sheep drive. This band of sheep was Varick's future, his foothold into Two Medicine life when he would need it. For his sake, if it ended up that I had to carry each and every last wonderful woolly fool of a sheep on my back these forty miles, this I know the tune of.

As the first hard drops of rain swept onto us we were shoving the sheep across the short bridge over Noon Creek. In less time than it takes to tell, Varick and Davie and I in our slickers were wet yellow creatures, the ewes and lambs were gray wet ones, as we pressed across creek water through storm water. But the rain was traveling through so swiftly that the lambs did not stay chilled and begin to stiffen too much to walk, and there was the first woe we hadn't met.

This I know the tune of. All of life seemed fresh, sharp, to me as we spread the sheep into ^a quick grazing pace. The mountains from an angle different than the one I had known every day for more than twenty years were somehow an encouraging chorus up there, news that the world is more than the everyday route of our eyes. I could even look west to the Reese ranch nestled in the farthest willow bends of Noon Creek and not crush down under the weight of what my life and Anna's could have been, much. After a last glance west I swallowed away the thought of her, at least away as far as it would ever go, and dogged my wing of the band of sheep into quicker steps, and pointed us north.

Now the rise of the long hills beyond the Double W, their pancake summits the high flat edge of the Birch Creek country ahead. I called out to Davie, and to Adair in my imagination, that these bare ridgelines were in dire need

of our sheepherder monuments. But there are monuments not just of stone, aren't there. When the sheep were topping that first great ridge north of where the buildings of the Double W lay white and sprawling, there on that divide I climbed off Scorpion, unbuttoned my slicker, and pissed down in the direction of Wampus Cat Williamson.

Overnight at Birch Creek, and then across the ford of the creek at dawn and through the gate of the Reservation fence and into the first of the Blackfeet Reservation and a land immediately different. Drier, more prairielike, the benchlands flatter and more isolated. Here toward the northern heart of the Two country, every distance seemed to increase, as if giving space to the Blackfeet grassland. The mountains no longer were head-on and near, but marching off northwestward toward the peak called the Chief which stood out separate as if reviewing them. Benchlands here were bigger and higher and more separate than we were used to, so that cattle and horses looked surprisingly small in the Indian pastures we passed, and when I rode ahead a mile or so to be sure of water for noon, our band of sheep was hard to spot at all.

This I know the tune of. But did I. At the end of that day, bridgeless Badger Creek. Bridgeless and brimfull. Time to turn sheep into fish. I had Varick lead Percy across, the wether uneasy about the creek water up to

his belly but going through with his leadership role. His followers were none. For an endless hour there on the brink of dark, we relearned that making sheep wade water is a task that would cause a convent to curse in chorus. At last by main strength Varick and I half-led half-hurled enough sheep into the water to give the others the idea, and the community swim began. There was a last mob of lambs, frantic about not being across with their mamas but also frantic about the water. Varick and Davie and the dogs and I fought them into the creek, lambs splashing, thrashing, blatting, and when there were no more kinds of panic to invent, swimming. This I know the tune of.

From dawn of the next day, with not a stormcloud in the Blackfeet sky and a fine solid bridge ahead of us at the Two Medicine River, I could feel our great journey as if it already had happened, as if now we, Varick and I and our poor bent Davie, we incomparable three had only to walk steadily in its tracks. Hour on hour, life sang out to me. Any moment that my eyes were not on the sheep and the land, they were on Varick. More and more he was growing to resemble me; the long frame, the face that was a mustacheless version of mine, probably of all McCaskills back to old Alexander hewing the Bell Rock lighthouse into the sea. The job was there...it was to be done. We still were living resemblances of old Alexander Angus McCaskill

in that, too, this ~~one~~^{son} of mine born attuned to this country's work and I who had spent every effort I knew to learn it. Time upon time that day, I stood in my stirrups and gazed for the sheer pleasure of gazing. The land rolled north with grassy promise in every ridge. The pothole lakes we were passing, with clouds of ducks indignantly rising at the sight of us, seemed a wondrous advent. Even old Scorpion under me seemed more interested in being a horse. By the holy, I was right. Right to have brought these sheep, for Varick's sake. Right, even, to have married Adair and persisted through our strange distanced life together if this strong son was our result.

We came to the Two Medicine River in sunny mid-afternoon and were met by gusts of west wind that shimmered the strong new green of the cottonwood and aspen groves into the lighter tint of the leaves' bottom sides, so that tree after tree seemed to be trying to turn itself inside out. In the moving air as we and the sheep went down the high bluff, a crow lifted off straight up and lofted backwards, letting the gale loop him upward. I called to Varick my theory that maybe wind and not water had bored this colossal open tunnel the Two Medicine flowed through. And then we bedded the sheep, under the tall trees beside the river.

When morning came, I was sorry this was about to be

over. All the green miles of May that we had come, the saddle hours in company with Varick, the hand-to-hand contest with the sheep to impel them across brimming Badger Creek, yesterday's sight of the Two Medicine and its buffalo cliffs like the edge of an older and more patient planet. Every minute of it I keenly would have lived over and over again. This I knew the tune of.

The sheep crossed the bridge of the Two Medicine in a series of hoofed stammers. Up the long slope from the river Varick and Davie and the dogs and I pushed them. When they were atop the brow of the first big ridge north of the river, we called ourselves off and simply stood to watch.

On the lovely grass that once fed the buffalo, the sheep spread themselves into a calm cloud-colored scatter and began to graze, that first day of June of 1914.

TWO MEDICINE

With water projects abounding from the Sun River in the south to the Two Medicine River in the north, it is evident that the current creed of our region of Montana is "we'll dam every coulee, we'll irrigate every mountain." But the betterment of nature goes on apace in other ways as well. Anna Reese and children Lisabeth and Peter visited Isaac Reese at St. Mary Lake for three days last week, where Isaac is providing the workhorses for the task of building the roadbed from St. Mary to Babb. Isaac sends word through Anna that the summer's work on this and other Glacier National Park roads and trails is progressing satisfactorily.

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, July 2, 1914

"Prrrrr prrrrr. Right along, Percy, that's the way, into the chute, earn a brown cracker. Prrrrr prrrrr. Bring them for their haircut, Percy. Prrrrr."

It stays with me like a verse known by heart, that first ever Two Medicine day of shearing and all it brought. Our site of pens and tents atop the arching grass ridge above the river was like being on the bald brow of the earth, with the sunning features of the summer face of the land everywhere below. In the three weeks since Varick and I departed from Davie with his browsing cloud of sheep, the Reservation grass had crisped from green to tan, the pothole lakes now were wearing

sober collars of dried shore, the bannerlike flow of the Two Medicine River had drawn down to orderly instead of headlong. Even the weather was taking a spell of mildness, a day of bright blue positively innocent of any intention to bring cold rain pouncing onto newly naked and shelterless sheep, and with that off my mind I could work at the cutting gate with an eye to other horizons than the storm foundry of those mountains to the west. A long prairie swooped from our shearing summit several miles north to Browning and its line of railroad, iron thread to cities and oceans; the chasm of the Two Medicine River burrowed eastward to graft itself into the next channel of flow, the Marias, and next after that the twinned forces of water set forth together to the Missouri-- every view from up here was mighty.

Not that any scenery short of heaven's was ever going to ease the hard first hours of shearing. The crew of shearers laboriously relearning the patterns of the work from the year before. The sheep alarmed and anarchic. But I could grin at all that and more. The troubleproof mood I brought here to the Two Medicine when Varick and Davie and I trailed the sheep was still in command of me, still the frame of all I saw and thought as the swirling commotion of a thousand ewes was being turned into the ritual of wool. Life and I still were hand in hand, weren't we, life.

Past noon, whenever I found chance to gaze up from my cutting gate, it was south, direction of Scotch Heaven and home, that needed my watching. Up from the great trench of the Two Medicine River the Gros Ventre-to-Browning road wove itself in a narrow braid of wheeltracks

worn into the ground, but Rob still had not appeared on that road as promised. First thing after breakfast that first day, Angus, I've got a 'steader to take out to see his claim. But I'll drive up in the Lizzie the minute after that's done. You can get the shearers under way and then I'll be there by afternoon to pitch in--you and the sheep can gimp along without me for that long, can't you? Aye, yes and yea, Rob. We could do that and were. It was plain as noonday that these Two Medicine sheep were nowhere near Rob's central enthusiasm this summer, but I didn't mind. In the eventual, these sheep were not for his benefit anyway nor for mine, but for Varick's. I thought of my son, man of employment now at the ripe age of fifteen, somewhere beside Stanley Meixell there on distant Phantom Woman Mountain or Roman Reef or other venue of the Two Medicine National Forest, hard at the tasks of summer. He'll have misfortunes great and small/He'll be a credit to us all. In summers to come, if Adair and I could make our financial intention come true, Varick could have his own sheep in those mountains, could be as much a master of flocks as Rob or I ever were. So it was befitting that I was here amid earnest sheep, seeing across the miles from the Two Medicine to Varick's future.

What I still was not seeing any clue of was Rob. I had to be a bit concerned that he wasn't making his appearance at this shearing camp by now. This was unlike Rob Barclay, to not be where he said he would. As time kept passing, it more than once brought the thought, Rob, is that automobile of yours on its side in a gully somewhere and you under it? I would give him until suppertime, and then serious searching

would need to commence.

"Prrrrrr, Percy, bring them, that's the lad. Follow Percy, ladies. Time to get out of those winter coats. Prrrrrr."

As the end of the afternoon neared I at last saw a wagon begin to climb the road from the river toward our shearing operation. This now was possibly Rob, resorting to hoof and wheel if his automobile had disgraced itself in some way, and so I kept watch between my chute duties. Before long, though, I could make out that there were three people on the wagon seat. Most likely a family of Blackfeet going in to Sherburne's trading post at Browning. I dismissed my attention from the ascending wagon and went back to sluicing sheep into the shearers' catch pens.

When I happened to glance down the ridge again, the wagon was less than a quarter of a mile away and it was no Blackfeet rig, not with that pair of matched sorrels and the freshly-painted yellow wheelspokes. A gaping moment before I could let myself admit it, the shoulders-back erectness of the driver made me know definitely.

Anna at the reins. Her daughter and son on either side of her.

She brought the wagon to a stop near the shearing pen. I went over to her flabbergasted.

"Anna!" I greeted with more than I wanted to show in front of Lisabeth and Peter, but couldn't help. They were just going to have to take my warm tone as surprised hospitality; in their lack of years, how could they know it as anything more? I made myself speed on to: "You're

no small distance from Noon Creek."

"Angus, hello again." Anna provided me her lifegiving half-smile. "That husband of mine is even farther," she divulged. "Isaac is building roads in the national park. He'll be away most of the summer, so we're going up to St. Mary to spend some days with him." Except for the light veil of time that had put a few small wrinkles into her forehead and at the edges of those forthright eyes, she could have been the glorious young woman gazing back at me that first instant I stepped into her schoolhouse. Except for whatever propriety that had managed to find me now that I was a husband and a father, I still was the surprised smitten caller who was perfectly ready to rub my nose off kissing her shadow on that schoolroom wall. Our eyes held. Was I imagining, or were we both watching this moment with greatest care? "Angus"--how many thousands and thousands of times, across the past 17 years, had I missed her saying my name--"how far is it into Browning for the night?"

