

SCOTCH HEAVEN

Prophetic indeed was the man who uttered, "You can fight armies or disease or trespass, but the settler never."

Word comes of yet another settlement of homesteaders in this burgeoning province of ours. Who can ever doubt, with the influx which is peopling a childless land and planting schools by the side of sheep sheds and cattle corrals, that Choteau County is destined to be the most populous in Montana? Of this latest colony, situated into the foothills a dozen or so miles west of Gros Ventre, it is said so many of the arrivees originated in the land of the kilt and the bagpipe that Gros Ventrians call the elevated new neighborhood Scotch Heaven.

--Choteau Quill, July 3, 1890

"Hotter'n not, said the Hottentot."

"And what else do you expect, man. Montana is up so high it's next door to the sun."

"Speaking of high, your lifting muscles are ready, are they?"

"As ready as they'll ever be."

"Then here it comes, house. Up she goes. Tenderly, now. Up a bit with your end. Up up up, that's the direction. A hair more. Almost there. There. Ready to drop?"

"Let's do."

With a sound like a big box lid closing, the log fell into

place, its notched ends clasping into those of the cabin's side walls.

"Well?" demanded Rob the log hewer. "Does your end fit?"

I squinted dramatically at the wink of space between the log we had just placed and the one below. "Snug enough. You'll barely be able to toss your cat through the crack."

That brought him in a rush. He eyed along the crevice-- which would vanish easily enough when chinked--and lamented, "A tolerant tolerance, my father and Lucas would have called that in the wheelshop. ^{See now} These Montana trees have more knots in them than a sailor's fingers."

"Lucky thing we're just practicing on this house of yours," I philosophized for him. "By the time we build mine, now--"

"Lucky thing for you I'm so much a saint I didn't hear that."

God proctored poor dim old Job about how the measures of the earth were laid. Had Job but been a homesteader, he could have readily answered that the government of the United States of America did it.

The vast public domain westward of the Mississippi River, as Crofutt put the matter for us when Rob and I were somewhere back there on his oceanic border from emigration to immigration, where the stalwart homesteader may obtain legal title to his land-claim by three years of living upon it and improving it with his building and husbandry labors, has been summed in an idea as simple as it is powerful: the land has been made into arithmetic. This is to say,

surveyors have established governing lineations across the earth,
the ones extending north and south known as principal meridians and
those east-to-west as base lines. Having thus cast the main lines
of the net of numeration across half a continent, so to speak, they
further divided the area into an ever smaller mesh, first of Ranges
measured westward from the meridians and then of townships measured
from the base lines. Each township is six miles square, thus
totaling thirty-six square  miles, and--attend closely for just a
few moments more--it is these townships, wherein the individual
homesteader takes up his landholding, that the American penchant for
systemization fully flowers. Each square mile, called a section, is
numbered, in identical fashion throughout all townships, thusly:

6	5	4	3	2	1
7	8	9	10	11	12
18	17	16	15	14	13
19	20	21	22	23	24
30	29	28	27	26	25
31	32	33	34	35	36

As can be seen, the continuousness of the numeration is reminiscent
of the boustrophedonic pattern a farmer makes as he plows back and
forth the furrows of his field--or, indeed, of the alternate
directions in which ancient Greek is written! Thus does the
originality of the American experiment, the ready granting of land
to those industrious enough to seek it, emulate old efficacious
patterns!

Rob's remark at the time was that Crofutt himself verged to

Greek here. But upon the land itself, there on the great earthen table of the American experiment, the survey system's lines of logic worked so well they took your breath away. The system by which we filed our homestead claims of 160 acres apiece amounted merely to finding section markers--Ninian Duff could stride blindfolded to every one of them in the North Fork valley--and making the journey to the land office at Fort Benton and saying to the registrar and his map of Montana, this quarter-section is the square of earth that will be mine. On the Declaration of Applicant there in front of me my land's numbers were registered as SW 1/4 Sec. 31, Tp. 28 N, Rge. 8 W, on Rob's they were NE 1/4 Sec. 32, Tp. 28 N, Rge. 8 W, and with our grins at each other we agreed that ink had never said anything better.

Rob's choice of land was lofty. His homestead claim lay high as it could across the south slope of Breed Butte itself, like a saddle blanket down a horse's side. Those early summer days when we were building his house--he won the coin toss for whose would be first--all of the valley of the North Fork sat sunlit below Rob's site; and if you strolled a few hundred yards to the brow of the butte each dawn, as I did, you saw the sun emerge out of the eastward expanse of plains all the way beyond the far, far Sweetgrass Hills.

"Ay, you'll eat your fill of wind up here," Ninian Duff brought along as a decree one forenoon when he rode up to inspect our house progress.

Rob found that worth a laugh. "Is there somewhere in this

dialogue?
more Ninian's
comment up
here?

maybe
let

add summary
remark?

Robert
"will

country that a man wouldn't have wind in his teeth?"

Even while we three stood gazing, the tall grass of the valley bottom was being ruffled. A dance of green down there, and the might of the mountains above, and the aprons of timber and grazing land between; this would always be a view to climb to, you had to give Rob that. Even Ninian looked softened by it all, his prophetic beard calm against his chest. I was struck enough to say: "You did some real choosing when you found us the North Fork, Ninian."

The beard moved back and forth across the chest. "None of us has bragging rights to this country yet."

After Ninian had ridden away, there still was some peeve in Rob. He aimed his chin down at the Duff and Erskine homesteads, one-two there beside the creek at the mouth of the valley. "I didn't come all the miles from one River Street to live down there on another."

"You can see almost into tomorrow from up here, I will say that," saying it against my own inclination in the matter. For, unlike me as it was to be in the same choir with Ninian, to my way of thinking too Rob's scenery had high cost. By choosing so far up onto the butte he was forfeiting the meadow of wild hay that meandered beside the North Fork the full length of the valley, hay that seemed to leap from the ground and play racing games with the wind as we went back to hammering together Rob's roof. And more serious than that, to my mind, he was spurning the creek itself, source for watering livestock. True, at the corner of his land nearest to mine a spring lay under a small brow of butte, like a weeping eye, and Rob gave me to know that I would see the day when

By down,

he built a reservoir there. But we live in the meantime rather than the sometime and to me a nearness to the creek was a necessary pleasure, which was why my own homestead selection, southwest from Rob's and just out of view behind the dropping shoulder of Breed Butte, was down into the last of the North Fork valley before the foothills and mountains took command of the geography. There at my homestead meadows of wild hay stood along both sides of the creek, and the bottomland was flat enough to build on in comfort; for all the open glory of Rob's site, you always were trudging up or down slope here.

more -
Angus' mind
on his side

"In the eventual, a dab of hay or water more or less won't make the difference," Rob had assured me in that Barclay future-owning style. "What counts, see now, is that no one can build to the west of me here," the timbered crest and long rocky shoulder of Breed Butte indeed making that an unlikelihood. "Angus, this butte will be the high road into all the pasture there ever was and I'll be right here on it."

There he had me. Crofutt to the contrary notwithstanding, anyone with an eye in his head could see that the key to Scotch Heaven was not our homestead acreage, because no piece of land a quarter of a mile long and wide is nearly enough to pasture a band of a thousand sheep on. They'll eat their way across that while you're getting your socks on in the morning. No, it was the miles and miles of free range to our west, the infinity of grass in the foothills and on up into the mountains, that was going to be the larder for the flocks of fortune. Ninian Duff had seen so, and Rob

and I, not to mention our treasurer Lucas, could at least puff ourselves that we glimpsed Ninian's vision.

"Our woolly darlings," Rob broke these thoughts now, "can you spot them up there?"

"Just barely. They're grazing up over the shoulder of the butte. One of us is going to have to, again. You know I'd gladly tell you it's my turn, except that it isn't."

Rob swore--sheep will cause that in a man, too--and went down the ladder, the fourth time that morning one or the other of us had to leave off roofwork to ride around ~~our new~~ ~~of yearling ewes~~ the band and bring them back within safe view.

Here then is land. Just that, land, naked earthskin. And now the due sum: from this minute on, the next three years of your life, please, invested entirely into this chosen square of earth of yours.

Put upon it house, outbuildings, fences, garden, a well, livestock, haystacks, performing every bit of this at once and irrespective of weather and wallet and whether you have ever laid hand to any of these tasks before. Build before you can plan, build in your sleep and through your mealtimes, but build, pilgrim, build, claimant of the earth, build, build, build. You are permitted to begin in the kind delusion that your utensils of homestead-making at least are the straightforward ones--axe, hammer, adze, pick, shovel, pitchfork. But your true tools are other. The nearest names that can be put to them are hope, muscle, and time.

pastor

"Angus, I wish we had oakum to do the chinking with. Make nice dark seams against the logs instead of this clay."

"Toussaint told you how to darken it."

"Considering the cure, I'll accept the ill, thank you just the same." The Toussaint Rennie formula for darkening the chinking clay was: You take horse manure. Mix it in nice with that clay.

A buckboard was coming. Coming at speed along the road beside the North Fork, past Duffs' without slowing, past Erskines' just short of flying. It looked like a runaway, but at the track which led up the butte to us the light wagon turned as precisely as if running on a railroad track. Then Rob and I saw one of the two figures wave an arm. Arm only, no hand to be seen. Lucas. And Nancy was driving.

The rig, one of Dantley's hires, clattered to a stop just short of running over us and the house. The horses were sweat-wet and looked astounded at what was happening to them. Nancy seemed as impervious as she did in the kitchen. Lucas was as merry as thick jam on thin bread.

"By Jesus, there's nothing like a buggy ride to stir the blood," he announced as the buckboard's fume of dust caught up with the contingent. "Air into the body, that's the ticket. Angus, lad, you're working yourself thin as a willow. Come to town for some buttermilk one of these evenings." Both arms cocked winglike for balance, Lucas bounded down from the wagon. "So this is your castle, Robbie. I've seen worse, somewhere, sometime."

"You're a fund of compliments," Rob said back, but lightly.

"This will do me well enough until I have a house with long stairs."

