

ms sample the contract
was negotiated on

ENGLISH CREEK

by Ivan Doig

This time of year, the report from the dust counties of northeastern Montana customarily has it that Lady Godiva could ride through the streets there without even the horse seeing her. But even over east this spring's rains are said to have thinned the air sufficiently to give the steed a glimpse.

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, June 1

That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country. In my life until then I had never seen the sidehills come so green, the coulees stay so spongy with run-off. A wet May evidently could sweeten the universe. Already my father on his first high patrols was encountering cow elk drifting up and across the Continental Divide to their calving grounds on the west side. They, and the grass and the hay meadows and the benchland barley, all were a good three weeks ahead of season. Which of course accounted for the fresh mood everywhere across the Two. It's said spring rain in range country is as if someone is handing around halves of ten-dollar bills with the remainder promised at shipping time. And so in the sheepmen, the cowmen, the Forest Service people, the storekeepers in Gros Ventre, in just everyone that start of June, hope was up and

would stay strong as long as the grass did.

Talk even could be heard that maybe Montana at last had seen the bottom of the Depression. After all, the practitioners of this notion went around pointing out, last year was a bit more prosperous, or anyway a bit less desperate, than the year before. A nice close point of measurement which managed to overlook that for the several years before last, the situation of people on the land out here had been purely godawful. I suppose I ought not to dwell on dollar matters when actually our family was scraping along better than a good many. Even though during the worst years the Forest Service did lay off some rangers--Hoovered them, the saying went--my father was never among them. True, his salary was jacked down from ~~\$120~~ ^{\$100} a month and Christ only knew when it might ever go back up again, but we were getting by. Nothing extra, but getting by. But it has always graveled me that stock market players who happened to lose their paper fortunes are the remembered figures of those times. The eastern professors who write as if the Depression set in the day Wall Street tripped over itself in 1929 seem not to know it, but by then Montana had been on rocky sledding for ten entire years. The winter of 1919--some of the men my father's age and older still just called it that sonofabitch of a winter-- was the one that delivered hard times to the stockmen. Wholesale. As Dode Spencer, who had the ranch farthest up the south fork of English Creek, used to tell: I went into that '19 winter with four thousand head of ewes and by spring they'd evaporated to five hundred. Trouble never travels

lonesome, so about that same time livestock and crop prices nosedived because of the end of the war in Europe, and right along with that, drought and grasshoppers showed up to take over the dry-land farming. It began to be a hell of a situation. Then when drought came back again at the start of the Thirties and joined company with Herbert Hoover, bad progressed to worse. Year upon year in my own memory, to take just one example from a possible many, the exodus stories had been coming out of the High Line country to the north and east of us, and down here on the very highway which runs through Gros Ventre we saw for ourselves the truth of those tales, the furniture-loaded jitney trucks with farewells to Montana painted across their boxboards in big crooked letters: GOODBY OLD DRY and AS FOR HAVRE YOU CAN HAVE 'ER.

So it was time hope showed up.

Jick! Set your mouth for it!

Supper, and my mother. I remember that all this began there right at the very outset of June because I was out getting my saddle ready, lengthening the stirrups to account for how much I had grown in the past year, for the ride up with my father on the counting trip the next morning. I can even safely say what the weather was, one of those brockle late afternoons under the Rockies when tag-ends of storm cling in the mountains and sun is reaching through wherever it can between the cloud piles. Details like that, saddle stirrups a notch longer than last year or sunshine dabbled

around on the foothills some certain way, seem to be the allowance of memory while the bigger points of life hang back. At least I have found it so, particularly now that I am at the time where I try to think what my life might have been like had I not been born in the Two Medicine country and into the McCaskill family. Oh, I know what's said. How home ground and kin together lay their touch along us as unalterably as the banks of a stream direct its water. But that doesn't mean you can't wonder. Whether substantially the same person would meet you in the mirror if your birth certificate didn't read as it does. Or whether some other place of growing up might have turned you wiser or dumber, more contented or less. Here in my own instance, some mornings I will catch myself with a full cup of coffee yet in my hand, gone cold while I have sat here stewing about whether my years would be pretty much as they are by now had I happened into existence in, say, China or California instead of northern Montana.

Any of this of course goes against what my mother forever tried to tell the other three of us. That the past is a taker, not a giver. It was a warning she felt she had to put out, in that particular tone of voice with punctuation all through it, fairly often in our family. When we could start hearing her commas and capital letters we knew the topic had become Facing Facts, Not Going Around with our Heads Stuck in Yesterday. Provocation for it, I will say, came from my father as reliably as a dusk wind out of a canyon. Half a day at a time he might spend listening to old Toussaint tell of the roundup

of 1882, when the cowmen fanned their crews north from the elbow of the Teton River to the Canadian line and brought in a hundred thousand head. Or the tale even bigger and earlier than that, the last great buffalo hunt, Toussaint having ridden up into the Sweetgrass Hills to see down onto a prairie that looked burnt, so dark with buffalo, the herd pinned into place by the plains tribes. Strange, but I can still recite the tribes and where they pitched their camps to surround those miles of buffalo, just as Toussaint passed the lore of it to my father: Crows on the southeast, Gros Ventres and Assiniboines on the northeast, Piegans on the west, Crees along the north, and Flatheads here to the south. Something to see, that must've been, my father would say in his recounting to the rest of us at supper. Varick, somebody already saw it, my mother would come right back at him. What you'd better Put Your Mind To is the Regional Forester's Visit Tomorrow. Or if she didn't have to work on my father for the moment, there was Alec when he began wearing a neck hanky and considering himself a cowboy. That my own particular knack for remembering, which could tuck away entire grocery lists or whatever someone had told me in innocence a couple of weeks before, made me seem likely to round out a houseful of men tilted to the past must have been the final stem on her load. Jick, I can hear her yet, there isn't any law that says a McCaskill can't be as forward-looking as anybody else. Just because your father and your brother--

Yet I don't know. What we say isn't always what we can do. In the time after, it was her more than anyone who would return

and return her thoughts here to where all four of our lives made their bend. The summer when--she would start in, and as if the three-note signal of a chickadee had been sung, it told me she was turning to some happening of that last English Creek summer. She and I were alike at least in that, the understanding that such a season of life provides more than enough to wonder back at, even for a McCaskill.

JICK! Are you coming, or do the chickens get your share? I know with all certainty too that that call to supper was double, because I was there at the age where I had to be called twice for anything. Anyway, that second summons of hers brought me out of the barn just as the pair of them, Alec and Leona, topped into view at the eastern rise of the county road. That is, I knew my brother as far as I could see him by that head-up way he rode. Leona would need to be somewhat nearer before I could verify her by her blouseful, but those days if you saw Alec you were pretty sure to be seeing Leona too.

Although there were few things surer to hold my eyes than a rider cresting that rise of road, with all the eastern horizon under him as if he was traveling out of the sky and then the outline of him and his horse in gait down and down the steady slow slant toward the forks of English Creek, almost a mile of their combined parading figure approaching, I did my watching of Alec and Leona as I crossed the yard to the ranger station. I knew better than to have my mother call me time number three.

I went on in to wash up and I suppose was a little more

deliberately offhand than I had to be by waiting until I'd dippered water into the basin and added hot from the kettle before announcing, Company.

The word always will draw an audience. My father looked up from where he was going over paperwork about the grazers' allotments, and my mother's eyebrows drew into that alignment that let you know you had all of her attention and had better be worth it.

Alec and Leona, I reported through a face rinse. Riding like the prettiest one of them gets to kiss the other one.

You seem to know a remarkable lot about it, my mother said. Actually, that sort of thing was starting to occur to me. I was fourteen. Fourteen, hard on to fifteen, as I once heard one of the beerhounds around the Medicine Lodge saloon in Gros Ventre describe that complicated age. But there wasn't any of this I was about to confide to my mother, who now instructed: When you're done there you'd better bring in that spare chair from your bedroom. She cast the pots and pans atop the stove a calculating look, then as if having reminded herself turned toward me and added: Please. When I left the room she already had rattled a fresh stick of wood into the kitchen range and was starting in on whatever it is cooks like her do to connive food for three into a supper for five.

Remind me in the morning, I could overhear my father say, to do the rest of this Uncle Sam paper.

I'll serve it to you with breakfast, promised my mother.

Fried, he said. Done to a cinder would suit me, particularly

Van Bebbber's allotment. It'd save me arguing the Section Twenty grass with him one more time.

You wouldn't know how to begin a summer without that argument with Ed, she answered. Are you washed?

By the time I came back into the kitchen with the spare chair which had been serving as my nightstand, Alec and Leona were arriving through the doorway, him inquiring Is this the McCaskill short-order house? and her beaming up at him as if he'd just recited all of Shakespeare. I will always admit, they were a pair to look on. By now Alec was even taller than my father, and had the same rich red head of hair; atop each of them, a blood-sorrel flame which several hundred years of kilts and skirts being flung off had fanned into creation. Resemblance isn't necessarily duplication, though, and I see in my mind's eye that there was the message of that as promptly as my father and my brother were in the same room that evening. Where my father never seemed to take up as much space as his size might warrant, Alec somehow took up his share and more. I noticed this now, how Alec had begun to stand in that shambly wishbone way a cowboy adopts, legs and knees spraddled farther apart than they need to be, as if hinting to the world that he's sure longing for a horse to trot in there between them. Alec was riding for the big WW ranch, his second summer as a hand there. It had caused some ruction, his going back to cowboying instead of taking a better-paying job this summer, such as driving truck for Adam Kerz as my mother particularly suggested. But the past year or so he had had to shut

off his ears to a lot of opinions my parents had about his cowboy phase. Last Fourth of July when Alec showed up in rodeo clothes which included a red bandanna around his neck, my father asked him: What, is your Adam's apple cold?