Eight or ten miles, and I of course put it at ten. This sudden wild chance thumped in me as I said what civility would say but with greatly more behind it: "That's a lot of wagonwork yet, before dark. You're welcome to stay here, do I even need to say." I indicated the shearing camp, our impromptu little tent town, oasis amid the grassy miles if she would just see it that way. "Mrs. Veitch is cooking for the crew--you could share the cook tent with her and have proper company for the night."

"Mother, let's!" from the boy Peter, craning his neck toward the hubbub of the wrangling corral and the rhythmmed grooves of the shearers

at work.

Anna cast her look north across the expanse of prairie to Browning, the girl Lisabeth so much like her in face and bearing as she gauged the miles to Browning too.

Anna, stay. That same desperate chant in me from the day when Adair and I were wed, yet not the same. This time there was no division in the chorus. This time it wanted only one outcome. Stay, Anna. I want to see you, here, now, in this least likely place.

When Anna stated, "It is a distance--I suppose we had better stay here for the night," Lisabeth nodded firmly, a separate but concurring decision. I breathed a thanks to Montana's geography for its helpful surplus of miles. Young Peter yipped his pleasure and asked to go watch the shearing, could he please, and was away.

I helped Lisabeth down from the wagon, then her mother, aware as deep as sensation can go that I was touching the person who might have been my daughter and then the person who might have been my wife.

"We'll of course lend Mrs. Veitch a hand with supper," Anna was detailing to Lisabeth now, "but I don't feel we should impose on her for the night. Under the wagon served us perfectly fine last night and there's no reason why it won't again." Anna sent her gaze around the shearing camp, her eyes eventually coming back across my face and lingering a bit there. Or was I imagining? "Beth," she spoke to her daughter, "why don't you go see the shearing with Peter, before we pay our respects to the cook tent. Mr. McCaskill can help me with our things from the wagon."

The girl's eyes, the same direct sky-source blue as her mother's, examined the bedrolls and other travel gear in the back of the wagon, then Anna and myself as if weighing the capability of adults in such matters. Evidently satisfied that the tasks were not beyond us, she gave that decisive nod again and went to join Peter at the shearing pen. I watched her go in a gait of grace that was more than a girl's. Lisabeth was, what, fourteen now, and womanhood had its next priestess arriving.

I said to Anna, "She resembles you so much it must be like meeting yourself in the mirror."

"People think we're as alike as eggs, yes. Beth has a mind of her own, though." Anna glanced at me. "But then I suppose there are those who would say an independent child serves me right."

"Send me anybody who says so much as word number one against you and I'll pound the tongue out of him for you."

Her gaze stayed on me. "You would, too, wouldn't you, Angus. In spite of everything, you would."

Yes and then some. I would defend her in any arena, even the one within myself. Every instant of the next minutes, as I helped Anna unhitch the sorrel team and situate her family's night gear under the shelter of the wagon, and then accompanied her to the shearing pen a discreet adult distance from where Lisabeth and Peter were engrossed in watching the clipwork, it was beyond belief to me that, yet and now, this still could be so; but I felt as thundershook by love for this woman as that first giddy ride home from the Noon Creek schoolhouse when it was

all I could do not to fall off the back of Scorpion. Not to fall off the planet, for that matter.

Like a dozen marionettes, the shearers made their patterned motions, stooping, clipping, rising to begin over again. The sheep, betrayed and dismayed, gave up their buttery fleeces with helpless blats. While I was there beside Anna assiduously spectating the shearing pageant, my mind was everywhere else.

I knew I had only moments in which to contrive, before she gathered Lisabeth and they marched off to the cook tent. Yet she wasn't showing great sign of going, was she. Watching wool depart from sheep seemed the most absorbing activity either of us could imagine.

"Anna," I finally began, then found nowhere to alight next but onto: "The times we meet up are few and far between."

"Yes, they are. And now you're busy here--I mustn't take up your time, Angus."

"No, I thoroughly wish you would." I signaled to Davie to come up and work the cutting gate for the next batch of ewes into the catch pens. "I've had my fill of wool today, the crew can get along fine without me a bit." As I said it wondering: did she know I would be here, handy beside her road north? By now everyone in the Two country above nipple age would have heard of the McCaskill-Barclay advent of sheep onto the Blackfeet Reservation. But granting that Anna knew, did she come because I would be here on her plausible route to Isaac? Or in spite of it?

I tried to test that water now. "It's glorious to see you. But

what's Isaac going to think of you"--I didn't want to say spending the night--"stopping over here?"

"Isaac knows me." I questioned how thoroughly true that could be; how much any skinsack of existence ever can know of what is in another. She went on: "If it'll relieve your conscience, he'll at least know nothing out of order could happen with so many people around." Yes; two of them his own--your and his--children. That was unfortunately so, my yearning told me. Yet I was aware there was something else here with us. Her tang of interest toward me. The air's taste of about-to-happen, that I had caught so clearly during our noonhour together the time in Valier. I was every inch conscious of it again, and so was Anna. She was making every effort to say lightly: "Counting the sheep into the situation, Angus, we have chaperones by the hundred, don't we."

Sheep or not sheep, sentinels were going to have to get up before early to stop me from seeing this woman. I gathered it all behind my words--the liquid fire/of strong desire--and asked her rapidly:

"Anna. Will you do a thing for me?"

She scrupulously kept her eyes on the wool brawl in front of us.

"If I can, I will. You know that, Angus. What?"

"See the dawn with me tomorrow."

A blue flash of eyes from her, quicker than quick, then away. I reasoned to her profile: "It'd be our one time to talk alone."

There was that same narrow hesitation she had shown when I asked her four years before, Do you have the life you want? Now her answer:

"Yes. Show me a Two Medicine dawn."

Rob pulled in just before supertime, the automobile gray with mud halfway up itself like a pig that has been wallowing, Rob himself more than a little dirt-freckled as well.

"See now, McAngus," he called out, "I'm the only land merchant who carries his real estate on his person."

I had to grin a bit. Even when he was abominably late, the man arrived the way olden travelers might have been announced by a drum.

Rob waved a hand toward his automobile.

"Badger Creek," he explained ruefully. "The Lizzie got stuck in the crossing and I had to troop off and find the nearest Blackfeet to pull me out. You can just about guess how involved an enterprise that turned out to be, Angus. A person might as well dicker with the creek, at least it has some motion to it. How those people manage to--" He broke off. The girl Lisabeth was stepping out of the cook tent with a kettle to fill from our milk cans of drinking water. Like the wraith of Anna stepping out of years ago.

Rob rid himself of his look of confoundment as fast as he could, then offered speculatively: "Company, have we. I thought Isaac was somewhere north, contracting roads or some such."

"He is," I affirmed.

Rob scanned around until he found the Reese wagon, plainly parked for the night, and for once seemed not to know what to say. Which of course did not stop him from coming out with: "A girl that age isn't kiting around the country by herself, I hope."

"No," I solemnly assured him.

He gave me a close look that had me on the verge of answering him by hand. By the holy, how did this man think he was the clerk in charge of my life?

"Angus," he began, "I don't savvy what in the hell--" and I didn't want to hear the rest.

"Her brother is with her, Rob. And her mother. She's thoroughly chaperoned," as if I still meant Lisabeth, although we both knew that I meant Anna. I enlightened him about their journey onward to Isaac in the morning, and he unruffled considerably. But couldn't help adding:

"It's just a bit odd to have overnight guests in a shearing camp, is all I meant, McAngus."

"Don't worry about your reputation, Rob," I gave him. "I'll vouch for you."

He cocked his head and adjudged, "You're a trifle touchy, Angus," which I thought made two of us by that description. "Well, I'd better wash up this Blackfeet real estate off me. ~~Dinner~~^{Supper} guests and all that, a person needs to be on his best behavior, doesn't he."

Steel on grindstone and whetstone, the keen-edged chorus of the shearers sharpening for the day. A wisp of wind, the grass nodding to it.

I leaned over into the corral where the sheep had been wrangled up against the chute mouth by Davie and the shearing crew's choreboy, and felt the wool on three or four ewes' backs for dew. Dry enough to shear,

now that the sun had been up for a few hours.

But before beginning the shearing day I cast a look to all the directions, lingering on north and the road to Browning that had taken a wagon with bright yellow wheels and a team of sorrel horses from sight a bit ago. The morning was bright as yesterday and so was I.

"Prrrrr, Percy, you're ready to bring them through, are you? Let's start making wool, Percy, what do you say."

The bell wether blinked idly at me in reproach and stayed where he stood in the mouth of the chute. Well, he was right. I needed to live up to my end of the proposition if I expected him to enter into his, didn't I. Life has its rules of bargaining.

"Here you are, Percy, half a brown cracker. Prrrrr, Percy, come get the rest here at the cutting gate. Prrrrr, sheep, follow Percy, that's the way. Everybody into the chute, prrrrr, prrrrr."

All the while that I was shunting sheep from the chute into the shearers' catch pens, all the while that the crew was taking their places and beginning the snipwork of taking the fleeces off the ewes, all the while I was not truly seeing any of it, but the scene at dawn instead. The barest beginning of light in the east, and Anna materializing from the direction of the shearing camp and joining me under the brow of the ridge, out of sight to all but each other. Anna, you need to see it with me, that vow from another June morning, the first time I saw this green high bluff above the Two Medicine River, the precipice of the buffalo cliffs, the prairie heaven of grass emerging from the sky's blue-and-silver one. Then as the warming colors of morning came, our words back and forth,

my hope and her ver--

I felt the hand drop onto my shoulder just as I finished filling the catch pens. The clamping touch alone told me this was Rob, back from his start-of-day chore of spreading yesterday's shorn sheep along the slope of the ridge to graze. I glanced around at him inquisitively, for I'd assumed he would be taking his place behind the sheep to help Davie with the wrangling.

The face on Rob Barclay was thunderous. He grated out:

"What in Christ's name is it between you and her, man? Out there this morning, like a couple of slinking collie dogs."

Again, was this. Rob patrolling my life again, Rob the warden of my marriage again. And again no more able than ever to understand the situation between Adair and me, and therefore Anna and me.

"Put it in the poorbox, Rob," I told him flatly.

But plainly he didn't intend to be dissuaded from giving me what was on his mind. He persisted: "You're not answering--"

"Oh, but I am. I'm telling you what I told you before, Anna isn't a topic of discussion between us. So just save yourself the trouble of trying, all right?" Save us both it. The two of us had been through this backwards and forward, after Valier. That outbreak of in-law from you was more than enough, Rob. Neither of us had one damn least iota of a thing to gain by-- "Neither of us has a thing to gain by getting into this again," I kept to. "You know my opinion by heart, and yours is stamped all over you."

"You'd like the trouble saved, all right, wouldn't you. Well, not

this time. You're going to hear me on this, Angus."

Beyond Rob I saw that Davie was watching us wide-eyed, Rob's words loud enough to carry anger above the sounds of sheep and shearing.

"Then it better be away from here," I informed Rob, and I went off enough distance from the chute and corral, him after me.