"And a wife and seven sons and a red dog, ay? That reminds me, Gros Ventre has progress to report, lads," announced Lucas. His stubs were in his coat pockets now, he was wearing his proprietor-of-Montana demeanor. "A stagecoach line. Direct from up there where they're building the Great Northern railroad to us. I tell you, our town is coming up in the world so fast it'll knock you over."

*What do you
say to me
now, ay?*

There was more than a little I didn't know about stagecoaches, but I had a fair estimate of the population of Gros Ventre and its surroundings. "What, they're running a stage line just to Gros Ventre? Where's their profit in that?"

*Wanted to
here*

"Oh, the stage goes on ^{South} to Choteau too," Lucas admitted, "but we'll soon have that place out of the picture."

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"Up here we have news of our own," Rob reported in turn.

"Ninian has had word of three families from the East Neuk of Fife who are on their way to here."

"Grand, grand. The Scotch are wonderful at living anywhere but Scotland. I suppose they'll all be Bible-swallowers like Ninian, but nobody's perfect." Lucas rotated himself until he stood gazing south, down the slope of Breed Butte to the North Fork and its clumps of willows. Beyond against the sky were the rimrock walls of Roman Reef and then of Grizzly Reef, and beyond Grizzly other mountains stood in rugged file into the Teton River region. "By Jesus, this is the country. Lads, we'll see the day when all this

is farms and ranches. And Robbie, you're up in the place to watch it all." A whiff of breeze snatched at Lucas's hat and he clamped an arm stub onto the crown of it. "You'll eat some wind here, though."

While we toured our visitors through the attractions of the homestead and Lucas dispensed Gros Ventre gossip--Sedge and Lila were ready to open the hotel but couldn't agree what sign to paint on it; Wingo had another new "niece"--I tried to watch Rob without showing that I was. And in turn Rob was trying not to look at Nancy. Meanwhile Lucas was as bold as the sun, asking questions, commenting. Evidently he felt he had taken care of the Nancy situation by getting Rob from under his roof, and so far as I could see, he had.

Lucas paused at a rear corner of the house, to study the way Rob's axwork made the logs notch together as snug as lovers holding hands. While Lucas examined, I remembered him in the woodyard in Nethermuir, choosing beech worthy for an axle, ash for shafts, heart of oak for the wagon frame. I could not help but wonder what lasts at the boundaries of such loss. At his empty arm ends, did Lucas yet have memory of the feel of each wood? Were the routes of his fingers still there, known paths held in the air like the flyways of birds? When ^{had} he looked enough at Rob's logcraft, Lucas nodded and said nothing, which was purest praise.

"And the woollies," Lucas inquired as he and Nancy returned to the wagon. "How are the woollies?"

That was the pregnant question, right enough. The saying is

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that it takes three generations to make a herdsman, but in the considerable meantime between now and the adept grandson of one or the other of us, Rob and I were having to learn that trying to control a thousand sheep on new range was like trying to herd water. How were the woollies? Innocently thriving when last seen an hour ago, but who knew what they might have managed to do to themselves since.

Rob looked at me and I at him.

"There's nothing like sheep," I at last stated to Lucas.

Lucas and Nancy climbed into the buckboard, ready for the reversal of the whirlwind that brought them from Gros Ventre. "Well, what's the verdict?" Rob asked in a joking way but meaning it. "Are we worth the investment?"

Lucas looked down at him from the wagon seat.

"So far," he answered, "it seems to be paying off. Pound them on the tail, Nancy, and let's go home."

That first Montana summer of ours was determined to show us what heat was, and by an hour after breakfast each day Rob and I were wearing our salt rings of sweat, crusted into our shirts in three-quarter circles where our laboring arms met our laboring shoulders. Just as soon as Rob's house was done we began on our sheep shed, at the lower end of my homestead for handiness to the creek. The shed work we interrupted to join with Ninian and Donald in putting up hay for the winter. Any moment free from haying, we devoted to building fencelines. And someday amid it all we were

shearing

hewing and laying the logs of my house, to abide by the spirit of the homestead law even though I was going to share Rob's house this first winter; we were reasonably sure President Harrison wouldn't come riding over the ridge to check on my residency. more

Ours was not the only sweat dripping into the North Fork earth. In a single day the arrival of the contingent from Fife almost doubled our valley's population--the Findlater family of five, the ^{young} widower George Frew and his small daughter, and George's bachelor cousin Allan. Two weeks later, a quiet lone man named Tom Mortensen took up a claim over the ridge south from my place, and a week after that, a tumbleweed family of Missourians, the Speddersons, alit along the creek directly below Rob. As sudden as that, the valley of the North Fork went from almost empty to homesteaded. Rob & Nancy

"Who do you suppose invented this bramble?" Barbed wire, that was meant. Neither of us liked the stuff, nor for that matter the idea of corseting our homesteads in it. But the gospel according to Ninian Duff rang persuasive: If you don't fence, you'll one morning wake up and find yourself looking into the faces of five hundred Double W cows. will

"Never mind that, why didn't they invent ready-made postholes to go with it?"

Rob and I were at my homestead. We had bedded the sheep on the ridge and come on down to wrestle a few more postholes into my eternal west fenceline before full dark. There were occasional

consequences from nature for decreeing lines on the earth as if by giant's yardstick and one of them was that the west boundary of my homestead claim went straight through a patch of rock that was next to impossible to dig in. Small enough price, I will still tell you all these ^{grunted} postholes later, to have the measures of the earth plainly laid for you; but at the time--

"Now, you know the answer to that. There isn't a homestead in this world with enough room on it to pile up all the postholes it needs."

"Dig. Just dig."

Between bouts with shovel and crowbar, we began to hear horses' hooves, more than one set.

"Traffic this time of day?" Rob remarked as we listened.

"Angus, what are you running here, an owl farm?"

We recognized the beanpole figure of Ninian Duff first among the four who rode out of the dusk, long before he called out: "Rob ^{ert} and Angus, good evening there. You're a pair who chases work into the night."

"It's always waiting to be chased," Rob said back. I ran a finger around the inside leather of my hat, wiping the sweat out. Those with Ninian proved to be Donald Erskine and the new man Archie Findlater and a settler from the South Fork, Willy Hahn. Every kind of calamity that could put men on saddle leather at the start of night was crossing my thoughts. Say for Ninian, you did not have to stand on one foot and then the other to learn what was on his mind.

"Angus, we've come to elect you."

I blinked at that for a bit, and saw Rob was doing the same.

"Elected, is it," I managed at last. "Do I get to know to what?"

"The school board, of course. There are enough families here-around that we need a proper school now, and we're going to build one. We want you for the third member of our school board."

"Together with--?"

"Myself," Ninian pronounced unabashedly, "and Willy here."

Willy Hahn nodded and confirmed, "You are chust the man, Anguss."

"The old lad of parts!" Rob exclaimed and gave my shoulder a congratulatory shove. "He'll see to it that your youngsters recite Burns before breakfast, this one."

"The fact of the matter is," Ninian announced further, "what we need done first, Angus, is to advertise for a teacher. Can you do us a letter of that? Do it, say, tomorrow?"

I said I could, yes, and in the gathering dark there at my eternal west fenceline the school was talked into shape. Because of their few years' headstart in settlement, the South Fork families had a margin more children of schoolable age than did Scotch Heaven, and so it was agreed to build the schoolhouse on their branch of the creek.

"You here in Scotch Heafen will haff to try hard to catch up with uss," Willy Hahn joked.

"Some of us already are," came back Ninian Duff, aiming that at the bachelorhood of Rob and me.

"The rest of us are just saving up for when our turn comes," Rob contributed. That drew a long look from Ninian, before he and

the other three rode away into the night.

It was morning of the third week of August, still a month of summer ahead on the calendar, when I came in from the outhouse with my shoes and the bottoms of my pantlegs damp.

Yawning, Rob asked: "What, did you miss your aim?"

I almost wished I had, instead of the fact to be reported: "Frost on the grass."

That forehint of North Fork winter concentrated our minds mightily. In the next weeks we labored even harder on Rob's outbuildings and fences, and when not on those, on the schoolhouse or on my house; and when not any of those, we were with the sheep, keeping a weather eye on the cloudmaking horizon of the mountains.

On the day when Donald Erskine's big wagon was to be borrowed for getting our winter's provisions in Gros Ventre, my magpie flew first from the gate. "Man, you're sneaking out here and training them," Rob accused. But off he went to the sheep and I pointed my grin toward Gros Ventre.

The Medicine Lodge was empty but for Lucas. "Young Lochinvar is come out of the west," he greeted me and produced an instant glass between his stubs and then a bottle.

"What's doing?" I inquired.

"Not all that much. People are ^{pure} scarce this time of year, busy with themselves. We'll soon have snowflakes on our head, do you know, Angus."

It did
seem so.

more
o winter

"We will and I do," I answered and drank.

"You and Robbie are ready for old winter, are you?"

"Ready as we'll ever be, we think."

"Winter can be thoroughly wicked in this country. I've seen it snow so that you couldn't make out Sedge's flagpole across there. And my winters here haven't been the worst ones by far. Stories they tell of the '85 winter would curl your dohickey."

"I'll try not hear them, then."

"You and Rob have worked wonders on those homesteads of yours, I have to say. Of course I could tell from the moment the pair of you walked in here that you were going to be a credit to the community."

"Credit. Do you know, Lucas, there's the word I was going to bring up with you."

"Angus, Angus, rascal you." Shaking his head gravely, Lucas poured a drink for himself and another for me. "What do you and Rob do, sit up midnights creating ways to spend my money? What's the tariff this time?"

"Pennies for porridge. We need groceries enough to get us through the winter, is all."

"All, you say. You forget I've seen you two eat."

"Well, we just thought if you maybe were to sell the Medicine Lodge and your second shirt--"

"All right, all right, tell Kuuvus to put your groceries on my account. By Jesus, you and Rob would have to line up with the coyote pups for supper on the hind tit if I didn't watch over you."

toast

A ay

"We might yet, if half of what you and Ninian keep saying about winter comes true."