Not that you could ever dent Alec for long. I have told that he had a head-up way of riding, as if always trying to see over a ridgeline in front of him. A young king might ride that way going home from his coronation. How I should have said it is that on horseback Alec looked as if he was riding the world itself, and even afoot as he was here in the kitchen he seemed as if he was being carried to where he wanted to go. Which, just then, I guess you could say he was. Everything had been coming up aces for him that year. Beating Earl Zane's time with Leona. Riding for the Double W this green high-grass summer. And in the fall he would be headed for Bozeman, the first McCaskill to manage to go to college. Already my parents had pieced together enough of the financing of it, a loan from my mother's brother Pete Reese, and my father arranging a part-time job for Alec with a range management professor at the college who knew us from having spent some time up here studying the Two. College cost was going to take some exerting by us all, but then, what didn't? Besides, Alec hadn't hit anything in life yet that had stopped him. We none of us held a doubt that four years from now he would step out of Bozeman as an engineer, if he listened to my father, or as an architect, if my mother's ambition for him prevailed. Alec was a doer, as people said of him. My own earliest memory of this brother of mine was the time--

I must have been four and him eight--when he took me into the pasture where the ranger station's saddle horses were grazing and said Here's how you mooch them, Jick. He eased over to the nearest horse, waited until it put its head down to eat grass, then straddled its neck. When the horse raised its head Alec was lifted, and slid down the neck into place on its back and simultaneously gripped the mane to hang on and steer by. Now you mooch that mare he called to me, and I went beside the big chomping animal and flung my right leg over as he had, and was elevated into a bareback rider just as he was.

'Lo, Jicker, Alec said across the kitchen to me now after his greeting to my mother and father. How's the world treating you?

Just right, I said back automatically. 'Lo, Leona.

Leona too was a horseperson, I guess you'd call it these days. When Tollie Zane held his auction of fresh-broke saddle horses in Gros Ventre every year he always enlisted Leona to ride them into the auction ring because there is nothing that enhances a saddle pony more than a good-looking girl up there on his back. Right now, though, entering my mother's kitchen Leona's role was to be milk and honey. Which she also was first-rate at. A kind of pause stepped in with Leona whenever she arrived somewhere, a long breath or two or maybe even three during which everyone seemed to weigh whether her hair could really be so gold, whether her figure actually lived up to all it advertised on first glance. I noticed once that her chin was pointier than I like, but by the time any male looked Leona over enough to reach that site, he was prepared to discount that and a lot more.

We still were getting used to the idea of Leona, the three of us in the family besides Alec. His girls before her were from the ranch families in here under the mountains or from the farm folks east of Gros Ventre. Nor was Leona in circulation at all for the past few years, going with Tollie Zane's son Earl as she had been. But this past spring, Alec's last in high school and Leona's next-to-last, he somehow cut Earl Zane out of the picture. Swap one cowboy for another, she might as well have stayed put, my mother said at the time, a bit perturbed with Alec about his intention for the Double W job again and also, I can see back now, about the instant enthusiasm both Alec and Leona were bringing to their romance. Well, it will happen: two people who have been around each other for years and all of a sudden finding that nobody else in history has ever been in love before, they're inventing it all themselves. At least it was that way with Alec and Leona then.

Anyway, there in the kitchen we went through that pause period of letting Leona's looks bask over us all, and on into some nickel-and-dime gab between Alec and my father--

Working hard?

Well, sure, Dad. Ever see me do anything different?

Just times I've seen you hardly working.

The Double W sees against that. Y'know what they say--nobody on the Double W ever gets a sunburn, they don't have time.

--and then my mother was satisfied that she had multiplied the food on the stove sufficiently, and said: I expect you brought your

appetites with you? Let's sit up.

I suppose every household has some habited way to begin a meal. Ours, though, said grace only once every three hundred sixty-five days, and that one a joke--my father's New Year's Day invocation in that Scotch-preacher burr he could put on: Hogmanay that's born today, gi' us a year o' white bread and nane o' your gray--and other than that, a McCaskill meal started at random, the only tradition to help yourself to what was closest and pass the food on clockwise.

How's cow chousing? My father was handing the mashed potatoes to Leona, but looking across at Alec.

It's all right." Alec meanwhile was presenting the gravy to Leona, before he realized she didn't yet have spuds on her plate. He colored a little, but notched out his jaw and then asked back: How's rangering?

When my father was a boy a ~~piece~~^{stick} of kindling flew up from the axe and struck the corner of his left eye. The vision was saved but ever after, that eyelid would droop to about half-shut whenever amusement made him squint a little. It descended now as he studied the meal traffic piling up around Leona. Then he made his reply to Alec:

It's all right.

I had the bright idea this conversation could benefit from my help, so I chimed in: Counting starts tomorrow, Alec. Dad and I'll be up there a couple three days. Remember that time you and I were along with him and Spencer's herder's dog Moxie got full of porcupine quills and we both--

Alec gave me a grin that was tighter than it ought to have been from a brother. Don't let all those sheep put you to sleep, sprout.

Sprout? Evidently there was no telling what might issue from a person's mouth when he had a blond girl to show off in front of, and the look I sent Alec told him so.

How are they feeding at the Double W? My mother, here. Leona, take some more ham and pass it on to Jick. He goes through food like a one-man army these days. I might have protested that too if my plate hadn't been nearly empty, particularly of fried ham.

It's---filling. The question seemed to put Alec a little off balance, and I noticed Leona provide him a little extra wattage in her next gaze at him.

So is sawdust, said my mother, plainly awaiting considerably more report.

Yeah, well, Alec fumbled. I was beginning to wonder whether cowboying had dimmed his wits, maybe driven his backbone up through the judgment part of his brain. You know, it's usual ranch grub. He sought down into his plate for further description and finally proclaimed again: Filling, is what I'd call it.

How's the buttermilk business? my father asked Leona, I suppose to steer matters off Alec's circular track. Her parents, the Tracys, ran the creamery in Gros Ventre.

Just fine, Leona responded along with her flash of smile. She seemed to be on the brink of saying a lot more, but then just passed that smile around to the rest of us, a full share to my father and another to my mother and then one to me that made my throat tighten

a little, then letting it rest last and coziest on Alec. She had a natural ability at that, producing some pleasantries then lighting up the room so you thought the remark amounted to a whole hell of a lot more than it did. I do envy that knack in a person, though likely wouldn't have the patience to use it myself even if I had it.

How's this, how's that, fine, all right, you bet. If this was the level of sociability that was going to go on, I intended to damn promptly excuse myself to get back to working on my saddle, the attractions of Leona notwithstanding. But then just as I was trying to estimate ahead to whether an early piece of rhubarb pie could be coaxed from my mother or I'd have to wait till later, Alec all at once put down his fork and came right out with:

We got something to tell you. We're going to get married.

This kicked the conversation in the head entirely. My father seemed to have forgotten about the mouthful of coffee he'd just drunk, while my mother looked as if Alec had announced he intended to take a pee in the middle of the table. Alec was trying to watch both of them at once, and Leona was favoring us all with one of her searchlight smiles.

How come?

Even yet I don't know why I said that. I mean, I was plenty old enough to know why people got married. There were times, seeing Alec and Leona mooning around together, when I seemed to savvy more than I actually had facts about, if that's possible.

Focused as he was on how our parents were going to respond, the philosophy question from my side of the table jangled Alec. Because,

because we're--we love each other, why the hell do you think?

Kind of soon in life to be so certain on that, isn't it?

suggested my father.

We're old enough, Alec shot back. And meanwhile gave me a snake-killing look as if I was going to ask old enough for what, but I honestly didn't intend to.

When's all this taking place? my father came up with next.

This fall. Alec looked ready to say more, then held on to it, finally just delivered it in one dump: Walt Williamson'll let us have the Foster place house to live in.

It was up to my mother to cleave matters entirely open. You're saying you'll stay on at the Double W this fall?

Yeah. It's what I want to do. The unsaid part of this was huge, more colossal than anything I had ever felt come into our kitchen before. Alec was choosing against college.

Alec, you will End Up as Nothing More Than a Gimped-Up Saddle Stiff, and I for one Will Not--

More out of samaritan instinct than good sense my father headed my mother off with a next query to Alec: How you going to support yourselves on a cow chouser's wages?

You two did, at first.

We starved out at it, too.

We ain't going to starve out. Alec's grammar seemed to be cowboyifying too. Walt'll let me draw ahead on my wages for a few heifers this fall, and winter them with the rest of the outfit's.

It'll give us our start.

My father finally thought to set down his coffee cup. Alec, let's keep our shirts on here--language can be odd; I had the vision just then of us all sitting around the table with our shirts off, Leona across from me in full pure double-barreled display--and try see what's what.

I don't see there's any what's what about it, Alec declared. People get married every day.

So does the sun rise, my mother told him, without particular participation by you.

Mom, now damn it, listen--

We all better listen, my father tried again. Leona, we got nothing against you. You know that. Which was somewhat short of true in both its parts, but I'll delve into that situation a little later. It's just that, Godamighty, Alec, cattle have gone bust time after time these last years. That way of life just has changed. Whether anybody'll ever be able to start off from scratch in the cow business and make a go of it, I don't see how--

Alec was like any of us, he resisted having an idea pulled from under him. Rather have me herding sheep up on one of your allotments, would you? There'd be something substantial to look forward to, I suppose you think, sheepherding.