We faced each other again. Still determined to carry me by the ears, Rob began: "You just won't make yourself stay away from her, will you. Even after that last talking-to I gave you--"

"Try giving me a leaving-alone, why not," I answered. "Anna and I are still none of your business, Adair and I are still none of your business, and climbing out of your bed this morning to spy on me was none of your business either, Rob." Oh, I had known even while it was happening that Anna and I were seen. But not by these Barclay gray eyes that were auguring into me now. No, it was when Anna returned first from our dawn, went to the wagon and had a look at her sleeping children, and then headed on toward the cook tent to begin helping toward breakfast; and I meanwhile came up over the ridge from a deliberately different direction. Beneath the wagon, Lisabeth's head suddenly was up out of the bedroll. She watched her mother go. Then she turned enough to watch me come. Across that distance, I knew she knew. The steady attitude of her head, the gauging way she looked at us both, and then conclusion. That lovely young face in its frame of black hair, like a portrait of Anna gazing from the past, seemed to have seen through the ridge to where her mother and I were together. And there was no explaining I could do to the girl. It was a situation I

would make worse if I so much as tried to touch it; Anna would have to be the one to handle it if Lisabeth ~~asked~~ brought out the question. The truth would have to handle it. The truth, Lisabeth, that I had asked your mother: Anna, when Lisabeth and Peter and Varick are grown and gone... if Adair takes herself back to Scotland then...if and when, Anna, is there the chance then of our lives fitting together? Of you answering my love with yours, if and when? And her, Angus, you know how I am. Beyond anyone else, really, you grasp the kind of person I am. So you know all too well, I can only decide as far as I see a situation. The judging hesitation, the click as she gauged. But I can't see ahead to forever, can I. Whether Isaac is there in my life, after the children go--or whether.... Her eyes honestly telling me the same as her words. I'm sorry the words aren't any better than they were, those years ago, when ~~I told you I'd chosen Isaac. You more than deserve better ones from me. But they're the same, Angus. If I ever see that Isaac and I have become wrong together, I'll know in the next minute ~~where~~ ^{to you.} ~~for~~ rightness. To you.~~ Again and yet and still: Isaac was not lastingly innocent of the hazard of losing Anna: I was not irredeemably guilty of loving her hopelessly. Not Proven, the verdict one more time. Well, we had life ahead yet to see if proof would come, didn't we. I had lost no ground since our meeting in Valier, I could stay on the compass setting Adair and I had agreed to, getting on in life as best we could for Varick's sake, hers, mine, ours.

"You've utterly got to stop this infatuation of yours," Rob was delivering urgently to me now. "It was one thing when you were just

moonning around like a sick calf over her. But this is the worst yet--meeting her out there to go at it in the grass."

I stared at Rob as if some malicious stranger had put his face on. Go at it in the grass? On the one hand, this slander was the worst thing that had come out of him yet today, which was saying a lot. On the other hand, the random stab of what he had just said showed that at least he hadn't slunk out after us this morning close enough to count our pores. All during our meeting of dawn, Anna and I had not so much as touched. We knew we didn't dare. Starved as I was for her--and I recognized, from another morning, long ago, that she was more than a little hungry for me--we didn't appease those cravings. Anna was still Isaac's, I was still Adair's; until those facts managed to change, we did not dare make the remembered touches we wanted to on each other's body, for families and lives would tumble with us.

"Rob," I uttered flat and hard. "You're going way too far."

"Somebody finally has to tell you what a lovesick sap you're looking at in the mirror every morning," he retaliated. "Adair has been too easy on you, all these years."

"Who made you the world's expert on Dair and me?" I burst out. "Man, just what is it you want from the two of us--doves and honey every blessed minute? She and I have what life together we can manage to. And we have Varick. Those are worth whatever Dair and I have cost each other."

The Barclay face bright with anger wasn't changed by my words. I took a last try.

"Rob. Will you just remember that your sister and I are a pair in life you devised yourself. Dair and I knew from early that we weren't perfect for each other, and it's damn far past time for you to accept that fact too."

"I'm not accepting that you can sniff off after her"-- he jerked his head north toward Anna's route to Isaac--"whenever you get the least little chance. Angus, how is it you can't see that when you're the way you are about Anna, you're only half a husband to Adair. And that's not enough."

"Angus and Rob!" Davie had limped halfway our direction to call out worriedly to us. "The shearers are hollering for more sheep."

I gave Davie a wave of reply. And then I answered Rob, one last time. "It'll have to be enough. It's as good as I can ever do."

Rob shook his head stonily, at me, at my answer, at the existence of Anna. Each of us had said our all, and we hadn't changed each other a hair. That was that, then. I turned from him to go to the shearing pens, but had to let him know this useless argument couldn't go on perpetually.

"Rob, don't ever give me any more guff about something that's none of your business, all right?"

Behind me, his tone was tighter than ever. "I'm telling you this. I'll give you more than guff if you don't get her out of yourself."

For the rest of shearing, speaking terms between us were short and narrow. When Rob announced, as soon as we were done loading the

woolsacks for hauling to the depot at Browning, that he^d's like to get on back to Breed Butte immediately, I nodded and silently applauded. The three or so days before I finished the wool-hauling and made my ride back to Scotch Heaven would give us both some time to wane from the argument about Anna. I just wondered what year it would be on the calendar when Rob Barclay decided he had to get huffy in a major way again.

The third day later, I was atop the divide between Noon Creek and the North Fork when I decided to veer past the ranger station, why not, on my way to home and Adair. There was no telling how soon I'd see Varick if I didn't snatch this chance to drop in on him at his summer employ, and I much wanted him to hear the news that as far as our Two Medicine sheep and shearing was concerned, the world was wagging its tail at us.

When I rode over the crest into sight of the ranger station, I was double glad I'd come by. Varick was out behind the building boiling fire camp utensils in a wash tub of lye water, a snotty job if there ever was one, and good news would sound even better amid that.

By the holy, I swear the son I was seeing ahead of me had put another inch on himself during the week and a half I'd been at the Two Medicine. Growing so fast his shadow couldn't keep up with him.

Varick's fire under the lye tub was crackling crisply--odd to hear, this warm almost-July afternoon--and he was judiciously depositing into the boiling murky water a series of camp pots as black as tar buckets.

I got down from Scorpion and went over to him. With a grin I said, "When the Forest Service washes dishes, it really means it, ay?"

My tall son stayed intently busy with his lye cauldron until all the pots were drowned, then turned around to me. And delivered:

"You and Mrs. Reese. Is that true?"

The inside of me fell to my shoetops.

Varick's face showed all the strain behind the asking, all the confoundment of a fifteen-year-old not wanting to believe the world was askew. I made myself look back at him steadily before I said:

"I suppose that depends on what you've heard."

"What I hear is that you and her get together any chance you can. Out in the grass along the Two Medicine, say."

Mercy I sought, mercy came not. Where had this squall dropped on us from, besides out of the vasty blue? Abruptly my mind saw again the face of the girl Lisabeth, up out of the bedroll beneath the wagon, gazing levelly toward her mother, turning that gaze toward me. No accusation in her look, only judgment: choosing among the three verdicts, innocent or guilty or not proven. But even if she accounted me guilty, would she have sought out Varick with poison such as this? Your father and my mother... A person with any of Anna in her, destructive and vindictive to this degree? In that young Anna-like face beneath the wagon, I just could not see--

Accusation still stood here staring at me, waiting, wearing its painful mask of Varick. Pushing the echo of that question at me: Is that true?

"Son," a confused sound I added to the thudding of my heart, "I did see Anna, yes, but not--"

Varick's next was on its way: "Is that why you put sheep on the Reservation? So you'd have a way to sneak off to her?"

"For Christ's sake, no!"

"Unk says it was."

Disbelief filled me now.

And in a sick terrible surge after it, belief.

The voice I knew as well as any but my own, following me across the Two Medicine prairie: I'll give you more than guff if you don't get her out of yourself. But Rob, why this? Why drag Varick into the middle between Anna and my helpless love for her? Why in all Hell did you ever resort to this, Rob?

I struggled to concentrate through my fury at Rob and my anguish toward Varick, fight one welter of confusion at a time.

"Varick. You've heard the worst possible version. Nothing anywhere near wrong happened between Anna and me at the Two Medicine."

"Then what were the two of you doing out there alone that morning?"

"I asked her to watch the dawn with me."

Varick's look said this confounded him more than ever. He swallowed and asked shakily, "What, are you in love with her?"

Truth, were you going to be enough in this situation? Maybe so, maybe no.

"Yes." An answer that needed to go back seventeen years had to start somewhere. "This is hard to find the words for. But I've always

been in love with her, in spite of myself. Varick, this goes back farther in my life than you. Farther than your mother, even. She's known how I feel toward--"

"She knows?"

"Ask her. If you're intent on the history of this, you'd better get all sides of it." Not just that meddling bastard Rob Barclay's version. I tried again to swallow Rob away and say what was needed to make Varick understand. "Son, your mother and I--"

"I don't savvy any of this!" he blurted.

"Listen to me half a minute, will you. What--"

"You and mother aren't--" the words broke out of him. "You don't--"

"If you're trying to say your mother and I don't love each other, all I can tell you is we come close enough. Otherwise you wouldn't be here." Wouldn't be here challenging the years we had spent trying to have you, and then to raise you, Varick. "Let's get a grip of ourselves here, and I'll try again to make you see how this is. What I feel for Anna Reese has nothing to do with your mother. That's the utter truth, son. It began before her, and nothing she or I have ever been able to do has changed it any. It's something I have to live with, is all. And I pretty much do, except when that goddamned uncle of yours shoves his size twenty nose into the situation."

My words didn't have effect. There wasn't a semblance of understanding on Varick's face. A hurt bafflement instead. My son who could so readily comprehend the land and its rhythms and its tasks, could not grasp my invisible involvement with a woman not his mother. Those stormy countries

of the mind--love, loss, yearning--were places he had not yet been.

And what words were strong enough to bring him there, make him see.

"Varick, there is just no way to undo the way I've always felt for Anna. I know you're upset about your mother and me, you've every right in the world to be. But we'll go on as we have been--she and I will stay together at least until you're grown and gone from home, I promise you that on all the Bibles there are."

But I could see I was losing. I could see from Varick's pained stare at me that whatever I said, my son was going to look on me from here forward as someone he had not really known. Even that realization, though, nowhere near prepared me for what came now from him.

"You don't have to stay together on my account. Not any more, you don't."

I eyed Varick and tried not to show how his words made me come undone inside. "Meaning what, son?"

"I'm not coming home at the end of this summer. Or any other time."

The clod of realization choked my throat. Any other boy-man, man-boy, whichever this son of mine was, might have been pretending the determination behind that statement. But you could collect all the pretense in Varick on an eyelash-- he was like Adair in that. He meant his declaration.

He had gulped in enough breath for the rest, and now was rushing it out:

"I'll board in town for school, but weekends and summers I'm going to be working here for Stanley."

"Varick, you're making this a whole hell of a lot worse than it needs to be."

"I'm not the one who started making it worse, am I. I don't want to be"--his gaze said be around you--"be part of this situation, as you call it."

If only the tongue had an eraser on the end of it as a pencil does, this terrible set of minutes wouldn't need to be called anything. Rob would unsay his slur, Varick would never need to blurt Is that true? I would not have to frantically search for how to keep what little was left after my son's declaration. "You can't just walk out on your mother"--I swallowed miserably--"and me."

"I don't see how you're going to stop me from it."

"By stirring your head with a stick, if I have to. Varick, behave toward me the way you feel you need to. But not your mother. Go to her and tell her you take her side in all this, tell her you're on the outs with me, tell her whatever the hell. But don't pull away from her." I tried to will into him the urgency of what I was saying, tried to hold in the loss this was costing me. "If you'll keep on terms with her, stay the same as ever with her, you can ignore me or throw rocks at me when you see me coming or whatever will make you feel any better. If you'll do that, I won't stop you from staying on with Stanley as much as you want." Until you get your dismay at me out of your system. If you ever do.