"Put me in the same camp with Ninian, do you. There's a first time. How is old Jehovah Duff? Still preaching and breeding?"

"In point of fact, Flora does have a loaf in the oven. As does Jen Erskine. As does Mary Findlater. If our neighbors are any example to the sheep, we're going to have a famous lamb crop come spring."

"Lambs and lasses and lads," Lucas recited as if from Scripture. "By Jesus, we'll build this country into something before it knows it." I raised an eyebrow at his paternal "we" there. Lucas raised it a good deal higher for me by declaring next: "Angus, I believe you need to think of a woman."

"I do, do I." Truth known, on my mind right then was the visit I was going to make to Wingo's niecery as soon as I was finished with other provisioning. "Along any particular lines, do you recommend?"

"I'm talking now about a wife. All right, all right, you can give me that look saying I'm hardly the one to talk. But the situation of Nancy and myself is--well, not usual." That was certainly so. "You're young and hale and not as ugly as you could be," he swept on, "and so what's against finding a wife for yourself, ^{ay?} I tell you, if I were you now--"

"Just half a moment, before you get to being me too strenuously. What brings this on?" It wasn't like Lucas to suddenly speak up for womanhood at large. "Is this what you're

don't he say?

prescribing today for all your customers?"

"Just the redheaded ones." My eyebrow found a new direction to cock itself. Why was I the subject of this sermon instead of Rob? He was the one Lucas had needed to negotiate away from Nancy. "Oh, I know what you're thinking," and as usual, he did. "But that's another case entirely, our Robbie. The first bright mare who decides to twitch her tail at Robbie, she'll have him. He's my own nephew, but that lad is sufficiently in love with himself that it won't much matter who marries. Whoever she is, she'll never replace him in his own affections. You though, Angus. You're not so much a world unto yourself. You I think need the right partner in this old life."

I hoped the Lucas Barclay Matrimonial Bureau was about to close for the day. "I'm already in partnership with a pair of Barclays," I pointed out, "which seems to keep me occupied twenty-five hours a day eight days a week."

"Mend your tongue," Lucas answered lightly but with a glance that seemed to wonder whether I'd heard any word he'd been saying. "Robbie and I'll have you so prosperous you can take your pick of womanhood. But who's that going to be, ay? It wouldn't hurt you a bit to start thinking in that direction."

"And was Lucas in fettle?" asked Rob as we unloaded the wagon of groceries.

"Lucas was Lucas, and then some," I said.

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Was it a long winter Rob and I put in together, that first homestead one? Yes, ungodly so. And no, nothing of the sort. How time can be a commodity that lets both of those be equally true, I have never understood.

November and December only snowed often enough to get our attention, but by Thanksgiving the North Fork had ice as thick as a fist and we were chopping a waterhole for the sheep each morning. Of course that was the time of the year the bucks were put with the ewes to breed April and May lambs, and so there was warm behavior in the pastures, so to speak.

"See now, ^{Ms} Angus, don't you just wish it was spring? To see those lambs come--man, it'll be like picking up money along the road."

"That's what it had better be like, or we're going to be in debt to Lucas down to our shoe soles."

You might not think it, but with winter we saw more of the neighbors than ever. People visited back and forth to escape cabin fever, and no more than a few weeks ever passed without Scotch Heaven having a dance which brought out everyone, for even the Duffs and Erskines were not so skintight they could resist waving a foot to a tune. I thought many a time that to watch Ninian on the dance floor was like hearing a giggle out of God. Not, let me say, that Ninian got all that much of my watching that winter, nor Rob's nor George Frew's nor Allan Frew's nor old Tom Mortensen's either. We of the bachelor brigade were too busy appreciating that Scotch

of our
1 wh horses

more?

other
visitors
in house

Heaven's balance sheet of men and women was less uneven than it had^d been, with the teacher Mavis Milgrim and Archie Findlater's sister Judith now on hand. Miss Milgrim always had a starch to her that she thought a schoolma'am had to have, and Judith Findlater had a startling neck that was not so much swanlike as gooselike, but they helped the situation of the sexes, they helped. Along those lines, the single time I found a decent chance after a dance to get Judith aside and coax a kiss out of her, she delivered one that I could feel all the way to my ears.

+ especially
Judith

Something to put away for spring, although I still was not seeing anything that resembled marriage when I looked in a mirror.

no #

When the last day of the calendar came--no Homanay³ commemorative portrait of Rob and myself this year, except the one that memory draws--we were invited down to see out the eve at Duffs, together with the five Erskines and the six Findlaters, as many people as could breathe in one house that size. As midnight neared, there was acclamation --led by Judith with a bit more enthusiasm than I was comfortable with--that I had to be one to first-foot the new year in for Ninian and Flora. "Can't I wait for a year when the weather is better out there?" I protested, but at a minute before, out I went into the cold blustery dark.

more of
weather -
not no beyond
in dark

no #

"Now there's a year's worth of good luck if I ever saw him," announced Rob after I stepped back in across the Duff threshold

without a word, strode to the stove and poked the fire into brisker flame. Not that any of us at all believed the superstition about a tall unspeaking man who straightway tended the hearth fire being the year's most propitious first foot, but still.

"He will do," granted Ninian while Flora handed us steaming cups of coffee with just a tip of whiskey therein. "Warm yourselves, you may need it riding home."

"What do you make of this weather, Ninian?" I asked. By the sound of it the wind was whooping harder every minute. "A squal^l is this?"

"It may be. Or it may be the start of winter."

For the next eight days, all the wind in the world tore at Scotch Heaven. We had wind that took the hay as we struggled to feed^d the sheep, wind that coated us and the workhorses with snow, wind every breath of the day and wind in our sleep.

And then came cold. Probably Rob and I were lucky not to know until later that from the tenth of January until the twenty-second, Donald Erskine's thermometer never rose above fifteen below zero.

"Angus, you're my favorite man, but there are times when I wish your name was Agnes."

"What times are those, I wonder? January can't be one, surely. A month of snow-white purity--"

"You say snow one more time and you'll be out in it."

Winter engines, us now. The pale smoke of Rob's breath as he chopped ice from the sheeps' waterhole, I could see from the top of

made snow

Two cups
served from
Rob's
cups house
and him,
he had
been
looking
well

the haystack two hundred yards away. As our workhorses Sadie and Brandy pulled the haysled in a great slow circle while we fed the hay off, they produced regular dragonsnort. Our exertions were not the only ones there in the air, the whacking sound of Tom Mortensen at his woodpile over the ridge from my place, the spaced clouts of George Frew next down the creek breaking out the waterhole for his sheep. It was a new way to live, bundled and laborious and slow, oddly calm, and you had to wonder how Eskimos put up with it all the time.

A Saturday of February. The day had been blue and still. Rob's whistling was the liveliest element around. We had not been to Gros Ventre since Christmas and we were preparing to remedy that. Haircuts had been traded, baths had been taken, books^t blacked with stove lid soot. We were putting on our clean shirts when a white flurry flung past the south windows, as if someone had begun plucking geese.

"Don't be that way," Rob told the weather.

"Probably it's only a flurry."

"It had better be."

It was not. The snow drove and drove, sifting out of the silent sky as if to bury the planet. In minutes the west window was caked white.

"That's that, then," Rob admitted at last. "Goodbye, Gros Ventre."

diverted

in

*X
Mustaches*

"We'll go twice next time." That was brighter than I felt, for I was as keen as Rob for a meal cooked by Lila Sedge, for a drink poured by Lucas, for talk in the air of the Medicine Lodge, for what waited at Wingo's.

"Next time is the story of homesteading, I'm beginning to think," Rob gloomed.

"You're coming down with winter fever. Elk stew is the only known antidote." Or at least the only supper we had now that Lila Sedge's cuisine was out of the picture.

"Is this still the one Ninian told us to be careful about sticking our spoons into its gravy, we might bend them?"

"The same famous one." The bull elk shot by Ninian had a set of antlers that would have scaffolded Canterbury Cathedral. "Old Elky, grandfather of beasts."

"And enemy of teeth. Tell me again the price of mutton."

I raised my thumb to him. "One, the cost of a sheep herself." Then extended my first finger. "Two, the cost of the hay she's eaten so far this winter." Next finger. "Three, the loss of her lamb next spring." Next finger. "Four, the loss of her fleece next summer." Final finger. "Five, explaining to Lucas that we've been sitting out here eating an animal he put up good money for."

Rob studied my display. ^{McAngus,} "If you had more fingers on that hand, you'd have more reasons too. All right, all right, the sheep are safe again. Elk stew by popular demand."

To cheer him up while I heated the familiar stew, I asked: "Do you mean to tell me you've never heard the story about Methusaleh and his cook?"

"This weather has me to the point where I'll listen to anything. Tell away."

"Well, Methusaleh's cook got tired of cooking for that housefull. All those begatttings, more and more mouths at every meal--a couple of hundred years of that and you can see how it would start to get tiresome. So she went to Methusaleh and said, 'What about some time off, like?' 'No, no, no,' he tells her, 'we can't possibly spare you, you're too good a cook. In all these years have I ever complained once about your food?' She had to admit he hadn't. 'No, nor will I, ' he says. 'If you ever hear me complain, I'll do the cooking myself, for the rest of my life.'

"Well, the cook went away thinking about that. Methusaleh was only around four hundred years old then, still doing all that begatting, he looked as if he maybe had another five hundred years or so in him. The cook kept thinking, five hundred years off from all that cooking if she could just get Methusaleh to complain. So the next morning for breakfast, the first thing she does is put a handful of salt in Methusaleh's coffee and send it out to the table. Methusaleh takes a big swallow and spews it right back out. The cook starts to take her apron off. 'By Jehovah!' he says, and she can hear him coughing and sputtering, 'the coffee is full of salt!' She's just ready to step out of that kitchen forever when she hears him say: 'Just the way I like it!'"

better
transition

After laughter, Rob went quiet during the meal. I was hoping that after the last bite of elk he might put down his fork and proclaim Just the way I like it, but no, the evening was not going to be that easy. He pushed back his chair and said: "Angus, do you know what I think?"

"When it starts out that way, probably not."