My father seemed to consider. No, most probably not, in your case. It takes a trace of common sense to herd sheep. He said it lightly enough that Alec would have to take it as a joke, but there was a poking edge to the lightness. Alec, I just think that whatever the

hell you do, you need to bring an education to it these days. That old stuff of banging a living out of this country by sheer force of behavior doesn't work. Hasn't for almost twenty years. This country can outbang any man. Look at them along this creek. Spencer, Ed Van Bebber, the Busbys, Withrow, your Uncle Pete. They've all just managed to hang on, and they're as good a set of stockmen as you'll find in this whole goddamn state. You think any of them could have got underway, in years like there've been?

Last year was better than the one before, Alec defended with that litany of the local optimists. This one looks better than that.

And if about five more come good back-to-back, everybody'll be almost to where they were fifteen or twenty years ago.

Dad--Dad, listen. We ain't starting from fifteen or twenty years ago. We're starting from now, and we got to go by that, not whatever the hell happened to--to anybody else.

You'll be starting in a hole, my father said. And an everlasting climb out.

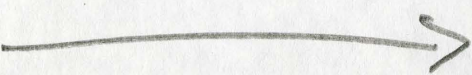
That's as maybe. But we got to start. Alec looked at Leona as if he was storing up for the next thousand years. And we're going to do it married. Not going to wait our life away.

If I ever get old enough to have sufficient brains, I will work on the question of man and woman. All those years ago, the topic rode with me into the morning as my father and I went off from the ranger station toward the mountains, but I could decipher only that the

previous evening's ruckus had more angles than could be followed at any one time. And the one that did stand clear to me was startling: the strife between my father and Alec. If I'd had to forecast, say at about the point Alec was announcing marriage intentions, my mother was the natural choice to bring down the house on him. She of course did make herself known, but the awful finale of that suppertime was all-male McCaskill: You're done running my life, flung by Alec as he stomped out with Leona in tow, and Nobody's running it, including you, from my father to Alec's departing back.

Put that way--the stark moment of an argument breaking off into silence--it may sound like something concluding itself; a point at which contention has been expended. But the fracture of a family is not a thing that happens clean and sharp, so that you at least know that from here on it will begin to be over with. No, it is like one of those worst bone breaks, a shatter. You can mend the place, peg it and splint it and work to strengthen it, and while the surface maybe can be brought to look much as it did before, it always remains a spot that has to be favored. So if I didn't grasp much, I at least held the realization that last night's rift in our family was nowhere near over.

We were not traveling in the greatest of moods, then, either my father or me. Those first hours on the trail up the north fork of English Creek were quiet, broken only by the sound of our horses' hooves or one or the other of us muttering a horse name and urging the creature to step along a little livelier. Even those blurts of sound were pretty pallid, because



no # Where horses were concerned, my father's imagination took a vacation. A black horse he invariably named Coaly, a blaze-face was always Star. Currently, ~~though~~, he was riding a big dun gelding who, on my mother's suggestion when she first saw the dim-colored colt, bore the name of Mouse. I was on a short-legged mare called Pony. Frankly, high among my hopes about this business of growing up was that I would get a considerably more substantial horse out of it. If and when I did, I vowed to give the creature as much name as it could carry, such as Rimfire or Chief Joseph or Calabash.

We also were leading one pack horse with us, to deliver some bolts and flanges and cable to the crew building a fire lookout on counting of Les Withrow's sheep today and Dode Spencer's tomorrow. Billy Peak, after we did the ~~sheep counting~~. That third horse was an elderly sorrel whom my father addressed as Brownie but the rest of us called by the name he'd been given before the Forest Service deposited him at the English Creek station: Homer. Having Homer along was a cause for mixed emotions. One more horse is always a nuisance to contend with, yet the presence of a pack horse also made the journey seem more substantial; testified that you weren't just jaunting off to somewhere, you were transporting. Packstrings had been the lifeblood of the Forest Service ever since its birth, the hooped carriers of supply into the countless mountains of the west. I know for a fact that my father considered that the person most important to his job as English Creek ranger was not anyone up the hierarchy from him, the forest superintendent or the regional forester or any of those, but his packer, Isidor Pronovost. Probably the story my father told oftenest was of being with

Isidor on one of the highest trails in this part of the mountains, where a misstep by one pack horse might pull all the rest into a tumble a few thousand feet down the slope, when Isidor turned in his saddle and called: Mac, if we was to roll this packstring right about here, the bastards'd roll until they stunk.

Since the lookout gear and our food only amounted to a load for one horse it hadn't been necessary to hire Isidor for this counting trip of ours. But even absent he had his influence as we arranged the packs on Homer that morning, both my father and I total converts to Isidor's perpetual preachment that in packing a horse, balance is everything. It took some finagling, say to make a roll of half-inch cable on one side of Homer equivalent to some canned goods on the other side of him, but finally my father proclaimed: There, looks to me like we got it Isidored.

Some winters ago Isidor and his brother Gabe, a noted packer in his own right, and my father brought out the pilot and co-pilot from the airplane crash above the north fork of English Creek. My mother and Alec and I heard that plane as it buzzed past west of the ranger station, then when we heard the motor noise again we looked at one another, as if confirming that a machine could be circling in the overcast next to these mountains, and then my mother spun to the telephone and rang the airport in Great Falls. All the passengers had been taken off there because of how the weather looked, but the plane was trying to go on to Spokane with the mail. Evidently its instruments went wrong, for it slammed directly into the east side

of Spring Mountain like a sagehen hitting a truck windshield. The next day a National Guard search plane managed to spot the wreckage, and then a couple more days ensued while a postal inspector trotted out from Spokane to see to the salvage of the mail, and after all that was concluded it was up to my father and Isidor and Gabe to bring down the two bodies. Both of course were frozen stiff in the positions they had been flung into. So the packers wrapped them in a ~~manti~~^{apiece} ~~piece~~ as they were and slid the bundles on the snow down the mountain to the trail and that night's camp. The intention was the next morning to fold each body face-down across a pack saddle. That night turned clear and cold, however, and in the morning the bodies couldn't be bent at all. Isidor proclaimed that, by the God, of all the packing he ever had done, this problem was a new one on him. He saw no choice though, except tie both bodies on one horse, one lengthwise along each side. And that is the way we saw them arrive, with that balanced cargo of what had been men, to the English Creek station where a hearse from Great Falls was waiting.



Stories of one kind or another abound more in the Two country than anywhere else I've ever been, taking their example maybe from the restless name of the region itself. Only the very northmost portion of the national forest actually has anything at all to do with the Two Medicine River or Two Medicine Lake--the vicinity where the forest joins onto the south boundary of Glacier National Park and fits in there between the park, the continental divide, and the Blackfoot Indian reservation like a big square peninsula on the map. The Two Medicine, the river that is, has its source up in the Rockies like all the water of this region, but cuts a distinctive canyon east through the plains as it pushes to meet the Marias and eventually the Missouri, so it is not even in sight to most of the Two country. Apparently it is just the ring of the words, Two Medicine, that has carried the name south all the way along ^{the} mountains to our English Creek area. The derivation as I've heard it is that the Blackfeet made their medicine lodge two years in a row near the lake that is the river's source, and the name lasted from that. By whatever way Two Medicine came to be, it is an interesting piece of language, I think.

By now, late morning, my father and I were well above the valley of English Creek, and could look down over the various ranches behind us. That is, we could pick out the green meadows of each, Pete Reese's and Ed Van Bebber's and Charlie Farrell's and Les Withrow's and the Busby brothers', for fields of wild hay were splotched all along English Creek from the ranger station to the town of Gros Ventre,

some of them narrow nests of brome grass which a mowing machine could scarcely maneuver in, others fat sweeping parcels which took a day or so apiece to cut flat. As in so much of the west, in the Two country hay is as necessary as air. The earliest stockmen didn't think so, believed they could graze their herds of cattle through a Montana winter. 1886 showed them that they hadn't yet seen a genuine Montana winter. By that next spring carcasses littered this land, I suppose as the buffalo earlier had lain after one of the slaughtering hunts for hides. Some foreign traveler crossing the prairie down there every decade or so then might have thought it an experimental site for killing four-hooved animals.

But those of course were cattle times, and now, with the encouragement of what the Depression had done to cattle prices, the Two Medicine country was home mostly to sheep.



no 41

Myself, I liked sheep. Or rather, I didn't mind sheep as such, which is the best a person can do towards creatures whose wool begins in their brain, and I liked the idea of sheep. True, sheep had to be troubled with more than cattle did, but the troubling was on a smaller scale. Pulling a lamb from a ewe's womb is nothing to untangling a leggy calf from the inside of a heifer. And a sheep you can brand by dabbing a splot of paint on her back, not needing to invite half the county in to maul your livestock around in the dust of a branding corral. More and more in life I find myself favoring proportion, and sheep somehow simply looked proper to me on those slopes of the Two. To my notion, cattle on the same pasture stick out like pepper on heather or meringue, but sheep blend with the country as sage or ~~some~~ other normal coloration would. A kind of instant natural crop, sheep somehow are; under a strong-eyed herder who has them in graze across a half-mile of wildflower slope, sheep seem as if generations of them always have been right there, cloudlike yet perpetual, and the grass and the flowers just now have been put in under them fresh for the year.