With a wordless nod, my son took that bargain. And turned away from me to his boiling task.

—

He was on his porch waiting when I rode to Breed Butte.

I climbed down from Scorpion and tied his reins to the gate while Rob came across the yard to me.

"McAngus, you've got a face on you that would curdle cream," he began on me. "But man, something had to hammer it home to you about your foolishness over that woman. Maybe this will finally do the job."

The job? As if the life of my family was some task for him to take into his hands, bang us this way and that, twiddle our parts around--

"If I know you," his words kept soiling the air, "you're going to drag out that old argument of yours that I don't have any right to do anything about the mess you're making of your marriage. But I told you before, and I'll tell you till the cows come home--Adair is my sister and she's my right to stop you from making a fool of yourself, any way it takes to do that."

Any way? Even by costing me my son? Was that the crazy gospel you still believed, Rob? After you had returned from the Two Medicine and hotly spilled your words to Varick, didn't you want them back, want them unspoken? Want yourself not to have been the tool of anger that ripped between Varick and me? I stared into you, needing to know. Your face again now had as much anger as it could ever hold. But Rob, your eyes did not have enough of red emotion. Or of any other. Your tranced look, your helmeted mood when you had put yourself where it all could not but happen. And so I knew, didn't I. Your own belief in your sabotage wasn't total now, you had to trance yourself now against the doubt. Not let yourself bend now, from the angle you had talked yourself into. And

now was too late. Doubt and trance didn't count in your favor now. Nothing did.

"You sanctimonious sonofabitch." My fist following my words, I swung to destroy that Barclay jaw.

Rob was ever quick, though. My haymaker only caught him pulling away, staggering him instead of sending him down. Which only meant he was still up where I could hammer at him. The single message thrummed in me, it had built in my blood from the instant I left Varick to come here and fight Rob. Will I kill him? How can I not, deserving as he is. He tried to set himself to return my blows, but I was onto him like fire, punching the side of his head, his shoulders, forearms, any available part of him. I beat that man as if he was a new drum. He took it grimly and struck back whenever he could manage. We struggled there, I see now, and fought through the years into our pasts, into the persons we had been. A Rob stands lordly and bright-faced on the Greenock dock, and my Angus of then pummels him in search of the being who hides inside that cocked stance. Rob on the sly with Nancy, and in Lucas's behalf the me whirling in from my first-ever North Fork day pounds him with the hands for both of us. The exultant Rob of the depot at Browning, He never guessed! Adair, we did it to the man! and the Angus who only ever has wanted Anna smashes the words back down his throat. The Rob of his homestead site aloof above the rippling North Fork, of ever more sheep, of the 'steaders, I at last was finding them all with my fists. The final one, the Rob who had betrayed by turning my son against me, I wanted to butcher with my bare hands. In that Rob's eyes, here, now, amid the thuds of my blows

bringing blood out of him, there was the desperate knowledge that I was capable of his death.

How many times Rob Barclay went down from my hitting of him, I have no idea. Not enough for my amount of rage against him and what he had done. Eventually he stayed down, breathing brokenly. The sound of him, ragged, helpless at last, came up to me as if it was pain from a creature trapped under the earth.

A corner of my mind cleared and said, "You're not worth beating to death. You're worse off living with yourself."

I left him there in the dirt of his Breed Butte.

"I wish Rob hadn't bothered."

"Bothered? Dair, bothered doesn't begin to say it. The damn man has set Varick against me. Nobody has the right to cost me my son."

"I suppose Rob thought he was doing what he did for my sake." Her glance went from me to the rimline of mountains out the window. "As when he brought me over here from Scotland."

"That's as may be." I drew a careful breath. "In both cases he maybe thought he had you at heart, I give him that much. But he can't just glom into our lives whenever something doesn't suit him. We're not his to do with."

"No." She acknowledged that, and me, with her gray eyes. "We're our own to do with, aren't we." She stayed her distance from me across the kitchen, but her voice was entirely conversational, as if today's results were much the same as any other's. I almost thought I had not

heard right when she quietly continued: "I'll have to live in town with Varick when school starts." Then, still as if telling me the time of day: "We'll need to get a house in town."

Her words did worse to me than Rob's fists ever could. On every side, my life was caving in. Varick, Rob, now her. Our marriage had never never been hazardless, but abrupt abandonment was the one thing we had guarded each other against.

Suddenly my despair was speaking. Suddenly I desperately had to know the full sum against me, even if it was more severe than I had imagined.

"Dair. Are you leaving me? Because if you are, let's--let's do the thing straight out, for once."

"Leaving?" She considered the word, as if I had just coined it. "All I've said is that I had better live in town with Varick during the school year." She looked straight at me now. "Angus, in all these years you've never really been able to leave Anna. So do you think leaving is something that can be done, just like that?"

"What do you call this, then, whatever it is you intend?"

"I call it living in town with our son while he goes to school, so that he has at least one of us in his life."

My wife, the ambassadress to my son. How does a family get in such kinks? Trying to keep the shake out of my voice, I asked Adair next: "And summers?"

"Summers I'll come back here with you, of course." Of course? Seventeen years with Adair and I still didn't recognize what she saw as the obvious. She was adding: "If you want me to."

"I want you to," I answered. And heard myself add: "Of course."

Lucas tried to invoke peace. The first time I stopped in at the Gros Ventre mercantile after Rob and I divided, the message was there that Lucas needed to see me. That didn't surprise me, but his absence at the Medicine Lodge when I went across to it did. "Luke just works Saturday nights now," I was told by the pompadoured young bartender. Around to the house I went for my next Barclay war council.

"Angus, I'll never defend what Robbie did to you. We both know there was a time he was half into the honey jar himself."

Lucas inclined his head to the kitchen doorway. Nancy could be heard moving about in there, the plump woman of middle age who had been the curvaceous girl at the stove when I walked in on Rob and her. Her lifted front lip, inquiring my verdict on them. Rob quick to ask my hurry, to blur the moment with his smile. So long ago, yet not long at all. "That lad needs some sense pounded into him every so often," Lucas was going on, then paused. "As I hear you undertook to do, ay?"

"I was too late with it."

"Maybe more of it sunk in than you think." Lucas speculated behind a puff of his pipe. Does humankind know enough yet, Lucas, to determine what has and hasn't sunk in to a Barclay skull? Enough of that thought must have come out in my gaze at him, for Lucas now went to: "None of this has to be fatal, Angus. It's one pure hell of a shame Varick got dragged into this, but he'll get over it sooner or later, I hope you know."

"I don't know that at all. Nothing I've tried to say to him does a bit of good. He has that edge to him--that way of drawing back into himself and the rest of the world can go by if it wants."

"But in the eventual, Angus, he'll--"

Lucas, Lucas. In the eventual was time I could not spare. In the eventual lay the only possible time-territory of Anna and myself, when our lives would find their way together if they were ever going to. No, it was in the now, in these years before the possibility of Anna and myself, that I had to regain my son. To have him grow up understanding as much of me as he could. But the knotted task of that, so long as Varick refused to come near me in mind or self. My father, in his iron deafness. Myself, encased in my love for Anna. They look at us, our fleecelless sons do, and wonder how we ever grew such awful coats of complication. To understand us asks so much of sons--and for all I knew, daughters--at the precise time when they least know how to give.

"Angus, I know that what's between you and Varick, the two of you will have to work out," Lucas was onto now. "But maybe I'm not without some suasion where Robbie is concerned--or where you are either, I hope." He peered at me in his diagnostic way, and wasn't heartened by the signs. "By Jesus, lad"--Lucas threw up his hands, or what would have been his hands at the empty ends of those arms--"I tell you, I just don't see how it helps the situation any for you and Robbie to be reaming the bones out of each other this way."

I shook my head. No, it helped nothing for Rob and me to be in silent war, and no, I would do nothing to change it. The hole in my

life where Varick had been was a complication I wouldn't have but for Rob. In exchange, he could have my enmity.

Lucas's last try. "Angus, all those years of you and Robbie count for something."

I looked steadily at Lucas, the age on him gray in his beard and slick on his bald head. Here was a man who knew time, and I wanted to answer him well about those years of Rob and myself: our lives, really.

"The trouble is, Lucas, they don't count for the same in each of us. Maybe they never have, with Rob and me. He sees life as something you put in your pocket as you please. I never find it fits that easily."

"That's as may be, Angus," he said slowly, deliberately, when I was done. "But those differences weren't enough to put you at each other's throats, in all the time before." He gave me one more gaze that searched deep. "I just can't think it's forever, this between the two of you."

"If it's not forever, Lucas," I responded to the one Barclay in the world that I had ever savvied, until now, "it's as close as can be."

—



In less time than is required to tell it, Rob and I took apart twenty-four years of partnership.

With Adair and Judith, each of them silent and strained, on hand to restrain us, everything went. He took my share of the Two Medicine sheep, I took his share of the band we had in the national forest. I bought his half-ownership in the sheep shed we had built together at the edge of my homestead nearest his. Oh, I did let him know he still had ~~water~~^{watering} in freedom on my portion of the North Fork whenever he had sheep at Breed Butte--my grudge was not against his animals, after all--if he wanted, and while he most definitely did not want so, he had no choice when the situation was water or no water. But of all else, we divvied everything we could think of except Scorpion. There, Rob would not touch the money I put on the table for his long-ago grand insistence that he stand half the price of my saddle horse. Bruised and scabbed as he was from my beating of him, he still wore that disdainful guise. There could not be more contempt than in the wave of Rob's hand then, and his banishing words: "Keep your goddamn Reese horse, as a reminder."

Or so I thought, about the limits of his disdain, until that September. When there was the morning that I looked up from my ride to school and saw teams of horses and earth equipment coming across the shoulder of Breed Butte. It

seemed too many for road work, but then who knew what royal highroad Rob Barclay had to have to travel on.

Riding home at the end of that schoolday, I saw what the project was. The soil was being scraped, hollowed, beneath the spring at the west edge of Rob's homestead.

"Rop's ressavoy," Isaac Reese confirmed to me when I went up to see closer. "Ve build him deep."

Rob had always said I would see the day he would build a reservoir here. As I stood beside Isaac, watching the fresnoes and teams of big workhorses with the Long Cross brand on their sides as they scraped the hillside down into a dam, it seemed to me one last barrier was going up between Rob and myself. Spurning my offer that he could use my portion of the North Fork for his sheep, he was choosing to store up the spring's trickle instead. Choosing to create water of his own. That was Rob for you.

As the reservoir rose, it changed the face of the North Fork valley. A raw dirt pouch beneath the silver eye of the Breed Butte spring; a catchment inserted into a valley built for flow. Then when Rob brought the Two Medicine sheep home from the Reservation for the winter, each few days I would see him on horseback pushing the band back and forth across the top of the earthen dam to pack down the dirt, a task which the sharp hooves of sheep are ideal for. Him and his gray conscript column, marching back and

forth to imprison water. I know I had an enlarged sense of justice, where Rob Barclay was concerned. But that private earthen basin of his up there on Breed Butte only proved to me, as if I needed any more proof, the difference in the way he saw the planet and the way I did.