"I think we need more sheep."

"If I understand right what those bucks were doing to those ewes, we're pretty soon going to have more."

"Not just the lambs, man. We ought to be thinking about buying more ewes. Another five hundred, maybe another thousand. It's not that much more trouble to run two thousand sheep than it is a thousand."

"It's twice the hay, though." My meadows were just enough to get us through this winter, if we were lucky. "Where's that going to come from?"

"We can buy it. Jesse Spedderson would a lot rather sell us his hay standing in the field than exert himself to put it up, I'll bet you this kitchen table on that."

"Say he does, then. What do we use to buy these famous further sheep with?" Although I thought I knew.

"We'll get Lucas to back us." Rob, we're already in debt to Lucas down to our shoe soles.

"Angus, look at it this way: if we're going to be in debt, Lucas is our best choice anywhere around. Naturally there's a bit

of risk. But if you're going to homestead, you have to take risk, am I right?"

I peered over at him, to be sure this was the same Rob who had been ready to spurn the North Fork ^{for} for going in with Fain in the blacksmith shop. X

"These sheep we have now can be just the start of us, man," he galloped right on. "That's why it was worth coming from Scotland. Worth even finding Lucas--the way he is. His hands maybe are gone but none of his head went with them. No, Lucas has the fact of it. This Two Medicine country will grow. It's bound to. And we're in on the ground floor.."

I directed his attention to the white outside the window. "Actually we may be down in the cold-cellar."

"Angus, Angus. By damn, I wish it was spring. You'd be in a brighter mood and you'd see in a minute what I'm talking about here."

If my ears were to be trusted, he was talking about the theory of sheep, which is the world's best. In theory a band of sheep is a garden on legs. Every spring a crop of lambs, every summer a crop of wool. Feed us and clothe us too-not everyⁿ potatoes yield so beneficially. But the fleecies are a garden that wanders around looking for its own extinction, and in the Two Medicine country there was much that was willing to oblige their mortal urge. Coyotes, bear^s deathcamas, lupine. Not least, themselves. I caⁿ tell you to this moment that anguish when a week after we had trailed our yearlings home to the North Fork from their former owner in the X ^

X
to get out of
hand:

X
to get out of
hand:

"With an attitude like that, you're not looking ahead beyond the end of your nose, you know."

And you're looking right past all the precipices there are, I thought but managed not to say. Instead: "You're working hard on the wrong source here. It's Lucas's wallet you're going to have to persuade."

"I can see winter isn't the season to reason with you. Let's talk this over in the spring, what do you say."

"I say, knowing you we're sure to talk it over, all right."

That at last drew a smile and a short laugh from him, and he got up and went to the south window. The snow no longer was flailing past, but clouds covered the mountains, more storm was only minutes away.

~~Mc~~
"Angus, who of your old poets called clouds the sacks of heaven?"

Undo the silver sacks of heaven,/ seed the sky with stars./ See every gleam grow to seven,/ something something Mars. "I can't think now, which."

"He ought to be shot," Rob stated.

Then in March, this.

"There. Hear that?" We were feeding the sheep their hay beside the North Fork, on a morning as icy as any of the winter had been.

"Hear what? The sound of me pitching hay and you standing there with your ears hanging out?"

Rob concluded

"There, that rushing sound up in the mountains. That's new."

"Just the wind."

"What wind? There isn't a breath of one."

"Running water, then?"

"That creek is frozen stiffer than I am."

"Creature, maybe?"

"Making a noise that size? We'd better hope not."

The sheep began to raise their heads from the hay, nosing the air.

"They hear it too."

"Why wouldn't they? Their ears are even bigger than yours."

"Listen. It's louder."

"Louder doesn't say it. That's a positive roar."

Off came our flap caps, not just for keener listening but because the air strangely no longer seemed chilly. In minutes the great flowing sound was dispensing itself down from the peaks and crags as a sudden stiff breeze, but a breeze warm all through. A day that had been firmly fifteen degrees below zero began to feel tropical. As we finished the pitchfork work we had to shed our scarves, then our coats. Not until Rob and I talked with Ninian a few days later, the snow already gone from every south slope and elsewhere retreating down into its deep coulee drifts, did we learn the word of that miracle wind, which was chinook. But driving the haysled home from the sheep on that chinook day, our gloves next off, the two of us kept flexing our pale winter hands, one and then

the other as if shedding old skin, in that astonishing blowing air of springtime.

In the after years, Rob always made the jest that the winter with me was what caused him to marry Judith Findlater.

"Your cooking, of course I mean to say, Angus. Every recipe you knew was elk, do you remember. Judith brought one of her mince pies to a dance and I was a gone gosling."

I laughed ritually each time, but what Lucas had forecast about Rob's route into marriage always tinged the moment. For I did see it come, Judith's sorting of us--me too wary, George Frew so gawkishly silent, Allan Frew too irresponsible, Tom Mortensen too old and bachelorly, but Rob bright and winnable, Rob always pleased to find himself reflected back in someone's attention. When Archie Findlater came to ask Rob for a few day's help in building lambing pens--work which anybody who could fit fingers around a hammer could do--and mentioned "Take your meals with us, why not, and save yourself the ride back and forth," he may as well have brought Judith and the marriage license with him. X

The wedding, in almost-warm-enough weather you could step into blindfolded and know it was May in Montana, was in Rob's front yard. All of Scotch Heaven assembled there under the crest of Breed Butte for the valley's first matrimony, and as best man I had the closest look of anyone except the minister and the two of them, at how Rob and Judith glowed for each other. He'd teased her X

beforehand that when the major question came he was going to respond, Can I toss a coin to decide that? but when the moment came he said "I do" as if telling it to the mountains.

*generations
before & aft.*

Afterward we ate and danced and talked and danced and drank and danced. As evening came on, before heading home I got Rob and Judith aside to congratulate them one last time. "For people who are married beyond redemption, you both look happy enough about it," I assessed for their benefit.

"You're the best best man we've ever had," Judith assured me and rose on tiptoes to kiss my cheek while Rob warned, "Not too much of that, now."

As I turned to go, Judith called out after me the ritual "Don't be a stranger, Angus," but I believe meant it, for she well knew the bond, long as our lives, between Rob and me.

"Come by whenever, man," Rob added his urging. "You're welcome at all times, you know that if you know anything."

Riding toward home with the bunch from the wedding, I took full notice that the May dusk was telling us the lengthened days of summer were truly on their way, but otherwise I heard with only half an ear the jokes and chat that were ^being passed around. Until silent George Frew and I swung off together on the trail to our homesteads. Then George, who had a bit too much to drink in him,

x

jerked his head back toward Breed Butte and blurted: "They're at it now."

No doubt Rob and Judith were. I'd have been, in Rob's place, and I have money that says you would have been too. Yet George's whiskied words set off something in me. I rode home thinking over whether i ought to have made the moves--maybe I flattered myself, but I believed it would not have taken any too many--that would have put me in Rob's place. And decided again, no. I was determined to do the thing right when I did it at all, to be certain of the shape of the married life before I entered it with anyone; and while Judith was someone I could imagine waking up beside, sureness beyond that was not there, in her case.

Say you are a stone that blinks once a year, when the sun of spring draws the last of winter from you. In the wink that is 1891, you see nine houses in the valley of the North Fork where there had been but those two of the Duff and Erskine homestads. You note the retreat of timber on Wolf Butte where Rob and myself and Archie Findlater and Jesse Spedderson and old Tom Mortensen and the Frew cousins George and Allan sawed lodgepole pines to build those houses. You notice lines of new fence encasing each of Schotch Heaven's homesteads, straight and taut as mesh. You see the Erskine boy, Davie, riding along the creek as if in a race with the breeze-blown hay. You see Vinia Spedderson's laundry flying from a

X
you see
sheep
his pony

hayrack

to the disgust of the other wives. Your next glimpse, 1892, shows you newborn Ellen, the first of Rob and Judith's girls. You see slow-grazing scatters of gray which are the sheep of one or another of us, maybe mine and Rob's working the grassy foothills west of my homestead, maybe the new band belonging to Rob and Lucas there on the slope of Breed Butte. (Were not stones famously deaf, you would have heard Rob try to the end to persuade me to come in with him and Lucas on that second thousand of sheep, Angus, I'm disappointed in you, man; and from me, to whom deeper debt did not look like the kind of prosperity I want, Rob, if this is the first time or the last I disappoint you, you're lucky indeed.) You see rain booming on the roofs in the rare two-day ^{May} downpour that brought us twice the crop of hay any of us had expected or imagined. You behold Ninian Duff coming home from town with a bucket of calcimine, and you watch as every Scotch Heaven household, mine included, quickly whitens a wall here or there. And now your third blink, 1893, shows the General Land Office certificates coming in their majestic envelopes, one for Rob, one for me, 160 homesteaded acres conveyed free and clear to each of us. You see my life as it was that achieveful year, tasks hurrying at each other's heels: turn out the last bunch of ewes and their fresh lambs onto new pasture and the garden needs to be put in; do that, and fence needs mending; mend that, and it is shearing time; shear the beloved woollies, and it is haying time. You notice an occasional frown as we lords of sheep hear what the prices are beginning to do in the distant ^{wool and lamb} markets. You see me

lambs

even

look up, somewhere amid it all, to a buckboard arriving, drawn by Ninian Duff's team of matched bay horses.

On the seat beside Ninian perched Willy Hahn. School board business, this could only be.

Ninian pulled his bays to a halt and announced down to me: "News, Angus. We've lost our teacher. George Frew is marrying her." With the school year so close on us, Ninian was saying what was in our three minds in the last of his pronouncement: "Maybe she can teach him to speak ^{up} ~~of~~ sooner." X

"So we've a fast advertisement to write, have we?" I responded. "Come down and come in, I'll--"

Ninian interrupted, "In point of fact, Willy and I already have located a replacement teacher. Haven't we now, Willy?" Willy dipped his head yes. "More than that even," Ninian swept on, "we've voted to hire." Willy dipped again.