Nor do I hold with the argument that sheep destroyed such pasture. Put enough white mice or ostriches or anything else on a piece of land and you can overgraze it. No, if sense was used, if the sheep were moved around adequately on the range and there weren't more of them than the grass could stand, there was nothing in this world wrong with pasturing sheep on a portion of a forest. Anybody who slanders them as "hoofed locusts" or "bleaters and eaters" can also explain to me a better way to transform wild grass into food and fiber.

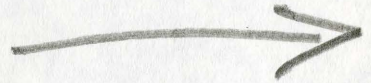
As with any number of men of his age who had grown up around stock in our part of Montana, my father had worked with both cattle and sheep. Range wars were not much the Montana style, and most particularly not the Two Medicine fashion. Oh, there had been one early ruckus south on the Sun River, some cowman kiying over to try kill off a neighboring band of sheep, and probably in any town Gros Ventre or Choteau or Augusta, along the mountains you could still find an occasional young hammerhead who proclaimed himself nothing but a cowboy and never capable of drawing breath as anything else, especially not as a mutton puncher. (Which isn't to say that most sheepherders weren't equally irreversibly sheepherders, but somehow that point never seemed to need announcing as it did with cowboys.) By and large, though, the Montana philosophy of make-do, as practiced by our sizable ranching proportion of Scotchmen, Germans, Norwegians, and Missourians, meant that ranchers simply tried to figure out which species did best, sheep or cows, and often ended up with both.

And so sheep in those Depression years were the sustenance, the manna, of the Two country. For a month solid at the start of summer, a band of sheep a day would pass through Gros Ventre on the way north to the Blackfoot Reservation, Tommy Larson and Guy Miller each trailing several bands from all the way down by Choteau, and the Bartley brothers and Broadhurst Smith and Ira Perkins and the others bringing theirs from around Bynum and Pendroy, and even Charlie Farrell from here on English Creek took his three bands to the Reservation instead of up onto the national forest. That was a time on the Reservation

when you could see a herder's wagon atop practically every rise: a fleet of white wagons anchored across the land. And off to the east, out of view, the big sheep outfits from Washington were running their tens of thousands, too, and of course to the west here my father's forest pastured the many English Creek bands--sum it how you will, from the sides of the Rockies out onto the plains where the farming began, the whole country was sheep.

#

—



Les Withrow's sheep were late, I don't know whether because of a slow start by his herder or if it just was one of those mornings when sheep are reluctant. I had learned from my father to expect lateness, because if you try to follow some exact time when you work with sheep you will rapidly drive yourself loony.

I might as well go up over here and have a look at that winter-kill, my father decided. A stand of pine about a mile to the north was showing the rusty color of death. How about you hanging on here in case the sheep show up. I won't be more than an hour. He forced a grin. Think about how to grow up saner than that brother of yours.

This whole family could stand some thinking about, I thought in reply but didn't say. My father climbed on Mouse and went to worry over winter-kill on his forest.

I took out my jackknife and started putting my initials into the bare fallen log I was sitting on. The J always wasn't too bad but the c's of McC needed to be carefully done. So that absorbed me, to the point where I was startled by the first blats of the Withrow sheep.

I headed on down through the timber on foot to help bring them to the counting vee. A sheepman could have the whole Seventh Cavalry pushing his band along and he'd still seem glad of further help. Les Withrow spotted me and called, Morning, Jick. That father of yours come to his senses and turn his job over to you?

He's patrolling to a winter kill. Said he'd be back by the time

we get up to the vee.

At the rate these sonsabitches want to move along this morning,
he's got time to patrol the whole Rocky Mountains.

This was said loud enough by Les that I figured it was not for my benefit alone. Sure enough, an answer shot out of the timber to our left.

You might just remember the sonsabitches ARE sheep instead of
racehorses. Into view over there came Les's herder, Pete Hoy. For as long as I had been accompanying my father on counting trips and I imagine for years before, Les and Pete Hoy had been wrangling with each other as much as they wrangled their sheep. Hello ^{there,} Jick. Don't
get too close to Les there, he's on the prod this morning. Wants the
job done before it gets started.

I'm told you can tell the liveliness of a herder by how his
sheep move, Les suggested. Maybe you better lay down, Pete, while we
send for the undertaker.

If I'm slow it's because I'm starved down, trying to live on the
grub you bring. Jick, Les is finally gonna get out of the sheep
business. He's gonna set up a stinginess school for you Scotchmen.

That set all three of us laughing as we pushed the band along, for one of the anthems of the Two was Les Withrow's lament about staying on and on in the sheep business. According to Les, both the sheep and the humans who had anything to do with them would have shown Job true affliction. This one time, the herder ~~the~~ had lost
the band and was sitting in the wagon quivering that the bear were

gonna get him, so I fired him and then was so hard up for a new herder that I hired a guy right off the street there in Gros Ventre. Never'd herded sheep before, but said he was game to. Well, he must have stood six-six or so, about big enough to eat hay, and I guess I figured that if nothing else he might be good bear-wrestling material. So we got up there onto the range and I happened to look down and see he was wearing oxfords. "Where's your other shoes?" I say. "Got none," he says. I told him to go off along the mountainside and look for the sheep while I rode up to try on top of the reef. Of course it started raining, and fog and cold and miserable. No sheep, anygoddamnwhere. I'd been up there most of the afternoon when all at once my horse stopped dead. Couldn't get him to move. So I climbed off and walked ahead about fifteen or twenty feet to take a look, and here there was a cliff that dropped off about eight hundred feet, right down the north end of the reef onto Billy Creek. If the horse hadn't had good sense we'd've dove right off that. So that was enough hunting sheep for that day, and when I got back to the wagon the big guy was in there feeding his face and he says, "I'm gonna have to have new shoes." Walking in those rocks up there had just tore those oxfords all to hell. So, okay, I told him I'd go to town in the morning and bring him out some ~~damn shoes~~ ^{workshoes}. "What size do you take?" "Thirteens," he says. Drove into Gros Ventre first thing the next morning, and do you think there was a shoe in the whole damn town that big? I ended up going all the way to Conrad to get a pair. Got back up onto the range about noon, the guy was sitting in the wagon waiting and eating

up the groceries. So I had this gonna-be herder, with a pair of shoes I'd had to buy him out of my own pocket as an advance on his wages, if he ever stuck with the job long enough to earn that much wages, and still no sheep. So I sent him off around the mountainside the other way from yesterday, and I started working the timber on horseback, and of course here comes the rain again, harder and colder than ever. I kept saying to myself, "This is the end of the sheep business for me. If I ever find those damn sheep this time, this is it." About four hours of that and I finally came onto the sheep. So I got the big guy over there and told him, "All right, now you got something to herd, push the sonsabitches back down toward camp," and I rode down to the wagon to try dry out. I remember standing in there over the stove, all my clothes draped around trying to get some of the water out of them, standing there with goosebumps all over me and saying, "This is it. This does it. I am going to get out of the sonofabitching sheep business." That was about fifteen years ago and yet here I am, still in the sonofabitching sheep business. God, what a man puts himself through.

On up the mountainslope Les and Pete Hoy and I shoved the sheep. It took a while, because up is not a direction sheep particularly care to go, at least at someone else's suggestion. Sheep seem perpetually leery of what's over a hill, which I suppose makes them either terrifically dumb or terrifically smart.

My father was waiting for us at the counting vee, and after greetings had been said all around among him and Les and Pete Hoy,

Les handed my father a gunny sack with a couple of handfuls of cottoncake in it, said Start 'em, Mac, and stepped around to his side of the counting gate. Up at Palookaville, where the dozen bands that summered on the north end of the Two entered the mountains all at the same place, there was an actual counting corral. But here on the spread-out English Creek range the count was done on each allotment through a vee made of poles spiked onto trees, the sheep funneling through while my father and the rancher stood beside the opening at the narrow end and counted. To head off arguments my father used a tallywhacker, a gadget about the size of a pocket watch which recorded a ~~hundred~~^{sheep} each time he clicked it. There weren't all that many disputes, though, the English Creek sheepmen and my father generally getting along like hand and glove.

My father went through the narrow gate into the vee, to the front of the sheep. He shook the sack in front of him, where the sheep could see it, and let a few cottonseed pellets trickle to the ground. Then it came, that sound not even close to any other in this world, my father's coax to the sheep: the tongue-made prrrrr prrrrr prrrrr, approximately a cross between an enormous cat's purr and the cooing of a dove. Maybe it was all the rs built into a Scotch tongue, ~~but~~^{but} for whatever reason my father could croon that luring call better than any sheepman on the Two. Les and Pete and I watched now as a first cluster of ewes, attentive to the source of the prrrrs, caught the smell of the cottoncake. They scuffled, did some ewely butting of each other, as usual to no conclusion, then forgot rivalry and swarmed

after the cottoncake. As they snooped forward on the trail of more, they led other sheep out the gate and started the count. You could put sheep up Mount Everest if you once got the first ones going so the others could turn off their brains and follow.