As those sheep tamped and tamped the Breed Butte reservoir into permanence, I tried to settle myself into the long seasons without Adair and Varick that Rob had inflicted on me. Back across time's distance, when America and Montana began for me at the Greenock dock, I thought the Atlantic was worth fear. But the Atlantic was a child's teacup compared to the ocean that life could be. The unexpected ferocities of family I now was up against, their unmasked hold on me, were as implacable in their way as the seawater ever was. This too was a sick scaredness of the kind that gripped me in the steerage compartment of the Jemmy, down in the iron hole in the water. Suddenly again now my life was not under my own control, now that everyone I had tried to stretch myself toward had yanked away from me. I felt so alone on the homestead that if I had shouted, I would have made no echo. When I tried to occupy myself with tasks and chores, even time was askew. Hours refused to budge, yet days went to no good use. I did not even have the usual troublesome company of sheep, for after Rob and I went our separate ways, that autumn at shipping time I sold my band of ^{the} sheep

to provide for Adair and Varick living in town; somehow two households cost three times as much to run as one did. I told myself I would soon have heart enough again to go back into the sheep business, but I did not. Back there in my ocean fear, the worst that could happen was that my life might promptly end that way. Now the worst was that my life, without Varick at all, without Adair most of the time, without Anna yet, my so-called life might go on and on this way.

I believe this: my South Fork schoolhouse saved my sanity, gave me a place to put my thoughts and not have them fly back shrieking into my face. Life turns on many hinges in a classroom, and day after day I was mentally thankful for the distraction of Paul Toski and his tadpoles in a jar--thankful too that he hadn't yet quite figured out how to jug up skunks, coyotes, bears. There was the slow circling intelligence of Nellie Thorkelson to watch, and to wonder where it would alight. There was Charlie Finletter's war cry at recess-time disputes with Bobby Busby, you whistledick! There was the latest generation of Roziers, none as lethal as Daniel but formidable enough, formidable enough.

During that school year and then the next after that, Scotch Heaven saw Adair ensconced in a rented house in town with Varick and of course assumed that she and I had had a

falling out and Rob was aloof to me because of that. But then glance out some sunny start-of-summer day and here Adair was, like the turn of the calendar from May into June each year, at the homestead with me again, wasn't she. And Varick nearby, working for Stanley at the ranger station or up in the national forest.

The McCaskills dwelt in some strange summer truce, did they? I knew not much more of it than you did, Scotch Heaven. I turned my brain inside-out with thinking, and still none of it came right. Varick, Adair, Rob--Anna as ever--each had extracted from my life whatever portions of themselves it suited them to, and I knew nothing to do but try to trudge along with whatever was left.

These were years, 1915 and 1916, when it seemed downright unpatriotic not to be thriving. I could stay as sunk as a stump if I wanted, but Montana and the homestead boom were rollicking along. 'Steaders were not only retaining those dry-land footholds of theirs that I thought were so flimsy and treacherous, they were drawing in more 'steaders; Montana in these years attracted like a magnet amid iron filings. And while the dry-land acres of farming extended and extended, even the weather applauded. The winters were open and mild. Each spring and summer, rain became grain. There was even more to it: thanks to the endless appetite of the war in Europe, the price of

anything you could grow was higher than you had ever dreamed. I had been dubious about whether prairie and benchland ought to be farmed, had I? Obviously I didn't know beans from honey.

The other person who did not join in the almost automatic prosperity was named Rob Barclay. Not for lack of trying, on his part. But to my surprise, he sold the Two Medicine band of sheep even before lambing time of the next spring after our split. Rob's decision, I learned by way of Lucas, was to put all his energy into land-dealing. See now, there's just no end to people wanting a piece of this country: I could hear him saying every letter of it. His misfortune in deciding to become a lord of real estate was that the buying multitudes had their own ideas. When Rob took the plunge of purchasing every relinquished homestead he could lay his hands on, under the notion of selling land to 'steaders as well as delivering them onto it, he then found that the next season's seekers were seeking elsewhere, out in the eastern sweeps of Montana where there still was fresh--"free"--land for homesteading. When he decided next to enter the sod-breaking business, buying a steam tractor half the calibre of a locomotive and the spans of ripping plows and hiring the considerable crew for the apparatus, that was the season he discovered he was one of many new sodsters

and that there was wasn't enough 'breaking business to go around. No, the more I heard of Rob's endeavors in these years, the more he sounded to me like a desperate fisherman trying to catch a bait grasshopper in his hat--always at least one jump behind, and sometimes several.

Hearsay was my only version of Rob Barclay now, and that was plenty for me. He and I had not spoken to one another since the day of severing our partnership, we tried not even to lay eyes on each other. This was the other side of the mirror of the past twenty-five years; the two of us who had built ourselves side by side into the Two Medicine country now were assiduously separate existences.

"Angus, it's not for me to say so," Ninian began once, "but it seems unnatural to see Robert and you--"

"--Then don't say it, Ninian," I closed that off.

"Angus, lad," from Lucas toward the end of that time, "Robbie is losing his shirt in his land dealing, and he'd go all the way to his socks if I'd let him. By Jesus, I don't mind telling you, it's time I straightened his head around for him again. So I'm going to back him in buying maybe fifteen hundred head of prime ewes. These prices for wool and lambs are just pure glorious. If I can talk Robbie into it, I wonder if you'd consider coming in with us on the deal."

"You can stop wondering, Lucas," I said, "because I won't do any considering of that sort."

And then it was our own war year, 1917. Wilson and America had been saying long and loud that they never would, but now they were going into Europe's bloody mud with both feet. That first week of April, I put down the Gleaner with its declaration-of-war headline, I thought of the maw of trenches from Belgium all across France, and I felt as sick as I ever had. This was the spring Varick would finish high school in Gros Ventre. Less than half a year from now, he would be eighteen years old. If the war did not stop soon--a war that so far had shown no sign it would ever stop--Varick in all soldier-age inevitability would go to it or be sent to it.

"Angus?" from Adair, one of that year's first summer evenings, the dusk long and the air carrying the murmur of the North Fork flowing high with runoff from the mountains. Her first evening at the homestead with me, now that the school year was done. Now that our son no longer had the safety of being a schoolboy. "I need to tell you. There's something terrible I wish. About Varick."

This was new. I have to truthfully say that each other June, Adair reappeared here in this house just as if she

had never been away from me. The homestead simply seemed to take on a questioning air, the same as it had when she first came here, straight from our Breed Butte wedding. Not knowing where we were headed in this adrift marriage of ours, we took considerable care not to jostle one another. But this was open agitation of some sort.

"What's this now, Dair? I don't believe the terrible in anything you could--"

"I wish he'd lost that eye." She gazed at me steadily, her voice composed but sad. "When the stick of kindling flew up, that time, I wish now it had taken his eye, Angus."

"Because, because of the war, you mean."

"Is that wrong of me, Angus?" To wish a son saved, from the Army, from the trenches, from metal death? When Samuel Duff enlisted, Ninian subscribed to the daily newspaper from Great Falls and the war news came to us in that, the battle for some French hill in one headline, the sinking of half a convoy in another, in pages worn from reading as they traveled up the North Fork valley. As if tribes were fighting in the night, and messengers were shouting guesses at us. A person had to wonder. Was this what all the effort, the bringing of yourself around the bend of the world to America and Montana, the making of homesteads, raising of children, was this what it all came

to? Our armies trading death with their armies?

"No," I answered my wife. "No, I can't see that you're wrong at all, Dair. You brought him into the world. You ought to have every right to wish the world wouldn't kill him."

Only a night later, Adair and I had just gone to bed when the scuff of hooves arrived in the yard, then the creak of a saddle being dismounted from. I pulled clothes on, went and opened the door to Rob.

Our stiff looks met one another. "I have something to say to Adair," was as much as he let me know.

From behind us, Adair's voice: "Anything you ever say to me, you ~~can~~ say to Angus as well."

Rob stepped in around me, toward his sister. He began huskily, "Lucas--"

His voice cut off, swallowed by the emotion of his news. He did not really need to wrench out the rest; Adair and I knew the sentence.

"Do you know, Angus," Lucas's death spoke itself in Toussaint's words the afternoon of the funeral, "we thought he was funning us. Saturday night, everybody in the Medicine Lodge. Luke pouring drinks left, right, sideways. All to once, he says: 'My hands hurt. They're

like fire.' We didn't know. To laugh or not. He rubbed both his stubs slow on his chest, like so. Then he fell. Doc was right there. But no use. Luke's heart went out, Doc says."

Lucas's funeral brought people and people and people. His graveside was the gathering of all of us who had come into the Two Medicine country in the years after he did. In its way, Gros Ventre itself seemed to attend, the town and its tree columns of streets at a respectful distance from the green graveyard knoll. Around me, the years' worth of faces. Anna and Isaac. Rob and Judith. Duffs, Erskines, Frews, Findlaters, Hahns, Petersons, the rest. Varick arrived with Stanley Meixell, a faded but clean workshirt on each of them, and strode across to join his mother and me, saying nothing to me. Nancy with us too, not wearing widow's weeds.... All of us, except the one whom death had chosen for this first whittle into us, Lucas's slit in the earth.

I blinked when Ninian Duff stepped from amid us to the head of the grave.

"I have asked Robert whether I may say some words over Lucas," he announced. The feedbag beard looked even mightier now that it had cloudswirls of gray in it. I could see in my mind how that asking went; not even Rob could turn down Ninian.

"It is no secret that Lucas and I did not see eye to eye about all of life." Lad, Lucas's voice to me in the Medicine Lodge that year Rob and I arrived to Gros Ventre and the Two Medicine country, how many Bibles do you suppose old Ninian's worn the guts out of? "I bring no Bible here today," Ninian was all but thundering now, "yet there is one passage that I believe even Lucas would not overly mind to hear, if said in its proper light. It is of sheep, and those of us who make them our livelihood. One of the most ancient livelihoods, for as you will remember, Adam's first son Abel was a keeper of sheep." Ninian, you're as spry as King David up on his hind feet. "The old treasured words come to us from ancient Israel, where the tending of sheep was a work far different from that we know here in Montana. The flocks of that ancient time were small in number and each sheep possessed its own name, and answered to that name when the familiar voice of his shepherd called forth." May we all go out with the timbre of a Ninian accompanying us; a voice such as that would shut down Hell. "Ay, and a shepherd of Israel did not herd his little flock from behind, as we do with our bands of a thousand and more. Rather, that shepherd of old went before his flock, finding out the safer ways, and his sheep followed him in confidence, depending upon him to lead them to safe watering places and to good pasturage." The North

Fork there, that's sinfully fine country. I'll tell you lads what may be the thing, and that's sheep. As sure as the pair of you are sitting here with your faces hanging out, sheep are worth some thinking about. "And too, that same shepherd of Israel carried certain items necessary to the guarding and care of his sheep. His rod was a club of some heft, nailed through at one end, and was used for fighting off wild creatures and robbers. His staff was a longer, lighter tool, used to beat down leaves from trees and shrubs for his sheep to eat when the grass was short, and it had too a crook in one end, for the rescuing of sheep caught in the rocks or tumbled in a stream. Ay, very like our own sheephooks, they were." I'll go with you on them. I'll partner the two of you in getting sheep. What do you say to the idea, Angus? Can I count on you both?

Ninian paused, as if to let the wind carry his words where it wanted before he gave it more to transport. Then he resumed:

"Lucas was stubborn as a stone. They seem to be like that in Nethermuir. But he was no bad man. And like the others of us, all of us who draw breath, he is part of the flock who in one way or another speak through time in the words of the Twenty-Third Psalm." Ninian's beard rose as he put his head back to recite:

"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters....Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou ~~are~~^{art} with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

By Jesus, the woollies do make a lovely sight. If we could just sell them as scenery, ay?

As the funeral crowd began to disperse and Adair was taking condolences, I singled out Rob. I would rather have been made to pull my own toenails out one by one, but this I needed to do.