I was peeved to hear this. By damn, I was more than that. These two old puffed-up whiskerheads. "Well, then. Since the pair of you are running the school board so aptly without me, we haven't anything more to talk about, now have we. Don't let me keep you here, busy persons like yourselves."

Ninian winked solemnly to Willy. "The man doesn't see it."

"What's to see?" I blazed. "You two parade in here and--"

"Anguss," Willy put in mildly. "It iss you we voted to hire."

SOUTH FORK, NOON CREEK

AND BREED BUTTE

World, it has happened at last! With this inaugural issue Gros Ventre and the Two Medicine country gain their journalistic voice. The Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner! The name flows easily from the tongue and the news of our prospering community will flow as fluently. Now that the Great Northern Railway links the land of the Two to the rest of humanity, now that the silver woes of 1893 are being burnished into Montana's new copper prosperity, scarce a day goes by without newcomers arriving to enrich this locale with their endeavors, and the Gleaner is ^{as} more proud ^{as} than can be put into words, to now join their ranks. Let the future come!--that is our chorus here in God's favored country.

Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, April 20, 1897

Ordain me here and now as the Lord High Kafoozalum and I would be no more surprised than I was to be made the South Fork schoolteacher. Not that there was ever any supposition I was the pedagogical genius the world had been seeking since Jesus went upstairs; after all, back there in Nethermuir I had only ever been the pupil teacher assisting Adam Willox, never the actual master of a schoolroom. What designated me now, as Willy and Ninian cheerfully made plain, was that time was short and I was nearest.

"Temporary, just for the year," Ninian assured me as if

schoolteaching could be done with my little finger.

"Can't Flora fill the situation as well as I can?" I astutely retorted to him, citing the only other person in the vicinity who had experience at standing at the front of a classroom. Willy tittered, cast a glance toward Ninian on the wagonseat beside him, then looked down at me severely. Which caused me to remember that Flora Duff was currently a prominent six months in the family way.

"There is of course the matter of the teacher's wage," Ninian at last found around to, and there he met me coming, I do have to admit. That year of 1893 was the sour kind that we hadn't known was in the calendar of America. Prices of wool and lambs both were falling through the floor while I still was trying to climb out of Lucas's wallet. And be it said if it needs to, no homesteader was ever his own best paymaster. Besides, I had come across the bend of the world looking for new, had I? The one thing certain about a year as the South Fork teacher would be its newness every day. Alexander Angus McCaskill of Bell Rock, were you watching this wade of mine into new water?

"All right then," I acquiesced to my electors. "If you haven't come to your senses in the last minute, I'm your schoolkeeper."

"Anguss, you are chust the man," Willy ratified, and I swear Ninian very nearly smiled at me.

That first South Fork morning. The Hahn brothers were the earliest to trudge down the road toward the waitful school and waitful me, dragging with them ^{the} that invisible Gibraltar of burden of

for this year
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having a father on the school board. The children from the other families of that branch of the creek as well, the Petersons and Roziers and Van Bebbers, all lived near enough to walk to school and soon they were ricocheting around outside in those double-quick games that erupt before the class day takes everyone captive. I turned from the window for one last inventory of my schoolroom. Desk rows across the room. Blackboard and a roll-down map of the world fastened above. Framed portraits of Washington and Lincoln staring stoically at each other on the far wall. I hammered days of nails when this schoolhouse was built, I came here many a time with Ninian and Willy to tend to our teacher, I had danced on this schoolroom's floor, mended its roof. Yet I tell you, it was a place foreign to my eyes as I waited for the minute when it would fill with pupils. My pupils.

For the dozenth time I looked at the alarm clock ticking on my solitary desk at the front of the schoolroom. This time it told me I had to ring the bell to begin school, even though a significant half of my pupil population hadn't yet appeared.

Ring I did.

In trooped the South Fork boys and girls.

I hemmed and hawed and had them take temporary seats until the others arrived.

But still no others.

Accident? Boycott? Jest of the gods? Possibilities trotted around in me until I needed to do what I had been resisting, retreat out onto the porch and peer up the North Fork road. With me went

the echo of Lucas's reaction to my new and quite possibly stillborn career: By Jesus, Angus, you're the first swamper the Medicine Lodge ever had that's turned out to be a schoolmarm.

Here they came, the child cavalry of Scotch Heaven. The three Findlaters on a fat white horse named Snowy. Susan Duff regal on one of Ninian's blood bay geldings. Jimmy Spedderson on a beautiful blaze-face black worth more than the rest of the Speddersons' homestead combined. Davy Erskine on his fast-stepping roan with small sister Rachel clinging behind him.

I let out a breath of thanks. But to show them I did not intend for tardiness to become habit, I stood conspicuously waiting while they put their horses on picket ropes. Already there on a length of grazing tether was the Dantley mare Patch that I still rode, and with all our horses picketed around the schoolhouse, the scene suddenly hit me as one of life's instants I had been through before--Rob and I gawking at the Floweree outfit's cow camp the day we arrived green as peas into Gros Ventre. I reminded myself how greatly more veteran in life I was by now, and tried to believe it in the face of what advanced on me here, Susan Duff.

She poised below me as if bearing a message from Caesar. "We cut through our lower field and couldn't get the gate open and the top loop was too tight and barbwire besides," she reported in funeral tones. "My father will need to fix that gate." Unaccountably my spirits rose as I thought of Ninian having to deal with this daughter. "Meg Findlater's nose is running and she doesn't have a hanky, and Davie Erskine forgot to bring his and

Maybe I ought
to have
stuck c...
maybe...

See I'm
daughter 00

Rachel's lunch." This seemed to conclude Susan's docket, and up the porch steps and into the schoolhouse she marched with the other Scotch Heaven children in a straggle behind her.

I kick myself yet for not anticipating the next snag of that morning, although I am not sure what I could have done about it. My gender. In Scotland schoolmasters were thick on the ground. But here, having a man teacher proved to be an unexpected thought to pupils accustomed to Miss Milgrim. The larger boys were plainly restless about me, and I was afraid little Meg Findlater's eyes would pop from her head every time I leaned far down to bring my handkerchief to the rescue of her nose.

My predecessor still governessed that schoolroom in another way, too. After I had everyone sorted and seated and the littlest ones were more or less occupied with the new things called desks and books, I started on my upper grades in what I thought was peerless emulation of Socrates, "Tell me, anyone please, the Presidents from Washington to Lincoln."

I drew back stares.

There I stood wondering what had taken their tongues, until Susan Duff informed me that it was the practice of Miss Milgrim to tell the pupils such matters as the Presidents to Lincoln, while they listened.

"That's as may be, Susan. But I look very little like Miss Milgrim, don't I, and so I need to do things my own way. Now who'll tell the Presidents, Washington to Lincoln?"

A silence deep as a corner of eternity. As the silence yawned

on, my only immediate hope was Susan again. But a look at her told me she had lent me all the instruction she currently intended to.

This tiny box of school, on the universe's ocean. How could we in here ever hope to know enough to get by on, let alone improve the race at all? I despaired and was starting to reach for the chalk and begin listing Presidents, anything to stir this congealed schoolroom, when I heard:

"Hickory Jackson."

I turned, blinking. Davie Erskine was regarding me with a helpfulness that managed to be vague and earnest at the same time. I'd made mental note to share my lunch with him and his little sister Rachel; this opening effort of Davie's resolved me to give them it all. Taking my surprise for encouragement, the boy visibly searched around in his head some more. After a while:

"Quincy Adams."

Yet another Davie spell of thought--Shakespeare could have written a couple of acts during this one--and:

"Some other Adams."

I was desperately debating within myself whether to shut off this random trickle of Presidents, try to suggest some order into it, or what, when Davie's thoughtseeking gaze lit on the wall portraits.

"Abe Lincoln," he announced to us. "George--"

It was too much for Susan Duff. Up shot her hand.

"Washingtonjohnadamsjefferson," she launched,

"Madisonmonroejohnquincyadams--"

—

scurried through the night before. Fortunately not all the subjects were as lion-sized as history. Even in America lessons in handwriting were lessons in handwriting, and reading was reading. And spelling was spelling except when harbour arrive to this side of the ocean as harbor, tyre as tire, theatre as theater, and sundry other joggled vowels. But geography. The grief of American geography. When it came to geography, my pupils and I had to be strange pickles together. In that schoolroom of mine were children born in Bavaria and Scotland and Norway and Alsace-Lorraine, and others who never had been farther in the world than ten miles down the creek to Gros Ventre. Our sole veteran traveler of the continent we were on was Jimmy Spedderson, seven years of age, who had lived in Missouri, Kansas, North Dakota, Manitoba and now Montana--a life like a skipping stone. Whatever the roll-down map of the whole world proclaimed, every one of us there came from a different earth and knew only the haziest about anyone else's. For me, terra incognita was the 99% of Montana where I had never been. I could instruct my pupils perfectly well that Thomas Carlyle--he of I don't pretend to understand the universe; it's a great deal bigger than I am--originated at Ecclefechan, pronounced Eckle-FECK'n, county of Dumfries in southmost Scotland, near to Carlisle and the Solway Firth. But I had to learn along with them the sixteen counties of Montana and the mysterious town names of Ekalaka, Wibaux, Saco, Missoula, Shawmut, Rimini, Ravalli, Ovando...

One geographic inspiration I did have. The piece of the planet that stayed with me as no other, the Atlantic. The Hahn boys and

the three Findlaters and Daniel Rozier and Susan Duff and Davie and Rachel Erskine also all remembered crossing the ocean to America. I strived to have them make the other pupils understand that feat of crossing, and to hold it in their own minds ever and ever. And got more than I bargained for when Jenny Findlater hesitantly raised her hand and asked if when I was on the ocean, was I scared any?

"Jenny, I was," I said to Daniel's smirk and the careful gazes of all the others. "An ocean is dangerous enough to be afraid of. As are the rear hooves of our horses out there, and blizzards, and just a number of things in life. But we try to use our judgment and be afraid only when it's worth it, don't we, and then only as much as we have to be. Is that how it was with you, Jenny, when you were on the ocean?" Jenny's vigorous nod carried me from that trouble.