My job was at the rear of the sheep with the herder, to keep them pushing through the counting hole and to see that none circled around after they'd been through the vee and got tallied twice. Or, whenever we counted Ed Van Bebber's band, I also was back there to see that his herder, on instructions from Ed, didn't spill some sheep around the wing of the corral while the count was going on, so that they missed being counted into the allotment. Not that I had much to add to the enterprise when Pete Hoy was on hand at the back of the sheep. I always watched Pete all I could without seeming to stare to try learn how he mastered those woolies as he did. Someway, he was able just to look ewes into behaving better than they had in mind. One old independent biddy or another would step out, size up her chance of breaking past Pete, figure out who she was facing and then shy off back into the rest of the bunch. This of course didn't work with lambs--who have no more predictability to them than chickens in a hurricane--but in their case, all Pete had to do was say Round 'em, Taffy, and his carmel-colored shepherd dog would be sluicing them back to where they belonged. There was no better herder anywhere than Pete Hoy the ten months of the year when he stayed sober and behind the sheep, and because this was so, Les put up with what was necessary to hang onto him. The sonofagun has to have a binge after the lambs are shipped and then

another one just before lambing time, go down to Great Falls and get
all bent out of shape. He's got his pattern down real pat. The
Star Cigar Store, Lena's place, he makes his headquarters, and for
the first week he drinks whiskey and his women are pretty good lookers.
The next week or so he's mostly on beer and his women are getting a
little shabby. Then for about two weeks after that he's on straight
wine and squaws. Generally it took Les three or four trips to Great
Falls to fish Pete out of a spree. I'll get there to Lena's and track
him down and sober him up a little and have him all lined out to
bring home, and he'll say, "Oh hell, I about forgot, I gotta have ten
dollars to go pay a fellow." Then he takes off with that ten and that's
the last I see of him. I wish to hell I had a nickel for every hour
I've spent leaning up against the cigar counter in that joint, trying
to wait that bugger out. Jesus, one time I never will forget, I drove
down there just bound and determined to get him back on the job, and
I went into the Star, and no Pete. Lena told me, "He's around here
somewhere, Withrow, you just wait, he'll blow in here." So I waited.
And waited. Leaning a hole into that goddamn counter. The bar was
full of guys, it'd been railroad payday, and Lena's whores were
working the crowd, Big Tit Lou and Bouncing Betty and Nora Buffalo and
some others. Bouncing Betty had the first table, right in front of
me, and she'd smile like a million dollars at everybody who came in.
And all the time those gandy dancers were getting more and more boozed
up. The place sounded like Hell changing shifts. So sitting there
at the bar was this one pretty good-looking gal, about twenty, one of

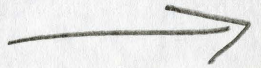
Lena's bunch, and she was well-dressed in a good gray suit and I
couldn't help noticing her. So did some big brakeman, who kept
buying her booze and putting his arms around her and patting her back,
down a little lower every pat. He must have been a live one, because
this girl wouldn't leave her seat at the bar for anything, I guess
figuring one of the other girls'd pick him off. Eventually of course
she wet her pants. A big wet ^{splob} ~~slob~~ there in back of her skirt. I
could see the brakeman patting lower and lower until finally, sure
enough, he hit that spot. He had just brought his hand up in front
of his face, trying to figure out how come he's struck water, when
Bouncing Betty got up and came over to me and said, "Withrow, I think
you need some fun. On the house. We'll make it up out of Pete's next
wages." I thought about how I'd been leaning there two-thirds of the
night watching all this disgusting stuff, and I thought to myself,
"By God, she is about a hundred percent right. I think Withrow DOES
need some fun." Right then, wouldn't you just know, in the door comes
goddamn Pete. "You looking for me?" he says. "I'm ready, let's head
on home."

————— →

Being around Les and Pete lifted our dispositions. When the count was done and we had helped Pete push the sheep toward the range he would summer them on, and then talked generally with Les until he had to head down the mountain toward home, I actually was looking forward to the rest of the counting ^{again.}trip. For I knew that tomorrow's sheep were Dode Spencer's, farther up in the mountains--country I always liked--and that on our way there, we would spend tonight at a camping spot along English Creek which my father and I--and yes, Alec in years past--always referred to as Fish Heaven.

By just before dusk the two of us were there, and Mouse and Pony and Homer were unsaddled and tethered on good grass, and camp was established. It seemed to me time to get down to the important matter, so I suggested:

Suppose we ought to give some thought to the menu?



Supper's in the creek, my father advised. Hide behind a tree to bait your hook or they'll swarm right out of the water after you.

Up here on its north fork English Creek didn't amount to much. Most places you could cross it in a running jump. But the stream was headed down out of the mountains in a hurry and so had some pretty riffles and every now and again a pool like a big wide stairstep of glass. If fish weren't in one of those waters, they were in the other.

Each of us took our hat off and unwound the fishline and hook wrapped around the hatband. On our way up, before the willows gave out we'd cut a pair of decent length, and now notched them about an inch from the small end, tied each fishline snug into each notch so it couldn't pull off, and were ready to talk business with those fish.

My father still had a reputation in the Forest Service from the time some Forest Service muckymuck who was quite a dry-fly fisherman asked him what these English Creek trout took best. Those guys of course have a whole catechism of hackles and muddlers and goofus bugs and stone flies and nymphs and midges. Chicken guts, my father informed him.

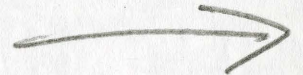
We didn't happen to have any of those along with us, but just before leaving home we'd gone to the old haystack bottom near the barn and dug ourselves each a tobacco can of angleworms. Why in holy hell anyone thinks a fish would prefer a dab of hair to something as plump as a stack-bottom worm, I never have understood the reasoning of.

The fish in fact began to prove that, right then. I do make the concession to sportsmanship that I'll fish a riffle once in a while, even though it demands some attention to casting instead of just plunking into the stream, and so it pleased me a little that in the next half hour or so I pulled my ten fish out of bumpy water, while at the pool he'd chosen to work over my father took some minutes longer to complete his catch.

Those little brookies, Eastern brook trout about eight inches long, are among the best eating there can be. You begin to taste them as quick as they hit the frying pan and go into their curl. Brown them up and take them in your fingers and eat them like corn on the cob, and you wish you had capacity for a hundred of them.

When we'd devoured five or so brookies apiece, we slowed down enough to share out a can of pork and beans, then resumed on the last half of our fish fry.

That hold you? my father asked when we were out of trout. I bobbed that I guessed it would, and while he went to the creek to scour the frying pan and rinse off our plates, I set to work composing the day book entry.



The day book constituted my father's worst bother about being a ranger. Early on, someone told him the story of a rider-turned-ranger down on the Shoshone forest. Cut short my horses tail and the wind blew all day, read the fellow's first day book entry. Then with further thought, he concluded: From the northeast. My father could swallow advice if he had to, and so he did what he could with the perpetual nag of having to jot his activities into the day book. When he did it was entirely another matter. Two or three weeks he would stay dutiful, then came a Saturday morning when he had seven little yellow blank pages to show for his week, and the filling in would start.

Beth, what'd I do on Tuesday? That the day it rained and I worked over the horse stalls?

That was Wednesday. Tuesday you rode up to look over the Noon Creek range.

I thought that was Thursday.

You can think so if you like, but you'd be wrong. My mother was careful to seem half-exasperated about these scriiving sessions, but I think she looked forward to the chance to set my father straight on history, even if it was only the past week's. Thursday I baked, and you took a rhubarb pie for the Bowens when you went to the Ear Mountain station. Not that Louise Bowen is capable of recognizing a pie.

Well, then, when I rode to the Billy Peak lookout, that was-- only yesterday? Friday?

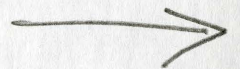
Today is Saturday, yesterday most likely was Friday, my mother was glad to confirm for him.

When I became big enough to go into the mountains with him for some days at a time, my father perceived relief for his day book situation. I think we had not gone a mile along the trail above the North Fork that first morning when he reined up, said Whyn't you kind of keep track of today for me? and presented me a fresh-sharpened stub pencil and a pocket notebook.

It did take a little doing to catch onto my father's style. But after those first days of my reporting into my notebook in the manner of We met up with Dill Egan on the south side of Noon Creek and talked with him about whether he can get a bigger allotment to run ten more steers on and my father squashing it down in his day book to Saw D. Egan about steer proposition, I adjusted.

By now I was veteran enough that the day came readily to the tip of my pencil. Patroled--another principle some early ranger had taught my father was that if you so much as left the station to go to the outhouse, you had patroled--Patroled the n. fork of English Creek. Counted L. Withrow's sheep onto allotment. Commenced packing bolts, and flanges and cable to Billy Peak lookout site.

My father read it over and nodded. Change that "bolts and flanges and cable" just to "gear." You don't want to be any more definite than necessary where regional headquarters is concerned. But otherwise it reads like the very Bible.



So the day was summed and we had dined on trout and the campfire was warmth and light against the night, and we had nothing that needed doing except to contemplate until sleep overcame us. My thoughts circled among Alec and my mother and my father--somewhat onto Leona, too--and what had happened last night. But mostly, I suppose because he was there next to me in the firelight, it was my father at the center of my mulling.

I am hard put to know how to describe him as he seemed to me then. How to lay him onto paper, for a map is never the country itself, only some ink suggesting the way to get there. Season somehow seems to bring out more about him than sketchwork does, and so I believe that to come close to any understanding of Varick McCaskill you would have to spend a full year at his side--

Despite what the calendar indicates, autumn was the onset, or threshold you could say, of a McCaskill year. The Two Medicine National Forest got reworked by my father each autumn almost as if making sure to himself that he still had all of that zone of geography. Of course every ranger is supposed to inspect the conditions of his forest at the end of the grazing season. My father all but X-rayed the Two. South Fork and North Fork, up under the reefs, in beyond Heart Butte, day after day he delved the Two. And somehow too when the bands of sheep trailed down and streamed toward the railroad chutes at Blackfoot or Pendroy, he was on hand there to look them over, talk with the herders, the ranchers, the lamb buyers, join in the jackpot bets about how much the lambs would weigh. I suppose it was the time

of year when he could assess his job, see right there on the hoof the results of his rangers. In a man who sometimes seemed doubtful whether his life totted up to what it should, that must have been a necessary inventory season, autumn.