"Rob," I stepped in while several others were around him and his family, so that he had no private chance to ignore me, "see you a minute, I need to."

He aloofly followed down the slope of the graveyard after me, far enough where we wouldn't be heard.

I began with it, "I've a thing to ask of you."

"You can always try," came back from him, wintry.

"The remembrance of Lucas for the Gleaner--I, I'd like to write it.

"You would, wouldn't you." It didn't come from Rob as any kind of commendation. "When all is done, you come prissing around wanting to have the saying of it, don't

you. That's been a failing in you since--" Since the dock at Greenock, Rob, do you mean? Since the moment you and I put foot into Helena? Gros Ventre? Scotch Heaven? Where and when did I become something other than the Angus you have known the length of your life? Specify, Rob. If you can, man, specify. I'm here waiting. ¶ He didn't finish, but went to: "Well, ^{you've} ~~you~~ asked. And I'm telling you no, in big letters. I'll write that remembrance myself. It's for a Barclay to have final say about a Barclay. And Christ knows, you've never even come close to being one."

Two days from then, in the lawyer Dal Copenhaver's office up over the First National Bank of Gros Ventre, Rob sat at one end of the arc of chairs in front of the lawyer's desk, I at the other with Adair and Nancy between us. Gros Ventre's streets of cottonwood trees had grown up through the years until they now made a shimmering green forest outside this second-storey window, and I stared out into the lace of leaves while trying to collect my mind. The reading of Lucas's will was just over, and its effect was beginning.

"Dal, is this some sort of joke lawyers make?" Rob broke out. "To see if they can rile up the audience? If so, you've damn well succeeded in that."

The lawyer shook his head. "I've only read you what's on the paper. It's an unusual document, I'm the first to admit."

Unusual, he said.

I, Lucas Barclay, being of sound and disposing mind and memory and mindful of the uncertainty of human life...do hereby make, publish and declare this to be my last will and testament....

First: I give and bequeath to Nancy Buffalo Calf Speaks my residence in Gros Ventre, Teton County, Montana, and all my household furniture, linen, china, household stores and utensils, and all personal and household effects of whatsoever nature. Further, I direct that my business property, the Medicine Lodge Saloon, shall be sold, at public or private sale, by my executor; and that said executor shall pay over the proceeds of that sale, together with all funds on deposit under my name in the First National Bank of Gros Ventre, to Nancy Buffalo Calf Speaks in such monthly sums as may reasonably be expected to sustain her for the remainder of her life....

Well and good, Lucas. Even Rob, after his involuntary grimace at the news of all that was being bequeathed to Nancy, did not seem unduly surprised. But the rest of that piece of paper.

Second: I direct that my share of the sheep, approximately one thousand five hundred head, either owned outright by me or with my personal lien upon them, that are operated in partnership with Robert Burns Barclay, shall be conveyed thusly: said sheep I give and bequeath to Robert Burns Barclay, Adair Sybil McCaskill née Barclay, and Angus Alexander McCaskill, share and share alike, provided that they operate said sheep in partnership together for three years from the effective date of this will. I expressly stipulate that within that same period of time said sheep cannot be sold by the beneficiaries, nor the proceeds of any such sale derive to them, unless all three beneficiaries give full and willing agreement to such sale. In the event that said beneficiaries cannot operate in partnership and cannot agree unanimously to sell said sheep, my executor is directed to rescind said sheep and all rights thereunto from said beneficiaries and sell said sheep forthwith, with all proceeds of that sale to be donated to the municipality of Gros Ventre, Montana, for the express purpose of establishing a perpetual fund for the care and upkeep of the Gros Ventre cemetery.

...I hereby nominate and appoint Dalton Copenhaver to be the executor and trustee of this my last will.

"The three of us couldn't pet a cat together," from Rob now, thoroughly incredulous, "and Lucas full well knew

that. So how in the hell are we supposed to ~~run~~ ~~run~~ fifteen hundred head of sheep--?"

With the supreme patience of a person being paid for his time, the lawyer stated: "If it's indeed the case that you can't cooperate in a partnership, then Lucas left you the remedy here in plain sight. The three of you only need to agree to sell, and the money from the sheep holdings can be split among you in equal shares."

From his face, Rob evidently didn't know which to be at this prospect of getting only a third of what he'd been anticipating, enraged or outraged. But at least he could be quickly rid of me by agreeing on sale of the sheep. "That's readily enough done," he said with obvious effort not to glare in my direction. I nodded sharp agreement. With all that lay between us, there was no way known to man by which the two of us could work as sheep partners again.

"No."

That from Adair. Rob cast her an uncomprehending glance and asked what my mind was asking too: "No what?"

"Just that." She returned Rob's gaze, gray eyes to gray eyes. "No."

Silence held the law office. Then the three male tongues in the room broke into wild chorus.

"Dair," I chided--

"Adair," Rob blurted--

"Mrs. McCaskill," the lawyer overrode us, "we must be very clear about this. You refuse to divide these sheep?"

Adair gave him a floating glance as if he was the biggest silly in the world, talking about dividing sheep as if they were pie pieces. "I refuse, yes, if that's what it has to be called."

In any other circumstance, I would have sat back and admired. My wife looked as though she had a lifetime of practice at being an intractable heiress. Small, slim, she inhabited the big roundbacked chair as if it were a natural throne. Not a quiver in the ringlets above her composed face. How many times had I seen this before. Wherever Adair was in that head of hers, she was firmly planted there. But as rich as the value was in watching Rob goggle at his sister, this was going to be expensive entertainment. Unless her no could be turned around, neither she nor I nor Rob was going to get so much as a penny from the sale of Lucas's sheep.

Rob gamely began on her. "Adair, what's this about? Unless you agree, the cemetery gets it all when the sheep are sold." Try his utmost, the look on Rob and the strain in his voice both told what a calamity he saw that as. Robbie is losing his shirt in his land dealing, and he'd go all the way to his socks if I'd let him. Well, well. The skin of Rob's feet were closer to touching disaster than

I'd even thought. He was urging Adair now, "And surely to Christ that isn't what you want to happen, now is it?"

"Of course it isn't," she responded. "And you don't either." She regarded Rob patiently. "We can keep that from happening by the three of us running the sheep."

That brought me severely upright. Rob and I exchanged glances of grim recalcitrance.

"See now, Adair"--credit him, Rob sounded valiantly reasonable under the circumstances--"we can all grant that Lucas intended well with this piece of paper of his. But you know better than anyone that Angus and I--we'd just never jibe, is all. The two of us can't work together."

"You did," she said, cool as custard. "You can learn to again."

"Dair, it'd be craziness for us to even try," I took my turn at reasoning with her, past my apprehensions that reasoning and Adair weren't always within seeing distance of each other.

"Trying is never crazy," she reported as if telling me the weather. "Lucas wished us to try this together, and that's what we're going to do."

Rob shifted desperately around in his chair to confront the lawyer again. "Give us a bit of mercy here, why not. All that rant in the will about sound mind and what is it,

disposing memory and such; surely to Christ this sheep mess Lucas came up with can't be called sane, am I right?"

"It was up to Lucas to dispose of those sheep as he saw fit," responded Copenhaver. "All I can tell you is, this will is plainly legal in its language." He pushed the paper toward Rob. "And there's Lucas's signature validating it." Even from where Adair and I and Nancy sat, that royal coil of signature could be recognized. Lucas's stubs propelling a pen, proudly saying to Scotland This place Gros Ventre is a coming town, leading Rob and me from Helena with its loops and swirls. Why did I write it, after these years? Matters pile up in a person. They can surprise you, how they want ^{out} ~~you~~. They were out now, weren't they, Lucas. You saying with this last signature of yours that Rob and Adair and I must make ourselves look at reconciliation, must face it if only to reject it.

"Moreover," the lawyer was asserting to Rob, "the will has been attested by the requisite two witnesses"--he glanced closer at the pair of much smaller ragged scrawls--"Stanley Meixell and Bettina Mraz."

Rob shot the accusatory question to Adair and me, but neither of us knew the name Bettina Mraz either.

"Bouncing Betty," said Nancy quietly.

The other four of us swung to Nancy in stupefaction. Her dark eyes chose Rob to look back at. The lifted middle

of her lip made it seem as if she was curious to know what he would make of her news to him. "Wingo's 'niece', once. A year, two, ago. Stanley's favourite. Young. Yellow hair. And--" Nancy brought her hand and arm up level with her breasts, measuring a further six inches or so in front of them. "Bouncing Betty," she explained again.

Rob was out of his chair as if catapulted now, his knuckles digging into the lawyer's desktop as he leaned forward to half-demand, half-plead: "Dal, man, a will witnessed by a forest ranger and a whore can't be valid, can it?"

Adair faced around to Rob reproachfully. "Really now, Rob. Just because Stanley Meixell is a forest ranger dosen't give you reason to question--"

"Mrs. McCaskill," the lawyer put up a hand to halt her, "I imagine your brother has reference to the competency of Miss"--he checked again the bottom-most signature on the will--"Mraz as a witness. But unless she has ever been convicted of practicing her purported profession, she is as competent to witness as any of us--and convictions of that sort are hardly plentiful in Montana, I would point out to you. No, there really isn't much hope of contesting this will on the basis of its witnesses, in my opinion. Nor on any other that I'm aware of."

Rob looked as if he'd been kicked on both shins.

"Adair," he intoned to her bleakly, "you've got to get us out of this sheep mess Lucas put us in."

"You know how much I hate to admit it, Dair," I chimed in at my most persuasive, "but for ^{once}~~one~~ in his life Rob happens to be right."

She stated it for us once more. "No."

There was a long moment of silence except for the rattle of the cottonwood breeze in the trees. But everything in my mind was as loud as it could be and still stay in there: Adair, it banged again and again, what now?

"Gentlemen," the lawyer summed, "Mrs. McCaskill is entirely within her rights. If and when you three heirs decide to divide the sheep, I can draw up the necessary papers. But until that decision is reached, you are in the sheep business together."

At home that night, I tried again.

"Dair, I don't know what it is you want, in this matter of Rob and me."

"I want the two of you to carry out Lucas's wish."

"It's not as if I want to go against something Lucas had his heart set on."

"Then you won't," she said.

"If you want us back in the sheep business so badly, I'll find the money somewhere to buy a band of our own."

"We already have sheep," she instructed me, "as of today."

"Dair, you know as well as I do that there's every reason under the sun for me to say a no of my own." No to her hopeless notion that Rob and I together could ever run that band of sheep, yes to the perpetual upkeep of the green bed, ay, Lucas? Yes to a ruination of Rob, as glad a yes as I could utter.

"I'm hoping you won't. I'm asking you not to."

"Because why?"

"Because this is another chance, for each of the three of us. Angus, I've never asked you these words before, but I am now. Will you do this for me?"

Put that way, this notion of hers resounded. Put that way, it had an inescapable echo. Here was the other end of the bargain she quietly broached to me those years ago: You would still have a life to look ahead to. Her acceptance, her grant, all through our marriage that I still loved Anna. And now this asking, that I make a demented try to partner with Rob again. Because why? Because for better or worse, Adair and I had each other, our marriage, until time told us otherwise. The Atlantic itself was a field of battle now; there could be no Scotland for Adair until the

war wore itself out. Anna's Lisabeth was grown now, I had heard that she was going away to the teachers' college at Dillon in the fall, but Peter was still a few years from homeleaving. All the hinges that life turns on. And in the meantime Adair at last asking a thing of me, repeating it gently as if wondering aloud to herself:

"Will you, Angus?"