Thank heaven arithmetic is a neutral country. At least I could put addition and subtraction and multiplication and division into my pupils like nails into a shingle roof, pound pound pound pound. Here was once when old Scotland came back to help me out, for when I had been pupil teacher under Adam Willox in Nethermuir he made arithmetic my particular topic: They can become literate from me, Angus, and learn to be numerate from you.

So maybe it was numbers alone that kept me, that school year, from ever riding into the Duff homestead and saying Ninian, start advertising for someone else, this is beyond me. Instead, day upon day I ransacked my brain for how Adam Willox had done things. Then amended nearly all of that, for Adam never had the situation of the Hahns' dog Blitzen following them to school and howling by the hour;

of keeping track of whose turn it was among the big boys to go to the creek and fill the water bucket; of Einar Peterson's perpetual tendency toward nosebleed and Jenny Findlater's toward hiccups; of having to watch for ticks on everyone including myself.

Of having to deal with Daniel Rozier about the issue of the girls' outhouse.

A country school such as South Fork was not an individual receptacle of knowledge, it was an educational trinity. You saw all three as you came to where the streambed of the North Fork met that of the South Fork and made the main creek--just upstream within a willow-thick bend, the white shcoolhouse and behind it the white twin toilets, girls' to the left, boys' to the right. Each waiting to do its duty, they sat there like an attentive hen and two pullets. My problem, or more accurately the girls' problem, was Daniel Rozier's fascination with the possibilities of that left-hand outhouse.

It all began with garter snakes. Most the girls were not normally afraid of them, but go seat yourself appropriately and glance down to find restless green reptiles beside you, and see what you think.

I heard out the girls' lamentations, and made my threats about what would happen to whomever I caught at snakework. But the Rozier homestead was just down the creek from the school, near enough for Daniel to sneak back before or after the rest of us, and try as I did I never could convict Daniel.

Susan Duff, rather than I, ended the snake episode the recess

time when she stormed out of the girls' toilet grasping a writhing foot-long serpent by the tail, carried it around to the side of the schoolhouse where Daniel Rozier was in a game of ante-I-over, and whapped him across the bridge of the nose with the thing.

Even if she was the avenging figure of justice, Daniel was livid about being hit by a girl.

"Susan-Duff-you're-worse-than-snot!" he screeched.

"The next snake I find in there I'll hit you with twice," she vowed in return.

And so only two of the trinity were standing when I rode into sight of the South Fork the morning after that. The casualty naturally was the girls' outhouse, flat on its back as a dead beetle. The bad fact now was that even Daniel Rozier at his most indignant wasn't strong enough to tip over a two-hole outhouse; he'd had help from the other boys. It took Daniel and Davie Erskine and the Hahn brothers, conscript labor all, and me to lift the structure upright. Two mornings later, the girls' outhouse was horizontal again.

By then I knew Daniel Rozier was the sort you could punish until he was jelly and he'd still behave the same. Instead, I opened school that day with the observation: "A freak of nature seems to have struck the girls' outhouse." Smirk from Daniel to Susan Duff, glower from her to him. "Until it comes along again and puts the toilet back up, chivalry will have to be in force. Who'll tell me the spelling of chivalry? Daniel, crack at it, please."

The smirk went and confusion came. "Unngg, ah, is it S-H-O-V-U-L-R-Y?"

"Closer than you might think," I granted. "Susan, enlighten Daniel as to chivalry, please." Which she did as fast as the letters could prance out her mouth.

"Thank you, Susan. Now the definition, at least in this case. The boys will yield their toilet to the girls."

Little Freddie Findlater, a lad with a nervous kidney, had his hand up in an instant. "Where will the boys go, then?"

I directed attention to the willow thicket along the creek. "Like Zeus on Mount Olympus, Freddie, all of outdoors is your throne." Looks were cast toward Daniel Rozier, but the boys sat firm, so to speak, on their outhouse position.

Montana weather being Montana weather, I didn't have to wait long for the day I needed. Squalls were getting up speed in the mountains as I reached into my cupboard that morning, and by noon hard wind and blasts of sleet shot against the schoolhouse windows.

"My eyes must have been big this morning, I brought more than I can eat," I confessed during lunchtime. "Daniel, pass those around please," handing him the big bag of prunes. In groped his paw for the first haul, then the fruit began its fist-diving circle among the other boys.

When the prunes had time for full effect, and boy after boy trooped back in from the bushes as if dragging icicles behind, I decided here was my moment. "I've been meaning to ask, how many of

you can stay after and put the outhouse back up?" Where it then held.

"A coyote can too run faster than a dog, Fritz Hahn." Jimmy Spedderson's contention wafted in through an open window as I was at my desk cramming that afternoon's American history.

"Can't either. Our dog Blitzen runs after coyotes all the time, see."

"Your dog can't catch coyotes! That's a fat lie. Liar, liar, pants on fire!"

"Didn't say he catches them."

"See, then."

"He'd have to run faster to catch them. What he does is he keeps up with them. So a dog and coyote run the same, see."

"They don't either. After recess we'll ask McAsker."

"All right then. McAsker will know."

McAsker, was I. It could have been worse.

For all the daily tussle of schooling, there were distinct times when I wished the rest of the world was made of children as well. I had wondered what some of the community thought of having me as teacher, and I found out when the first dance of the year was held in the schoolhouse. Just after I had done a schottische with Rob's wife Judith, Allan Frew called out to me in a high girly voice: "Angus, aren't you afraid your petticoat will show when you kick up your heels like that?"

now (7)

cut Judith?

I stepped over within arm's reach of Allan, which made him blink and think.

"Ask me that outside," I urged him, "and I'll answer you by hand."

That ended that.

Then there was the matter that fists have never been able to settle. It had to be Ninian to bring me word of this, and I give him full due, he looked nowhere near happy to be performing it.

"Angus, this business about the universe being too big to understand and so on. I'm hearing from a few folks that they would like a bit more orthodox view of things told to their children."

Of anything to be scanned and poked and sniffed in the making of education, this. So far as I could see I was doing the job of teaching as well as I knew how. Probably better. To have it all snag on a sentence from Carlyle, himself a God-wrestler right in there with the most ardent--it put my blood up.

"Ninian, I can't get into that. You can say all day long you just want a bit of orthodoxy, but there's my-doxy, your-doxy, this-doxy, that-doxy. They're all somebody's orthodoxy. I don't notice Willy being here with you. Has he been saying I don't trot Martin Luther into the classroom often enough? Then there are the Roziers. I can invite the Pope to visit from Rome to please them, too, of course?"

"Angus, I am troubled myself with this. The matter was simpler when we were over across in Scotland."

"Oh, was it? Then you don't hold with the fellow who said the

history of Scotland is one long riot of righteous against righteous."

"Now, don't start."

"You can fill your children with funnels of it at home, as far as I'm concerned. But I won't do it for you here at school. If you want a kirk school, then you'd better sack me and find yourself a preacher."

Ninian by now looked more bleak than I'd ever seen him, which is saying a lot.

"Ay, well. That's your last word, then?"

"It's even the one after that."

"Angus, we will leave this where it was. I have to go and tell them I told you." The long beard moved on Ninian's chest as he shook his head at me. "They don't need to know how hard of hearing you can be."

So, without meaning to--there was no Greenock dock at the mouth of the North Fork valley, no green-funneled emigrant ship hawsered in the clear ripples of the South Fork--I had become a divided citizen again. Between the homesteader families and their children. Between sheep enterprise with the pair of Barclays and my own homestead. Between my homestead and school. Sew a flounce of several more hours onto each day and maybe then I'd have had almost enough time for all those. As it was, I knew I was skimping everything else for the sake of the school, for my effort to be all the teacher I could, but I saw no other way.

Say it better, wanted no other way. A year is not forever, I

Angus

Ninian

more

told my other consciences. Zephyrs from the latitudes of learning
begin but in aspiration, I quoted righteously back at old Carlyle's
 universe, and came down the wind each morning to the South Fork.

Flow gently, sweet Afton, among thy green braes,
Flow gently, I'll sing thee a song in thy praise;
My Mary's asleep by thy murmuring stream--
Flow gently, sweet Afton, disturb not her dream.

Some zephyrs took more of my coaxing breath than others. Songtime each week hinged on whatever Burns was in my mind just then and wherever Susan Duff's fine clear lilt led us. Neither premise was much my choice. But a thousand hymns had built Susan a voice, even I had to admit, and I'd found it was like pulling teeth to draw song suggestions from my other pupils, even though the schoolyard often rang with one chant or another. Children are their own nation and they hold their anthems to themselves. Ritually, though, I tried to pry music out of them:

"You're like a shool for the mute today. Now who'll tell, please, what we can sing next?"

"I know one, Mr. McCaskill," piped Davie Erskine, standing and swallowing a number of times. Here was surprise.

"Do you, Davie? Can we hear it now?"

Another salvo of swallows. Then out quavered:

"I came down from Cimarron, a looking for a job
riding for the outfit they call the Jinglebob.

The boss told me "Stranger, let's have ourselves some fun.
Come and throw your saddle on our horse called Zebra Dun.'

Oh, that old zebra dun,
that bucking son of a gun,
a-pitching his walleyed fit,
while upon him I did sit.

The punchers came and gathered, laughing up their sleeves
counting on their zebra bronc to do just what he pleased.
And when I hit the saddle, old Dunny quit this earth
went right up to try the sky, for all that he was worth.

Susan Duff was wrinkling her nose at Davy's minstrelsy. But as soon as I gave her a severe look, she joined in the chorus with Davie and me, and the rest of the children followed her. Onward Davie warbled with his verses:

Old Dunny pawed the moon and passed right by the sun
He chased some clouds a while then came down like a ton.
You could see the tops of mountains under our every jump
But I stayed tight upon his back just like the camel's
hump.

We bucked across the prairie, scattered gophers as we went
kicked the cook and stewpot right through the boss's tent.
But when the fray was over and Zebra done all he did
No doubt was left in this world: that outlaw I had rid.