He never wintered well. Came down with colds, sieges of hacking and sniffing, strange fissures in a man of his size and strength. Had it not been for the trapping he tutored Alec and me in, he might have gone through all those winter months--which in Montana could amount to five or six--like someone you would think was a permanent pneumonia candidate. The trapping, though, was an excuse to defy the season and put in hours outdoors (as well as being a way to add to the family income, which never was too much). At that time there were still plenty of beaver in English Creek. Too many, in the view of the ranchers who would find their meadows flooded. And weasels were a considerable creek population, too, and occasional mink. My father never said so--again, not what you'd expect, because otherwise he seldom minded talking--but the way a trapped animal died^s must have bothered him. However many gnawed-off feet it had taken to persuade him, by the time he was teaching Alec and me he insisted that we set spring poles on at least the weasel traps; beaver of course ^{are} ~~were~~ trapped at their hutches, in such a way that they drown promptly. With a spring pole, the weasel or mink would be snapped off the ground and hung into the air to freeze to death within an hour or so, rather than fighting the trap for days or gnawing its own foot off. I suppose that my father's view was that a spring pole was not much mercy in a cruel

situation, but some.

Spring is the uneven season on the Two. You can't ever be sure when it's going to arrive, then if it happens to, whether it's going to stay beyond the next twenty minutes. More than a few times I have known mid-May snowfalls, the damp heavy ones, to blanket this country, and I see in my father's day book that this particular year, the record wetness of May included one of those bread dough snows, on the weekend of the 20th and 21st. That these spring snowstorms are perilous to the lambs and calves but also are magnificent grass-bringers is your usual Montana situation of on the one hand this, on the other hand that. I sometimes think if a person had third and fourth hands, there'd damn soon be some other hard Montana proposition on those, too. Anyway, my father seemed to green up with the country each spring. Paperwork he had put off all winter would get tackled and disposed of. All of the gear of the English Creek station got a going-over, saddles, bridles, pack saddles, fire equipment. And from the first moment that charitably might be classified as spring, he read the mountains. Watched the snow hem along the peaks, judging how fast the drifts were melting. Cast a glance to English Creek various times of each day, to see how high it was running. Kept mental tally of the wildlife, when the deer started back up into the mountains, when the fur of the weasel turned from white to ~~gray~~^{brown}, how soon the first fresh pile of coal-black crap in the middle of a trail showed that bears were out of hibernation. To my father, and through him to the rest of us in the family, the mountains were their

own almanac, you might say. That being true, our specific chunk of the Rockies, the Two country, seemed to us a special gold-leaf edition: positioned as it was along the east slope of the divide of the continent, its water and welfare touching out to the plains. In spring, with the Two opening itself in newness and promise wherever you happened to glance, I believe that my father could not imagine any better neighborhood of the planet.

And finally summer. Well, we were embarking on summer now, and how it would turn out I truly could not imagine. Nor did it come any clearer to me in that span of time from supper until my father said See you in sunshine and we both turned in.



If I was a believer in omens, the start of that next morning ought to have told me something.

The rigamarole of untangling out of our bedrolls and getting the campfire going and making sure the horses hadn't quit the country during the night, all that went usual enough. Then, though, my father glanced around at me from where he had the coffee pot heating over a corner of the fire and asked: Ready for a cup, Alec?

Well, that will happen in a family. A moment of absent-mindedness, or the tongue just slipping a cog from what was intended. Ordinarily it wouldn't have riled me at all. But all this recent business about Alec, and my own wondering about where anybody in this family stood any more, and I don't know what all else--it now brought a response which scraped out of me like flint: I'm the other one.

Surprise passed over my father; then I guess what is called contrition.

You sure as hell are, he said. Unmistakably Jick.

—



About my name. John Angus McCaskill, I was christened. As soon as I began at the South Fork school, though, and gained a comprehension of what had been done to me, I put away that Angus for good. I have thought ever since that using a middle name is like having a third nostril.

I hadn't considered this before, but by then the John must already have been amended out of all recognition, too. At least I can find no memory of ever being called that, so the change must have happened pretty early in life. According to my mother it next became plain that "Johnnie" didn't fit the boy I was, either. Somehow it just seemed like calling rhubarb vanilla, and she may or may not have been making a joke. With her you couldn't always tell. Anyhow, the family story goes on that she and my father were trying me out as "Jack" when some visitor, noticing that I was fair-complected but didn't have the freckles they and Alec all did, said something like: He looks to me more like the jick of this family.

So I got dubbed for the off-card. For the jack that shares only the color of the jack of trumps. That is to say, in a game such as pitch, if spades are led the jack of clubs becomes the jick, and in the taking of tricks the abiding rule is that jack takes jick but jick takes joker. I explain this a bit because I am constantly astonished by how many people, even here in Montana, no longer can play a decent hand of cards. I believe television has got just a hell of a lot to answer for.

Anyway, Jick I became, and have ever been. That is part of the

pondering that I find myself doing now: whether some other name would have shifted my life any. Yet, of what I might change, I keep deciding that that would not be among the first.

That breakfast incident rankled a little even after we saddled up and resumed the ride toward the counting vee where we were to meet Dode Spencer's sheep at around noon. Nor did the weather help any. Clouds closed off the peaks of the mountains, and while it wasn't raining yet, the air damply promised that it intended to. One of those days too clammy to go without a slicker coat and too muggy to wear one in comfort.

We were about two-thirds of our way, up where the trail crosses the side of Feather Woman Mountain and the north fork of English Creek hides itself in a timber canyon below, when evidently my father figured both the day and I could stand some brightening. He turned atop Mouse and called to me: How's an early lunch sound to you?

Suits me, I of course assured him.



Out like this, my father tended to survive on whatever jumped out of the food pack first. He did have the principle that supper needed to be a cooked meal, especially if it could be trout. But as for the rest of the day, he was likely to offer up as breakfast a couple of slices of headcheese and a can of tomatoes or green beans, and if you didn't watch him he might do the exact same again for lunch. My mother consequently always made us up enough slab sandwiches for three days' worth of lunches. Of course, by the ~~third~~^{second} noon in that high air the bread was about dry enough to strike a match on, but still a better bet than whatever my father was apt to concoct.

We had eaten an applebutter sandwich and a half apiece and were sharing a can of peaches for dessert, harpooning the slices out with our jackknives to save groping into the pack for utensils, when a rider appeared at the bend of the trail downhill from us. He was on a blaze-face sorrel, who snorted at the sight of us. A black pack mare followed into sight, then a light gray with spots on his nose and his neck stretched out and his lead rope taut.

Somebody's new camptender, must be, my father said.

The rider sat in his saddle that permanent way a lot of those old-timers did, as if he lived up there and couldn't imagine sufficient reason to venture down off the back of a horse. Not much of his face showed between the buttoned-up slicker and the pulled-down brown Stetson, but thinking back on it now, I am fairly sure that my father at once recognized both the horseman and the situation.

The brief packstring climbed steadily to us, the ears of the

horses sharp in interest at us and Pony ^{and Homer,} and Mouse. The rider showed no attention until he was right up to us. Then, though I didn't see him do anything with the reins, the sorrel stopped and the Stetson veered half out over the slickered shoulder nearest us.

Hullo, Mac.

Thought it might be you, Stanley. How the hell are you?

Still able to sit up and take nourishment. Hullo, Alec or Jick, as the case may be.

I hadn't seen him since I was five or six years old, yet right then I could have told you a number of matters about Stanley Meixell. That he had once been an often presence at our meals, stooping first over the wash basin for a cleanse that included the back of his neck, and then slicking back his hair--I could have said too that it was crow-black and started from a widow's peak--before coming to the table. That unlike a lot of people he did not talk down to children, never delivered them that phony guff such as Think you'll ever amount to anything? That he was taller than he looked on that sorrel, built in the riderly way of length mostly from his hips down. Of his eight or nine years since we had last seen him I couldn't have told you anything whatsoever. So it was odd how much immediately arrived to mind about this unexpected man.

Jick, I clarified. 'Lo, Stanley.

It was my father's turn to pick up the conversation. Heard you were gonna be campjack for the Busby boys.

Yeah. Stanley's yeah was that Missourian slowed-down kind,

almost in two parts: yeh-uh. And his voice sounded huskier than it ought to, as if a rasp had been used across the top of it. Yeah, these times, I guess being campjack is better than no jack at all. Protocol was back to him now. He asked my father, Counting them onto the range, are you?

Withrow's band yesterday, and Dode Spencer's today.

Quite a year for feed up here. This's been a million dollar rain, ain't it? Brought the grass up ass-high to a tall Indian. Though I'm getting to where I could stand a little sunshine to thaw out with, myself.

Probably have enough to melt you, my father predicted, soon enough.

Could be. Stanley looked ahead up the trail, as if just noticing that it continued on from where we stood. Could be, he repeated. Nothing followed that, either from Stanley or my father, and it began to come through to me that this conversation was seriously kinked in some way. These two men had not seen each other for the larger part of ten years, so why didn't they have anything to say to one another besides this small-change talk about weather and grass?