How many times had I seen this, now. A Barclay locked into an iron notion. Lucas becoming a builder of the Montana that had torn his hands from him. Rob so outraged toward me about Anna that he pried my son away from me. And now Adair bolting Rob and me into impossible partnership.

"Dair, I don't even want to be around the man. How under thunder am I supposed to run sheep with him?"

"The sheep won't care whether you and Rob have anything to say to one another."

I studied her. "Does Adair? Do you care?"

"In my way, I do."

I went to Breed Butte to begin lockstep sheep-raising.

The sheep were grazing complacently on the shoulder of the butte nearest Rob's reservoir. As I rode Scorpion across the narrow top of the dam I saw that Rob had been packing its dirt down again with the sheep, their small sharp hoofprints leaving every inch of it as pocked as a grater. The damn man and his damn dam.

Rob came out into his yard looking baleful in the extreme. I planted myself to face his harsh silence.

Nothing, from either of us.

Then some more of it.

Eventually I asked:

"How are we going to do this, by signal lamp?"

"Don't I wish."

"Rob, wishing isn't going to help this situation."

"You're one to tell me not to toss away life by wishing, are you. Surprising."

"We'd better stick to the topic of sheep."

Rob looked bleakly past me, down the slope of Breed Butte to the sheep shed that had been ours and now was mine. Then he shifted his gaze to the contented cloud of sheep. I followed his eyes there with my own. At least neither of us was new to the sheep part of this; after nearly thirty years, we could be said to have commenced at starting to make a stab at a beginning toward knowing a thing or two about the woollies.

After enough stiff silence, he made himself say it.

"What brings you? Shearing?"

I confirmed with a nod.

He rapped back, "You know my thoughts on it. Or at least you goddamn ought to, after all these years."

"That doesn't mean I agree with them a whit," I pointed out. "I'm for shearing at the end of this month, to be as sure as possible of the weather."

"That's just the kind of pussyfoot idea ^{you'd} ~~you've~~ have, right enough. I say shear as soon as possible and get the sheep up on the forest grass."

"You've said it, and I still don't agree."

The next jerked out of him savagely, not simply at me but at the situation. "Goddamn it all to hell, this can never work. We both know Adair means well, but a half-assed situation like this, neither of us able to say a real yes or a real no--how to hell are we ever going to settle anything about the sheep?"

He was right about one matter. Nothing he or I could provide was going to ordain anything to the other. I reached in my pocket and showed him what Adair had handed me before I left the house.

Rob stared down at my hand, then sharply up into my eyes. "What's this, now?"

"What it looks like. A deck of cards. Adair says when we can't agree, we're to cut for who gets to decide."

"Jesus' suffering ass!" Rob detonated. "We couldn't run a flock of chickens on that basis, let alone fifteen hundred goddamn sheep!"

"Adair has one more stipulation," I informed him. "Low card always wins."

You never know. Adair's second stipulation so dumbfounded Rob that his howl of outraged ~~now dwindled down~~ to the weary mutter, "It'd take that sister of mine to think of that."

"Anyway it's ^a change from letting magpies decide," I reminded him. Turning around to Scorpion, I used the ~~seat~~ ^{seat}ommel of his saddle to shuffle the cards on three times, then held the deck toward Rob: "Your cut."

Five ^{of} diamonds.

He grabbed the deck as if he wanted it out of sight of him, shuffled it roughly, held it to me.

Ten of clubs.

"Well, now," Rob ground out. "We'll shear as soon as possible, won't we."

I nodded once, and left.

The summer went that way. The thousand and a half sheep and Rob and I and our goddess of chance, also known as Adair. To ask myself how I had got swallowed into all this was to bewilder myself even more, so I tried instead to set myself to wait it through. Waiting was what I had practice in by now.

The deck of cards did me one inadvertent favor. In early August, when I was trying to finish the last of haying, Rob and I cut cards to see who had to campend Davie that week, and I lost. Nothing to do but pocket my exasperation and begin the journey on Scorpion up into the national forest with the pack horse of Davie's supplies behind.

It was one of those mornings of Roman Reef looming so high and near in the dry summer air that my interest wandered aloft with it rather than toward the barbwire gate of the boundary fence I was nearing. When I came to earth and glanced ahead and discovered the person off his horse at the gate, performing the courtesy of waiting for me to ride through too before he closed it, at first his brown Stetson made me hope it was Varick. I saw in my next minute of riding up, no, not quite that tall and far from that young. Stanley Meixell.

"Hullo, Angus," the ranger spoke up as I rode through and stopped my horses on the other side of the gate. "What do you know for sure?"

Never nearly enough, Stanley. But aloud: "I know we could use rain."

"That we could. There's never enough weather in Montana except when there's too much of it."

Both of us knew I had stopped for more than a climate chat. I threw away preamble and asked:

"How's Varick doing for you?"

"Just topnotch. He's about a man and a half on anything I put him to. Regular demon for work, and what he can't do a first time he learns before a next time gets here. I tell you, the Yew Ess Forest Service is proud of him. You maybe heard, he's getting to be just quite a bronc stomper, too." I had heard, unenthusiastically. The Sunday gatherings of young riders at the Egan ranch on Noon Creek were no longer complete without Varick atop a snorty horse, the report was. Stanley studied me, then Roman Reef, as if comparison was his profession. "I guess you'd kind of like to know his frame of mind about you, Angus. It's not real good."

"I wish that surprised me." What I went on to say did startle myself: "You know what it's about, this between Varick and me?"

"I do, yeah. Him and me had a session right after the blowup first happened between you two." Stanley regarded me thoughtfully for a moment before saying: "The ladies and us. Never as tidy as you'd think it ought to be, is it."

Definitely not for some of us, Stanley. Others of us, and I could name you one quick, the Bouncing Bettys ricochet soundlessly off of and never leave a whisper in the world.

"Angus, I've tried and tried to tell Varick to let it drop, the ruckus between him and you. And I'll keep on trying. But I've got to say, Varick ain't easy to budge, wherever he gets that from." Stanley paused again, then: "This probably don't help none, but my guess is it isn't just you that's burring him, Angus. It's him wanting to be away from home, get out in the world a little."

"He can be out in the world and still have a father."

"Yeah, I suppose. It's a whole hell of a lot easier for you and me to see that than it is for him, though."

It was my turn to glance away at Roman Reef. This deserved to be said, Stanley in his Stanley way had earned the hearing of it:

"Stanley. If I can't have Varick around me at this time of his life, there's nobody I'd rather he was with than you."

The only answer from under the brown hat was a brief session of throat-clearing. After a considerable moment: "Yeah, well, I better get ^{on} up the mountain. See you in choir practice, Angus."

At shipping time that fall, for once in our yoked partnership Rob and I did not need to cut the cards to find a decision.

"Ones like these, I'm going to take leave of my senses and go up to $20\frac{1}{2}$ cents on," the lamb buyer offered.

"However you Scotchmen manage to do it, you grow goddamn fine lambs."

While keeping a careful straight face Rob glanced at me; I was already glancing implacably at him. When we both nodded and got out ritual admissions that we supposed we could manage to accept such a sum of money, the flabbergasting deal was done. 85 pounds per lamb x 1500 lambs x $20\frac{1}{2}$ ¢ --In the years of '93 Rob and I and all other sheepmen would have gone through life on our knees to get five cents a pound for our lambs instead of four, and now these unmasked lofty prices of wartime. Life isn't famous for being evenhanded, is it.

"This doesn't mean one goddamn bit that I want to go through another year of this with you," Rob lost no time in imparting to me outside the stockyard as we were pocketing our checks. "If you had the least lick of sense, you'd go home right now and ask Adair if she won't let us sell the ewes this fall, too."

"I already asked," I gave him in identical tone. "She won't."

—

The next two months of numbers on the calendar, I hated to see toll themselves off. Why can't time creep when you want it to instead of when you don't. I stood it for half the toll, then on a mid-October Sunday afternoon I told Adair I was riding up into the foothills to see where our firewood was for this winter and instead rode across the shoulder of Breed Butte to Noon Creek.

Elderly Scorpion being pointed now to the country where I bought him: Skorp Yun, lad, what about that? What about it indeed. A woman looking up from the teacher's desk, a woman with the blackest of black hair done into a firm glossy braid, a glory of a woman: I am called Anna Ramsay. How long had it been in horse years, Scorpion? How long since Anna, at her schoolhouse or at the old Ramsay place, began being my automatic destination at Noon Creek? My destination anywhere in life, for that matter. But not now, not today, ^{not yet,} when I was reining Scorpion toward the round corral at the Egan ranch.

He was there atop a corral pole with the other young Sunday heroes when I arrived. Varick, whom I had come to lay eyes on before the eleventh day of the next month made him eighteen years of age. Before he became war fodder.

He saw me across the corral as I dismounted. I gave him a hello wave, he nodded the minimum in return, and with public amenities satisfied, we left it at that. Maybe more would eventuate between us later, but I did not really expect so. No, today I simply was bringing my son my eyes, the one part of me he could

not turn away from on such a public afternoon as this.

As I tied Scorpion where he could graze a little, I heard a chuckle from the passenger on a horse just arriving. "You are here to ride a rough one, Angus?"

I looked up, at the broad-bellied figure in the saddle. "That I'm definitely not, Toussaint. A bronc has to bring me a note of good behavior from his mother before I'll go near him. But you--what fetches you down from the Two Medicine?"

"The riding. The young men riding." As if such a sight was worth traveling all distances for. Well, I had come no small way myself, hadn't I, to peruse Varick.

I chatted with Toussaint about the fine green year, his job as ditch rider on the Reservation's new Two Medicine irrigation canal--"Did you know a man can ride a ditch, Angus?"--the war in Europe--"those other places," he called the warring countries--until I saw the arrival of a buckboard drawn by a beautiful team of sorrels. My breath caught. But this time the Reese wagon was not driven by Anna but by Isaac, with the boy Peter beside him. I might have known that wherever horses were collected, here would be Isaac.

"Toozawn, Annguz," he greeted us benignly and headed on toward the corral. Peter's eyes registered me but didn't linger, flew on to the happenings within the circle of poles. I felt relief that he didn't dwell on me. Yet some pang, too, that the immensity of the past between his mother and me did not even generate a speculative gaze from this boy. Add inches to him for the next year

or two, 1918, 1919, and he would be out into life. About the time when Adair and Rob and I would have done our duty to Lucas's will and could all go our separate ways. I had thought through the arithmetic of these next few years a thousand times: the Reese nest would be empty and Anna would be able to judge just on the basis I had waited so long for, Isaac or me.

"That Isaac," declared Toussaint. "He knows."

I could feel my face going white or red, I couldn't tell which. I stared at Toussaint. "Knows?"

"He knows horses like nobody's business, that Isaac."

I recovered myself, told Toussaint it was time I became a serious spectator and found a place along the corral. Men helloed and Angused me in surprise as they passed. Quite a crowd in and on the corral by then. Besides Varick and Pat Egan's son Dill and other local sons, riders from the Double W and Thad Wainwright's Rocking T abounded here today, and just now, the last one they had been waiting for before starting was arriving with a whoop and a grin, young Withrow from the South Fork.

"Angus, good to see you here," Pat Egan called out as he came over to me. "Heard about the special attraction, did you?"