The boss whooped hurrah! and threw the hat high off his
head

He shook my hand until it ached and here is what he said:
'If you can toss the lasso like you rode old Zebra Dun
You're the man I have looked for since the year of one.'

"Davie Erskine, that was--remarkable." It was more than that. There were days when Davie was so drifty he could scarcely remember how many fingers he had. "And where did you learn that tune?"

"From Mr. Fox and Mr. Mitchell." I had to expend a long moment to translate Mr. Fox and Mr. Mitchell: the riders Perry and Deaf Smith. "They took supper with us, when they were riding for strays. They said it's a song from Texas," Davie reported as if the place was blue heaven. "Texas is where I'm going when I grow up."

"That may be, Davie. But for now you're going to arithmetic. Davie and Susan and Daniel and Einar, your book is page 132. Karen show the others where they're to read, please."

At the close of school that day, I stepped out as always to watch the children start for home, the walkers up the South Fork, the riders up the North Fork. The white horseload of little

pp. 51-66, end of Noon disc, edited,
ready for printing, as of 16 June '86.

On hunch, I went not to the Ramsay place but to the schoolhouse.

With the beginning of school so near, I'd have bet hard money Anna would be readying her schoolroom, and she was. I patted her sorrel ^{rewardfully} ~~saddlehorse~~ ^{mare} as I stepped past and toward the schoolhouse door.

"Is this where a person ~~can~~ [§] come to learn?" I called in.

She turned around from the blackboard so quickly her braid ^{swung} ~~came~~

~~her~~ forward over her shoulder, down onto the top of her breast. "Angus!

They said you were still in the mountains, I wasn't expecting you yet!"

I'll tell you now, that braid was the rope to my heart.

"Yet?" I answered. "It's been forever, whatever the calendar says."

I went to her and held her at arm's length and simply looked, drank her

in. Her gaze was steady on mine, then she put her face against my

shoulder. "You look as if the mountains agreed with you," she said

gently.

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

"You do, do you."

"I do. And I want it to tell me every minute of itself since

I last heard it, back in Napoleon's time."

"That's an extravagant expectation," she gave me her half-smile.

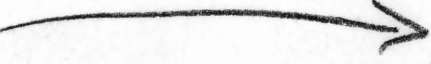
"A mighty word, extravagant. ~~And~~ What's the spelling for it? Write it for me, Miss Noon Creek Schoolkeeper."

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

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

"Now then. Write your utmost, Anna Ramsay."

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

Suddenly what we were saying to each other was with lips, but words were nowhere involved.  Our kissing

took a wild blind leap. The next thing I knew my lips had followed Anna's neck down, the top of her dress was open and the feminine

undergear was somehow breached--her breasts were there, ^{bare} ~~bra~~as babes, ~~my lips and tongue tasting~~ the beautiful whiteness and twin budding nipples ^{and} and I was kissing them. Anna's hand was under my shirt, her fingers ^{white} ~~up~~

spread and moving back and forth on my spine.

find that kissing well.

I looked up at her and her other hand came to my face, to the corner of my mouth. She looked intent, ready to say something.

My urge was to keep on with the kissing and the divesting of clothing, and hers evidently was too. But instead, "Angus, we can't. Not--not here."

"All right. Just let me hold you." Her hands hesitated where they had begun to close the front of her dress; and then they were clutching my back again, the two of us snug together, just being

there clasped. We rocked gently against each other on the schoolroom

floor was swaying on a gentle tide, we didn't care which. Out of my spell of sheer happiness I heard myself say: "Talk, ~~you mentioned~~ ^{we were mentioning.} It

seems to me a poor second-best to this, but yes, let's talk some more.

I'll even begin. Anna, marry me ^{now}."

I felt her tighten even more against me, the twin globes of her breasts wonderful in their pressure. She said into my shoulder:

We
rocked
gently
against
each
other



"I have to tell you,"

"Angus, you're not the first to ask."

"I suppose not. If the male half of the world has any sense at all, it's been trooping to you in regimental file with that question, since you were the age of twelve."

But Anna, love, first isn't what I had in mind--I just ^{want} ~~hope~~ to be the last."

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

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

"Angus," she said.

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

—

I rode away doomed.

Not around Breed Butte toward home, because I could not face the everlasting new canyon of emptiness waiting for me there. Down the Noon Creek road toward Gros Ventre I reined Scorpion. In ordinary times it was a pleasant straight-as-a-rope route along the benchland, roofs of the

Noon Creek cattle ranches below, but this day I wouldn't have given them a glance if they were the castles of the moon. The tatters that were left of me had all they could do to cling there onto Scorpion's back, hang in the saddle and be a sack for the disbelief. Angus, Anna saying, there in the schoolhouse and again and again in my mind, I am fond of you, I enjoy you. You know I find you attractive---the memory

of her open dress came into the schoolroom air between us. But I'm ^{actual} afraid it's Isaac I feel love for. Just that way. As if we two men were jars of jam on the table and she was saying, this is strawberry, this is plum, I'll have plum, ^{from now on}

She was marrying him for the sake of those parents of hers, to tie the leaky boat of Ramsay finances to the ark of Isaac. She was marrying him because she felt sorry for him, gabbler him. She was marrying him because she had temporarily lost her mind; ^{amnesia}; a blow on the head; the instant she came out of this sad mad drift of her senses...

She was marrying Isaac because she chose to.

Because she wanted to. Because some form of the love infection that had happened to me now had happened to her. I knew that, to

the bone. Knew it indelibly and with no possible mistake because Anna Ramsay in her honesty had made plain the difficulty of her decision.

can imagine
'self
of my life e.

anyone
was back
@ school
cloud
may

had his
of strong
senses

no 4

Angus, you are a rare man. Maybe the rarest I've ever met.

Her half-smile seemed wistful, or did I imagine. The frank faction
of her ^{though,} went right on to say: But I think you ~~you~~ don't know yet what
you want of life. But I did, did, did. Everything I wanted was
standing here telling me she was marrying someone else.

And you do, I ^{reaged} ~~said~~, and it's name is Isaac?

How can I ever explain? Angus, you are one who wants to see

how many ways life can rhyme. I just want it to add up as sensibly as
I can make it do.

And while I didn't ^{at all} ~~really~~ intend it to, ^{how much I want my life} this summer told me ~~this Isaac~~
to be with Isaac. Angus, I'm so sorry. I am sorrier for you than can
ever be said.

Scorpion was snorty and nervous, our shadow a restless one on
the road in front of us from his head-tossing and twitching. If truth
could show itself as sunlight ^{throws down} ~~shows~~ our outlines, there would have been
a third form there in our composite shadow--the dread that rode me.

There is nothing else to call it, a dread as harsh and bottomless as
^{smothering} the one I had felt ~~aboard the steamship~~ ^{in ~~the~~ the steerage bunk ~~those~~} ^{the} first Atlantic
nights out from Scotland. For what was tearing at me was not simply

prints
strokes

I reaged

I just-

sed

that Anna had turned me down. No. No, the greatly worse part was that even now I could not stop myself from siding with her, defending,

~~defended~~ her against myself even as I derided her reasons in favor of

mumblejumble

Isaac. I still loved that woman. And if this day had not changed

that fact, what ever could?

—

"Angus, you look as if the dog ate your supper."

I gave Lucas an answering eyeshot that sent his stubs reaching for a large glass for me.

~~I gave him a look.~~ Lucas Barclay, author of my homesteading

venture, commandant of the Medicine Lodge and the tall house behind

all this without even having

and Nancy in that house. ~~He didn't even have hands,~~ Isaac Bedamned

Reese barely had approximate English. ^{yet} Here was I, supposedly complete

~~but~~ ~~and yet~~ womanless, ^{exact} less the one woman I wanted.

Misunderstanding the situation as

I explained to Lucas in the one word: "Anna." ~~Thinking it was~~

something that could be mollified, he said: "A spat, ay? Don't be so

down, you're not the first--"

"She told me to go chase myself," I told him. I told him about ~~about~~

one all

the Anna-Isaac wedding-to-be, told
him my bafflement, told him a couple of ^{rapid} drinks' worth.

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

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

^{I hear him}
Harm, did ~~he~~ say.

no 91 From that day when Rob and I walked into this Medicine Lodge

and Lucas laid his lack of hands before us to see, I had wondered what so ^{harmed} ~~ruined~~ a life was like, how Lucas ^{must feel} ~~felt~~, true and deep, about ^{enduring the rest of existence} ~~having to go through life~~ as less than he had been. Now Lucas was

the one who did not, could not, know anything near the full sum of ^{damage} ~~what~~ I felt ^a ~~about deprivation~~. Come put on my bones, Lucas. Come

and wear Angus McCaskill like borrowed clothes, let our hearts pump in,

~~take them snug against yours, let our hearts pump in tune, our eyes~~

^{nasal}
sight together at this thing life. Come stand here under my skin

~~here under my skin~~ and find what this is like, I will learn your loss

and you mine. ~~Conspiration~~

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

anything as can be now halted
Slow, is it. My whole life is slow, indeed it's ~~stopped~~,

bogged...

This was my Bell Rock. My time of stone, with obliteration all around.

The ocean was coming to cover me, ready to put salt pennies on my eyes,

and it may as well, why live if this was what life amounted to. Land

stood a dozen miles distant from Bell Rock; yes, that was ^{the ever} same unswimmable

distance, from here in the Medicine Lodge to that Noon Creek schoolroom

where Anna had told me no, Isaac yes.

"Angus, man, you're full. No more of the wet stuff for you tonight.

Sedge and Toussaint, each grab an end of him, can you, and take him

around to the house. Angus, here now, just let the

lads lift you, there's the way. You'll be different in the morning."

Let the tide come. The Atlantic, the Annalantic. Take my ankles,

shins, knees, rise, damn you, bless you, sweep me off this reef, blanket

me with water, arms and throat and eyes and higher yet, the whole

hopeless thing I am.