Finally my father offered: Want some peaches? A few in here we
~~haven't stabbed~~^{dead}yet.

Naw, thanks. I got to head on up the mountain or I'll have
shepherders after my hide.

My father fished out another peach slice and handed me the can to finish. Along with it came his casual question, What was it you
did to your hand?

It took me a blink or two to realize that although he said it in my direction, the query was intended for Stanley. I saw then that a handkerchief was wrapped around the back of Stanley's right hand, and that he was resting that hand on the saddle horn with his left hand atop it, the reverse of usual procedure there. Also, as much of the handkerchief as I could see had started off white but now showed stains like dark rust.

You know how it is, that Bubbles cayuse--Stanley looked over his shoulder to the gray packhorse--was kind of snakey this morning. Tried to kick me into next week. Took some skin off, is all.

We all contemplated Bubbles. As horses go, he looked capable not just of assault, but maybe pillage and plunder and probably arson too. He was ewe-necked, and accented it by stretching stubbornly against the lead rope even now that he was standing still. The constellation of dark nose-spots which must have given him his name--at least I couldn't see anything else nameable about him--drew a person's look, but if you happened to glance beyond them, you saw that Bubbles was looking back at you as if he'd like to be standing on your spine. How such creatures get into pack strings, I just don't know. I suppose the same way ~~Good Help Hebners~~ ^{mortgage bankers} get into the human race.

I don't remember you as having much hide to spare, my father said then to Stanley. Then, as if the idea had just strolled up to him out of the trees: How'd you like some company? I imagine it's no special fun running a packstring one-handed.

Evidently my father had gone absent-minded again, this time about

something he'd mentioned not ten sentences earlier. I was just set to remind him of our appointment with Dode Spencer's sheep when he added on: Jick here could maybe ride along with you.

I hope I didn't show the total of surprise I felt. Some must have lopped over, though, because Stanley promptly enough was saying: Aw, no, Mac. Jick's got better things to do than haze me along.

Think about morning, my father came back at him. Those packs and knots are gonna be several kinds of hell, unless you're more left-handed than you've ever shown.

Aw, no. I'll be out a couple or three days, you know. Longer if any of those herders have got trouble.

Jick's been out that long with me any number of times. And your cooking's bound to be better for him than mine.

Well, Stanley began, and stopped. He seemed to be considering. Matters were passing me by before I could even see them coming.

I will always credit Stanley Meixell for putting the next two questions in the order he did.

It ought to be up to Jick. Stanley looked directly down at me. How do you feel about playing nursemaid to somebody so goddamn dumb as to get himself kicked?

The corner of my eye told me my father suggested a pretty enthusiastic response to any of this.

Oh, I feel fine about--I mean, sure, Stanley. I could, uh, ride along. If you really want. Yeah.

Stanley looked down at my father now. Mac, you double sure it'd be okay?

Even I was able to translate that. What was my father going to face from my mother for sending me off campending into the mountains with Stanley for a number of days?

Sure, my father said, as if doubt wasn't worth wrinkling the brain for. Bring him back when he's dried out behind the ears.

Well, then. The brown Stetson tipped up maybe two inches, and Stanley swung a slow look around at the pines and the trail and the mountainslope as if this was a site he might want to remember. I guess we ought to be getting. Got everything you need, Jick?

I had no idea in hell what I needed for going off into the Rocky Mountains with a one-handed campjack, but I managed to blurt: I guess so.

Stanley delivered my father the longest gaze he had yet. See you in church, Mac, he said, then nudged the sorrel into motion.

The black packhorse and the light gray ugly one had passed us by the time I swung onto Pony, and my father was standing with his thumbs in his pockets, looking at the series of three horse rumps and the back of Stanley Meixell, as I reined around onto the trail. Don't forget the day book, I muttered as I rode past him.

Thanks for reminding me, my father said poker-faced. I'll give it my utmost.

—————
The Busby brothers, I knew, ran three bands of sheep on their forest allotment, which stretched north of us from the north fork of English Creek. Stanley had slowed beyond the first bend of the trail for me to catch up, or maybe to make sure I actually was coming along

on this grand tour of sheepherders. Which camp do we head for first?
I called ahead to him.

Canada Dan's, he's the furthest south. If we sift right along
for the next couple hours or so we'll be there.

It couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes after we left my father, though, when Stanley reined his horse off the trail into a little clearing and the packhorses followed. When I rode up alongside, he said: I got to go visit a tree. You keep on ahead, Jick. I'll catch right up.

I had the trail to myself for the next some minutes. Just when I was about to rein around and see what had become of Stanley, the white of the sorrel's blaze flashed into sight. Be right there, Stanley called, motioning me to ride on.

But he caught up awfully gradually, and in fact must have made a second stop when I went out of sight around a switchback. I began to wonder a bit. Not only had I been volunteered into this expedition by somebody other than myself, I sure as the devil had not signed on to lead it. So this time, I was determined to wait until Stanley was up with me. And as I sat there on Pony, firmly paused, I began to hear him long before I could see him.

My name, she is Pancho,

I work on a rancho.

I make a dollar a day.

Stanley's singing voice surprised me, a clearer, younger tone than his raspy talk.

So did his song.

I go to see Lucy,
to play with her poosy.
Lucy take my dollar away.

When Stanley drew even with me I still ~~wasn't~~ couldn't see much of his eyes under the brim of the pulled-down hat, although I was studying pretty hard this time.

Yessir, Stanley announced as the sorrel stopped, great day for the race, ain't it?

The race? I gaped.

The human race. Stanley pivoted in his saddle--a little unsteadily, I thought--enough to scan at the black pack mare and then the gray one. He got a white-eyed glower in return from the gray. Bubbles there is still in kind of an owly mood. Mad because he managed to only kick my hand instead of my head, maybe. You're doing fine up ahead, Jick, I'll wander along behind while Bubbles works on his sulking.

There was nothing for it but head up the trail again. At least now I knew for sure what my situation was. If there lingered any last least iota of doubt, Stanley's continued disappearances and his ongoing croon dispatched it.

My brother is Sancho,
he try with a banjo
to coax Lucy to woo.

I have long thought that the two commonest afflictions in Montana--it may be true everywhere, but then I haven't been everywhere--are drink and orneriness. True, my attitude has thawed somewhat since I have become old enough to indulge in the pair myself now and again. But back there

on that mountain those years ago, all I could think was that I had on my hands the two worst of such representations, a behind-the-bush bottle-tipper and a knothheaded packhorse.

But she tell him no luck,
the price is another buck,
a banjo don't woo a screw.

I spent a strong hour being furious with my father before it occurred to me to wonder just how he ought to have alerted me to Stanley's condition. Cleared his throat and announced, Stanley, excuse us but Jick and I got something to discuss over here in the jackpines, we'll be right back? Worked his way behind Stanley and pantomimed to me a swig from a bottle? Neither of those seemed what could be called etiquette, and that left me with the perturbing suggestion that maybe it'd been up to me to see the situation for myself. Which gave me another hour or so of heavy chewing, trying to figure out how I was supposed to follow events that sprung themselves on me from nowhere. How do you brace for that, whatever age you are?

—



Canada Dan's sheep were bunched in a long thick line against a stand of jackpine. A lot of blatting was going on, as if there was an uneasiness among them. A sheepherder who knows what he is doing in timber probably is good in open country too, but vice versa is not necessarily the case, and I remembered my father mentioning that Canada Dan had been herding over by Cut Bank, plains country. A herder new to timber terrain and skittish about it will dog the bejesus out of his sheep, keep the band tight together for fear of losing some. As we rode up, Canada Dan's patch-marked sheepdog looked weary, panting, and I saw Stanley study considerably the way these sheep were crammed along the slope.

Been looking for you since day before yesterday, Canada Dan greeted us. I'm goddamn near out of canned milk.

That so? said Stanley. Lucky thing near isn't the same as out.

Canada Dan was looking me up and down now. You that ranger's kid?

I didn't care for the way that was put, and just said back: Jick McCaskill. Too, I was wondering how many more times that day I was going to need to identify myself to people I'd had no farthest intention of getting involved with.

Canada Dan targeted on Stanley again. Got to bring a kid along to play nursemaid for you now, Stanley? Must be getting on in years.

I bunged up my hand, Stanley responded shortly. Jick's been generous enough to pitch in with me.

Canada Dan shook his head as if my sanity was at issue. He's

gonna regret charity when he sees the goddamn chore we got for ourselves up here.

What would that be, Dan?

About fifteen head of goddamn dead ones, that's what. They got onto some deathcamas, maybe three days back. Poisoned themselves before you could say sic 'em. Canada Dan reported all this as if he was an accidental passerby instead of being responsible for these animals. Former animals, they were now.

That's a bunch of casualties, Stanley agreed. I didn't happen to notice the pelts anywhere there at the wag--

Happened right up over here, Canada Dan went on as if he hadn't heard, gesturing to the ridge close behind him. Just glommed onto that deathcamas like it was goddamn candy. C'mon here, I'll show you. The herder shrugged out of his coat, tossed it down on the grass, pointed to it and instructed his dog: Stay, Rags. The dog came and lay on the coat, facing the sheep, and Canada Dan trudged up the ridge without ever glancing back at the dog or us.

I began to dread the way this was trending.

The place Canada Dan led us to was a pocket meadow of bunch grass interspersed with pretty white blossoms and with gray mounds here and there on it. The blossoms were deathcamas, and the mounds were the dead ewes. Even as cool as the weather had been they were bloated almost to bursting.