When my blank look said I'd heard no such thing, Pat told me that after the bronc riding there was to be a bucking exhibition of another sort. "Some guy from Fort Benton brought over this critter of his. Claims he's trained the thing to toss any rider there is. Our boys are going to have to show him how real riding is done, don't you think?"

Away went Pat, as he said, to get the circus started. Across the pole arena from me, the Withrow lad had climbed onto the fence beside Varick. "How you doing, Mac?"

"Just right, Dode. How about you?"

"Good enough, if they got some real horses here for us."

"They're rank enough, probably. I see you're dressed for the worst they can do, though." Withrow was always the dressiest in a crowd, and for today's bronc riding he sported a pair of yellow-tan corduroy trousers with leather trim at the pockets, new as the moment. Except for his habit of dressing as if he owned Montana he was an engaging youngster, of a sheep-ranching family that had moved to the South Fork from the Cut Bank country in the past year or so. I perched there, watching Varick and Dode, listening to their gab of horses. Aching at the thought of how much of Varick I had not been able to know, these years of his climb into manhood.

Shortly the afternoon began to fill with horsehide and riders. Even just saddling each bronc was an exercise in fastening leather onto a storm of horse. The animal was snubbed to a corral post by a lasso tight around his neck while the saddlers did their work. Any too reluctant horse or a known kicker was thrown onto his side in the corral dirt and saddled while down. The rider would poise over him and try to socket himself into the saddle and stirrups as the horse struggled up. It looked to me like a recipe for suicide.

My throat stoppered itself when I saw that Varick had drawn one of the saddle-in-the-dirt rides.

"Watch out for when this sonofabitch starts sunfishing," I

heard Dode counsel ^{him} ~~Varick~~, "or he'll stick your head in the ground."

Varick nodded, tugged his hat down severely toward his eyes, and straddled with care across the heaving middle of the prostrate pinto horse. Then said to the handlers: "Let's try him."

The pinto erupted out of the dirt, spurts of dust continuing to fly behind his hooves as he bucked and bounced, querulously twisting his spotted body into sideways crescents as if determined to make his rump meet his head. While the horse leapt and crimped, Varick sat astride him, long legs stretched mightily into the stirrups. My blood raced as I watched. What son of mine was this? Somehow this bronc rider, this tall half-stranger, this Sunday centaur, was the yield of Adair ~~and~~ me. I was vastly thankful she was not here to see our wild result.

When Varick had ridden and the other braves of the saddle tribe had taken their turns at rattling their brains, Pat Egan hollered from beside the corral gate: "Time for something different, boys!"

Pat swung the gate open, and in strolled a man and a steer.

At first glimpse, the Fort Benton ^{critter} ~~steer~~ looked like standard steer. Red-brown, haunch-high to a horse, representing perhaps a thousand pounds of beef on the hoof. But when you considered him for a moment, this was a very veteran steer indeed, years older than the usual by not having gone the route to the slaughterhouse. An old dodger of the last battle, so to say. He was uniquely calm around people, blinking slow blinks that were halfway toward sleep as the onlookers gathered around him. The circle gave way considerably, however, when he lifted his tail like a pump handle

and casually let loose several fluid feet of manure.

For his part, the Fort Benton man was a moonface with spectacles; a sort you would expect to see behind the teller's wicket in a bank instead of ankle deep into a corral floor. The fiscal look about him was not entirely coincidental. He was prepared, he announced, to provide \$25 to anyone who could ride this steer of his. He also would be amenable, of course, to whatever sidebets anybody might care to make with him about his steer's invincibility.

At once, everybody in the corral voted with their pockets. All the young riders wanted a turn at the steer, or professed to. But the Fort Bentonian shook his head and informed the throng that was not how steer riding worked, it was strictly a one-shot proposition. One steer per afternoon, one rider per afternoon: what could be more fair? Then he set forth the further terms of ~~bucking~~^g steer riding, Fort Benton mode: the rider had to stay astride the steer for a total of three minutes in a ten-minute span. Naturally this Sunday assortment of bronc conquerors was free to choose the best rider among them--the bland spectacles suggested there had been a lot of other claims of "best" that came and went--and if the rider could stay on the steer the required sum of time, the \$25 was his.

Somebody spoke up: ~~did~~^{surely} the steer impresario ~~mean~~^{didn't} three minutes straight, uninterrupted, aboard the animal, did he?

He did not. The rider could get off and on again any hundred number of times he wanted to during the overall time span. Did he

need to add, he added, the steer would be glad to help the rider with the offs.

What about a hazer, to even the odds for the rider getting back on?

The eyebrows lifted above the moonface in surprise. But the Fort Bentonian allowed that one man hazing on foot maybe wouldn't do lasting harm to his cherished pet.

I saw Isaac come into the corral, stoop, sight along the steer's backbone--I could all but hear him mentally compare it to a horse's--and then step over and ^{gabble} say something to Varick, Dode Withrow and the others. They surveyed the territory for themselves, then somebody put it to the Fort Bentonian. How were they supposed to saddle something with as wide a spine as that?

Any old which way they desired, came the answer.

Discussion bred inspiration.

The young riders conferred again. Could they tie on the saddle as well as cinch it?

They could entwine the steer a foot thick in rope if that was their way of doing things, the steer's spokesman bestowed, but they had better decide soon, as darkness was only several hours away.

At last the terms of the contest were as clear as tongue could make them. Someone called out the next conundrum:

"Who's gonna climb on him?"

Faces turned toward Varick and the Withrow lad. Varick looked at young Withrow, and young Withrow at him. "Toss you for him, Dode," offered my son.

"Heads, Mac. Let her fly."

The silver dollar that spun into the air, I tried to exert to come down heads--not to send danger toward another man's son, simply away from my own. Name me one soul who could have done different. But I had my usual luck where Varick was concerned.

"You got on the wrong pants for riding a male cow anyway," Varick consoled Dode after the coin fell tails. Then, "I guess I'm ready for this if your steer is, Mister Fort Benton."

Varick and his adherents gathered around the steer. The steer blinked at them. As Dode Withrow approached with the saddle, someone moved from behind the steer to watch. The steer's right rear leg flashed, the hoof missing the pedestrian by an inch.

"Now, now, McCoy," the Fort Bentonian chided his pet. "That's no way to act towards these boys." He scratched the steer between its broad eyes as if it was a gigantic puppy, and it stood in perfect tranquility while Dode and the others saddled and trussed. The kick had done its work, though, as now both Varick and Dode, who was going to be his hazer, knew they would have to avoid the steer's rear area during the corral contest.

When the saddlers had done, a rope ran around the steer's neck and through the forkhole of the saddle. Two further ropes duplicated the route of the saddle cinch encircling, if that was the word for such a shape, the steer. And it had been Dode Withrow's ultimate inspiration to run a lariat around the animal lengthwise, chest to rump and threaded through the saddle rings, like the final string around a package. "You people over here sure do like rope," observed the Fort Bentonian.

Dode Withrow gripped the halter with both hands at the steer's jaw while someone passed the halter rope up to Varick. He took a wrap of it in his right hand and put his left into the air as if asking an arithmetic question in my classroom. He called to Pat Egan and the Fort Bentonian, the two timekeepers:

"Let's try him."

The moonface boomed out, "Go, McCoy!" and the steer writhed his hindquarters as if he were now a giant snake. A giant snake with horns and hooves. Varick's head whipped sideways, then to the other side, like a willow snapping back and forth. Then the steer lurched forward and Varick whipped in that direction and back.

MURRRRAWWWW issued out of McCoy, half-bellow, half-groan, as he and Varick began storming around the circle of the corral. It was like watching a battle in a whirlwind, the steer's hooves spraying the loose minced dirt of the arena twenty feet into the air.

I watched in agony, fear, fascination. So I wanted to know about Varick's Sunday life, did I. We spend the years of raising children for this, for them to invent fresh ways to break their young necks?

At about McCoy's dozenth MURRRRAWWWW, Varick continued left while the steer adjourned right.

"That was 51 seconds!" Pat Egan shouted out as Varick alit in the corral earth.

His words still were in the air when Dode dashed beside the steer to grab the halter rope. As he reached down for it, the animal trotted slightly faster, just enough to keep the rope out of

reach. Dode speeded up. McCoy speeded up even more, circling the corral now at a sustained pace that a trotting horse would have envied. As the seconds ticked by in this round race between Dode and McCoy, it became clear what they used for brains in Fort Benton. Before the considerable problem of climbing onto McCoy and staying on, there was going to be the trickier problem of catching him each time.

Varick by now had scrambled to his feet and joined the chase. "I'll cut across behind the sonofabitch, you run him around to me," Dode strategized in a panting yell.

He started his veer behind McCoy. Sudden as a clock mechanism reaching the hour, McCoy halted in his tracks and delivered a flashing kick that missed Dode by the width of a fiddlestring.

But while McCoy was trying to send his would-be hazer into the middle of next week, Varick managed to lay hands on the halter rope and hold the steer long enough for Dode to gain control of the halter. Time sped as Dode desperately hugged McCoy by the head and Varick remounted, then the writhing contest was on again. The steer bounced around the arena always in the same direction, with the same crazy seesaw motion, and I thought Varick was beginning to look a bit woozy. Then MURRRRAWWWW again and my son flew into the dirt another time.

"Another 46 seconds!" shouted Pat. "That's five and a half minutes," chimed the Fort Bentonian. Away went McCoy, away went the puffing Dode after him, in a repeat race until Varick managed to mount again and the bucking resumed.

They rampaged that way, McCoy and McCaskill, through three further exchanges, man onto steer, steer out from under man. Each time, Varick's tenancy atop McCoy was briefer; but each time added preciously toward the three minute total of riding, too.

Now McCoy sent Varick cloudchasing again, and I half-hoped my stubborn son would find enough sense to give up the combat, half-wished his heavy plummet into the arena would conk him hard enough that he had to quit. But no, never. Varick was one long streak of corral dirt, but he was onto his feet again, more or less. Gasping ~~as if he'd been running steadily since the bout with the steer~~ ^{in tandem with McCoy ever since their bout} began, he cast a bleary look around for his adversary. Over by the corral gate Dode Withrow had McCoy by the halter again, snugging the animal while urging Varick: "Now we got the sonofabitch, Mac! One more time!"

The steer casually studied young Withrow, then tossed his head and slung Dode tip over teakettle into the expanse of fresh green still-almost-liquid manure he had deposited just before the riding match commenced. The dazzling corduroy trousers and most other fabric on Dode ~~Withrow~~ ^g abruptly changed color. While he slid and sloshed, the steer started away as if bored. But Varick had wobbled close enough to grab the halter rope as it flew from Dode and now somehow he was putting himself aboard McCoy again.

The steer shook him mightily, but whatever wild rhythm McCoy was cavorting to, Varick also had found. The clamped pair of them, creature and rider, MURRRRAWWW and gritting silence, shot around the corral in a steady circle, if up-and-down isn't counted. Varick

grasped the halter rope as if it was the hawser to life. McCoy quit circling and simply spun in his tracks like a dog chasing its tail. Varick's face came-went, came-went...

"Time!" yelled Pat Egan. "That's three minutes' worth! And still half a minute to the limit!"

"Whoa, McCoy," the Fort Benton man called out sourly. At once the steer froze, so abruptly that Varick pitched ahead onto its neck. With a great gulp of air, Varick lowered himself from McCoy's back, held out the halter rope and dropped it.

Blearily my son located the figure, manure-sopped but grinning, of young Withrow.

"Dode," Varick called out, "you're awful hard on a pair of pants."