*with
Rob?
Toussaint*

*Sedge
unit*

*have
me*

#

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

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

"You may kiss the bride," the minister gave ^{out that} ~~his~~ last intonation ^{to us}. I ^{ing} ~~leaned~~ my head down to Adair's I saw she had her eyes closed, as if casting a wish. It all revisited me--

the pieces of time that had never really passed, simply drifted from corner to corner within me, dreamlike yet never with a dream's innocence--

Rob's voice,

beginning by saying Her Highness gave you a wave of her handkerchief, I hear, when I rode home the morning after my night of forlorn souse and found him there, →

at my homestead, crossing the yard to feed my indignant chickens.

Those Ramsays think their God's first cousins, though where they get

it from I can't see. Angus, she's not the only woman in this world.

No. There was another. In three days, when I hoped I was some semblance

of a human again, I rode to Breed Butte, asked Adair to ~~come~~ ^{walk} with me

to the brow of the butte, and there my words came out with cloppety

boots on but they came out. Dair, you know what's happened with me.

She: I know about Anna, Angus, and I'm sorry for you. She did not entirely

know, though, nowhere nearly all. Could not know how thoroughly Not that the lovespell for Anna

still gripped me, that neither disappointment nor anger nor reason

nor ~~anything~~ laughing at myself nor crying with myself nor anything

among else ~~of~~ the storms going through me seemed to loosen at all. Nor did

I dare even try to bring out my hopelessness for Adair to see, ^{because} ~~for~~ the

bargain we needed to make could not withstand full truth. I spoke

fact instead: That's the past now, Dair. And I'm asking you not to

you to stay and ^{Further} go back to Scotland. I'm asking whether you will marry me. Fact silent

but plain behind each line aloud: I could ^{stand to} no longer face life by my

solitary self, could not reverse myself into the awaiting watcher I was

And she
was by
for Scotland
in a way

improve

stand to

before Anna changed me; Adair who had come across an ocean believing

I was awaiting her did not want to return empty-handed to a stone

decades

~~in a stone~~ Scottish town: we two together at least were a different

awkward results
sum than either of those. She made her choice, more pity to her, Adair

softly
said ~~her~~ without touching Anna's name.

Then said the rest in that lofty little way as if outside herself,

speculating. And Adair has made hers. Angus,

I'll marry you any number of times over. I: We can start with once.

again
And Rob ~~once more~~, exultant:

mod "Angus, man, this is the best news in the world!" Rob exulted.

"Have the wedding here on Breed Butte, what do you say? We'll throw

shindig
you two a whingding that'll not be forgot."

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

every bit of
Adair looked as if I had taken ~~all the~~ breath from her, ~~In front~~
she looked as if she'd heard a wild rumor prove true. In front

of us the minister hemmed and hankered as he wished us well. Faces of
my pupils had been astounded into giggles.

"I thought all the kissing had to be done at once," I alibied to

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

I heard giggles, shushes, whispered bulletins, as if ^{ghostly}echoing up the butte from my schoolroom. Then ^{unmistakably}Susan Duff announcing, "We have a song for Mr. and Mrs. McCaskill." I turned and Adair with me, to the every-sized choir that had crept behind us; my pupils in slicked-down hair and stiff Sunday clothes, descending in grinning disorder around the central figure of Susan Duff, Susan, long and tall, Susan princess of my classroom, Susan of that silvered voice that now ^{soared out}~~began~~ and ^{wavering}coaxed the others:

"Dancing at the rascal fair,

Adair Barclay, she was there,

gathering a lad with red hair,

dancing at the rascal fair."

Angus McCaskill, he was there,

paired with a lass named Adair,

dancing at the rascal fair.

out?
~~"Dancing at the rascal fair,~~

^{lover's}
Feel the music everywhere,

Fill your heart, fill the air,

Dancing at the rascal fair."

"Some people," I declaimed after the applause died and Adair and I thanked Susan Duff to the limit, "will try anything to get on the good side of their teacher." Laughter met that,

Adair met my pupils one and all, and after them it would be their parents and everyone. The song had helped, I told myself.

no 4
~~The song had helped.~~ Maybe I did know what I was doing, maybe

tell myself whatever I would,
Adair did too, maybe we were going to be a good fit. But the other

refused to
~~would not~~ leave my mind. I tried and tried not to think any of it,

up there
which only incited the factions ~~within me~~ all the more. Anna, come

today. No, don't come, not this day that is by every right Dair's

day.

proceeding
 Married life ^{was} ~~proceeded~~ ^{ing} from there. Congratulations from the men
~~Lucas~~ ^{ing} ~~undid~~ those hopes for ^{ing}
 filled ^{ing} my ears, Adair received ^{ing} bushels of advice from the women about

how to perfect me. } *at one point brief*
 Lucas ^{ing} provided me ^{ing} rescue

captured
~~to me~~ with a generously full glass ~~extended~~ between his stubs. "Have
 a drop of angel milk," he directed. "You look as though

you need it, ay?"

no #

It was a lovely whiskey, like drinking the color off a ripe wheat

field. "This is the ^{house} brand in the Medicine Lodge now, is it?" I *advocated*.

no #

"Don't ^{wild} get ^{it} ideas. ~~This~~ happens to be a bottle that's a precious
 commodity ^{advent}

~~resource~~. Only the ~~event~~ of good sense in you, marrying a Barclay,

makes me crack it open. ^{our banter either} Lucas's face did not live up to ~~his words~~;

he was eyeing me in a diagnosing way. And so he knew, knew for certain

now that my tongue had just vowed for one woman but my thoughts still

chose another.

I waited for words from this man who always could see through me
 and out the other side. For once, there were none. Lucas nodded--was

it simply acknowledgment? ^{or} lodge greeting of the maimed?--and ^{left} ~~went~~.

Adair and me to our congratulators.

4

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

Anna, come. No, stay away. Anna, I just want to see you, before Adair and I make our life, to ^{lose} ~~put~~ you from my mind. No, I ~~just~~ want to see you that is what I always want, and so, Anna, don't — because you are Anna.

^{startling me.} I felt Adair startle, A round walnut-colored face, crinkles of

amusement permanently at the corners of its eyes, regarded the two of us as if we held the secrets it had forever wanted to know.

^{spoke} "I came to see the cream separator," Toussaint, ~~said~~. "She looks like the good kind."

^{exclaiming in relief} All simultaneously I was ~~chortling~~ and shaking hands hello with

^{feathered Zulu} Toussaint and introducing him to Adair, who was looking as if she'd ^{paid us his chuckling respects and} encountered a ~~man~~. When Toussaint had gone she asked, "Who on earth was that?"

hunger?

Zulu

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

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

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

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

"At least," she said close to breathless ^{again}. "Do people flock out this way for every wedding?"

"Only the ones I'm in," I vouched.

"Angus." ^{Adair} ~~She~~ put her hand on my arm.

I'll try with whatever's in me
"Angus, ~~I want~~ to be a good wife. I don't want you

disappointed in me."

The unexpected note of doubt in her voice
"Dair, what's this about?" What she said had hit deep in me, colliding with my own fears. But I made the words light enough to float away. "It's been most of an hour already since the ~~vow~~ ^S and I'm not

a war
against

ready to trade you in yet."

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

"Then that ought to be more than enough."

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

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

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

"We ~~will~~ ^{offer} have the rest of our lives to find that out, Dair," I at last said. ~~"We're not going to find that out"~~ "Let's not worry about ourselves until we have to."

from the tables of wedding supper.

People were calling to us, Here now, the lovey-dovey stuff just
will have to wait a bit....Angus, you've got the ring on her finger now,
you can afford to share her with us....Rob's voice emerging: "We're
moving on to important matters such as food and drink, you two, so
bring yourselves ^{on} down here.

*more -
in mind
sound*

7

7

*See
now*

Anna had co

"Hadn't we better?" Adair said and tried to give me a smile.

I manufactured one in return and confirmed, "By popular demand." And

in me that damned ^{double} chorus I could not be rid of. Anna, come. No, don't.

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

There wasn't a chance in this world to know what Isaac Reese was thinking above that drooping mustache, behind those horse trader's

eyes.

As well go read a fencepost as try to decipher that Dane. But Anna registered on me exactly, instantly as a mirror reflection. I saw in Anna a great carefulness, a holding back

as she met my gaze with hers, and understood at once that this was

the total of our meeting today, these ^{exacting} looks across the wedding crowd:

a man beside his yet-to-be-known bride, casting every glance he can

^{toward} ~~the~~ the woman he knows every inch of.

Propriety was delivered now by Anna and Isaac being here, now there

could be no behind-back talk as to why schoolkeeper Anna was absent

the day of schoolkeeper Angus's wedding, weren't they seeing one another,

for a time? You don't suppose...

No one
used
the

And now I had my ^{private} answer ^{as to} ~~about~~

"I have a song for the newlaid," Rob called out. "Written whether the sight of Anna here, unattainable, the past in a glorious glossy braid, would begin to heal my pang for her or make it worse."

Barclay." Seeing her did absolutely ~~nothing~~ neither. Not a candleworth of

difference one way or the other in the feeling for Anna that burned in

me. ^{That heartfire} It had persisted past her choice of Isaac for a husband, it was

persisting past my vow to this presence at my side, my wife. →

But it couldn't persevere on and on in the face of all the rest of

^{to come} life, could it? Could it, Angus? I drew breath. I had to hope not.

I had to make it not.

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

Rob had climbed onto a chair. He stood amidst all of us of the wedding crowd, half again as tall as anyone.

~~anyone~~

(no)

was raised

Rob stood with a glass of Lucas's magic whiskey in his hand.

"A toast!" he ^{called out} ~~announced~~. "In fact, ^{many} more than one toast, but this one first."

before this day is nearly done

Rob turned toward Adair and me, his eyes met mine and ~~we both held~~ ^{our looks locked} as they had so many times.

~~the look.~~ "Angus, man, you and I have been all but family." ^{everyone} ~~Of them~~ ^{there on Breed Butte} all--Adair, his own Judith, Lucas, Nancy, the Duffs and the Erskines

the many of Scotch Heaven and Noon Creek and Gros Ventre--of this day's entirety of people, Rob was speaking straight to me. "Angus, man, you and I have been all but

family." He held his glass as high in the air now as he could reach, as if toasting the sky, the earth, all. "And now we're that."