That's them, the herder identified for our benefit. It's sure convenient of you fellows to show up. All that goddamn skinning, I

can stand all the help I can get.

Stanley did take the chance to get a shot in on him. You been too occupied the past three days to get to them, I guess? But it bounced off Canada Dan like a berry off a buffalo.

We all three looked at the sheep for awhile. There is not too much you can say about bloated sheep carcasses. After a bit, though, Canada Dan offered in a grim satisfied way: That'll teach the goddamn buggers to eat deathcamas.

Well, Stanley expounded next. There's no such thing as one-handed skinning. Which doubled the sense of dread in me. I thought to myself, But there is one-handed tipping of a bottle, and one-handed dragging me into this campjack expedition, and one-handed weaseling out of what was impending here next and...All this while, Stanley was looking off in some direction carefully away from me. I can be unloading the grub into Dan's wagon while this goes on, then come back with the mare so we can lug these pelts in. Guess I ought to get at it.

Stanley reined away, leading the pack horses toward the sheepwagon, and Canada Dan beaded on me. Don't just stand there in your tracks, kid. Plenty of these goddamn pelters for both of us.

So for the next long while I was delving in ewe carcasses, slicing the hides loose around the hooves and then down the legs and around the milk bag and at last the big incision along the belly which, if your jackknife slipped just a little bit, would bring the guts pouring out all over your project. It had to be done, because the

pelts at least would bring a dollar apiece for the Busby brothers and a dollar then was still worth holding in your hand. But that it was necessary did not make it any less snotty a job. I don't know whether you have ever skinned a sheep which has lain dead in the rain for a few days, but the clammy wet wool adds into the situation the possibility of wool poisoning, so that the thought of puffed painful hands accompanies all your handling of the pelt. That and a whole lot else on my mind, I slit and slit and slit, tugging pelt off bloated belly and stiffened legs. I started off careful not to work fast, in the hope that Canada Dan would slice right along and thereby skin the majority of the carcasses. It of course turned out that his strategy was identical and that he had had countless more years of practice at being slow than I did. In other circumstances I might even have admired the drama in the way he would stop often, straighten up to ease what he told me several times was the world's worst crick in his back, and contemplate my scalpel technique skeptically before finally bending back to his own. Out of his experience my father always testified that he'd rather work any day with sheepherders rather than cowboys. You might come across a herder that's loony now and then, but at least they aren't so apt to be such self-inflated sonsabitches. Right about now I wondered about that choice. If Canada Dan was representative, sheepherders didn't seem to be any bargains of companionability either.

Finally I gave up on trying to outslow Canada Dan and went at the skinning quick as I could, to get it over with.

Canada Dan's estimate of fifteen dead ewes proved to be eighteen. Also I noticed that six of the pelts were branded with a bar above the number, signifying that the ewe was a mother of twins. Which summed out to the fact that besides the eighteen casualties, there were two dozen newly motherless lambs who would weigh light at shipping time.

This came to Stanley's attention too when he arrived back leading the pack mare and we--or rather I, because Stanley of course didn't have the hand for it and Canada Dan made no move toward the task whatsoever--slung the first load of pelts onto the pack saddle. Guess we know what all that lamb blatting's about, now, observed Stanley. Canada Dan didn't seem to hear this, either.

Instead he turned and was trudging rapidly across the slope toward his sheepwagon. He whistled the dog from his coat and sent him policing after a few ewes who had dared to stray out onto open grass, then yelled back over his shoulder to us: It's about belly time. C'mon to the wagon when you get those goddamn pelts under control, I got us a meal fixed.

I looked down at my hands and forearms, so filthy with blood and other sheep stuff I didn't even want to think about that I hated to touch the reins and saddlehorn to climb onto Pony. But I did climb on, for it was inevitable as if Bible-written that now I had to ride in with Stanley to the sheepwagon, unload these wet slimy pelts because he wasn't able, ride back out with him for the second batch, load them, ride back in and unload--seeing it all unfold I abruptly

spoke out: Stanley!

Yeah, Jick? The brown Stetson turned most of the way in my direction. All the ways to say what I intended to competed in my mind. Stanley, this just isn't going to work out...Stanley, this deal was my father's brainstorm and not mine, I'm heading down that trail for home... Stanley, I'm not up to--to riding herd on you and doing the work of this wampus cat of a sheepherder and maybe getting wool poisoning and-- but when my mouth did move, I heard it mutter:

Nothing, I guess.

After wrestling the second consignment of pelts into shelter under Canada Dan's sheepwagon, I went up by the door to wash. Beside the basin on the chopping block lay a sliver of gray soap, which proved to be so coarse my skin nearly grated off along with the sheep blood and other mess. But I at least felt scoured fairly clean.

Is there a towel? I called into the sheepwagon with what I considered a fine tone of indignation in my voice.

The upper part of Canada Dan appeared at the dutch door. Right there in front of you, he pointed to a gunny sack hanging from a corner of the wagon. Your eyes bad?

I dried off as best I could on the ^{burlap}~~gunny~~ sack, feeling now as if I'd been rasped from elbow to fingertip, and swung on into the sheepwagon. The table of this wagon was a square of wood about the size of a big checkerboard, which pulled out from under the bunk at the far end of the wagon and then was supported by a gate leg which folded down, and Stanley had tucked himself onto the seat on one

side of it. Canada Dan as cook and host I knew would need to be nearest the stove and sit on a stool at the outside end of the table, so I slid into the seat opposite Stanley, going real careful because three people in a sheepwagon is about twice too many.

KEEYIPE! erupted from under my inmost foot, about the same instant my nose caught the distinctive smell of wet dog warming up.

Here now, what the hell kind of manners is that, walking on my dog? He does that again, Rags, you want to bite the notion right out of him. This must have been Canada Dan's idea of hilarity, for he laughed a little now in what I considered an egg-sucking way.

Or it may simply have been his pleasure over the meal he had concocted. Onto the table the herder plunked a metal plate with a boiled chunk of meat on it, then followed that with a stained pan of what looked like small moth balls.

Like I say, I figured you might finally show up today, so I fixed you a duke's choice of grub, he crowed. Get yourselves started with that hominy. Then, picking up a hefty butcher knife, Canada Dan slabbed off a thickness of the grayish greasy meat and toppled it aside. You even got your wide choice of meat. Here's mutton.

He sliced off another slab. Or then again here's growed-up lamb.

The butcher knife produced a third plank-thick piece. Or you can always have sheep meat.

Canada Dan divvied the slices onto our plates and concluded: A menu you don't get just everywhere, ain't it?

Yeah, Stanley said slower than ever, and swallowed experimentally.

The report crossed my mind that I had just spent a couple of hours elbow-deep in dead sheep and now I was being expected to eat some of one, but I tried to keep it traveling. Time, as it's said, was the essence here. The only resource a person has against mutton is to eat it fast, before it has a chance for the tallow in it to congeal. So I poked mine into me pretty rapidly, and even so the last several bites were greasy going. Stanley by then wasn't much more than getting started.

While Canada Dan forked steadily through his meal and Stanley mussed around with his I finished off the hominy on the theory that anything you mixed into the digestive process with mutton was probably all to the good. Then I gazed out the dutch door of the sheepwagon while waiting on Stanley. The afternoon was going darker, a look of coming rain. My father more than likely was done by now with the counting of Dode Spencer's band. He would be on his way up to the Billy Peak lookout, and the big warm dry camp tent there, and the company of somebody other than Canada Dan or Stanley Meixell, and probably another supper of brookies. I hoped devoutly the rain already had started directly onto whatever piece of trail he might be riding just now.

Canada Dan meanwhile had rolled himself a cigarette and was filling the wagon with blue smoke while Stanley worked himself to the halfway point of his slab of mutton. Staying the night, ain't you?

the herder said more as observation than question. You can set up the tepee, regular goddamn canvas hotel. It only leaks a little where it's ripped in that one corner. Been meaning to sew the sonofabitch up.

Well, actually, no, said Stanley. This perked me up more than anything had in hours. Maybe there existed some fingernail of hope for Stanley after all. We got all that pack gear to keep dry, so we'll just go on over to that line cabin down on Spencer's school section. Fact is-- Stanley here took the chance to shove away his still mutton-laden plate and get to his feet as if night was stampeding toward him--we better be getting ourselves over there if we're gonna beat dark. You ready, Jick?

Was I.

Spencer's line cabin stood just outside the eastern boundary of the forest, through a barbwire fence. We had ridden more than an hour to get there, the weather steadily heavier and grimmer all around us, and Stanley fairly grim himself, I guess from the mix of alcohol and mutton sludging around beneath his belt. Once when I glanced back to be sure I still had him I happened to see him make an awkward lob into the trees, that exaggerated high-armed way when you throw with your wrong hand. So he had run out of bottle, and at least I could look forward to an unpickled Stanley from here on. I hoped he wasn't the kind who came down with the DTs as he dried out.

The whole way from Canada Dan's sheepwagon he never said a word

nor even glanced ahead any farther than his horse's ears; didn't even stir when we reached the boundary fence. In a hurry to get us into the cabin before the weather cut loose I hopped off Pony to open the gate.

My hand was just almost to the top wire hoop when there was a terrific yell:

GODaMIGHTy, get aWAY from that!

I jumped back as if flung, looking around to see what had roused Stanley like that.

Go find a club and knock it open with that, he instructed.
You happen to be touching that wire and lightning hits that fence,
I'll have fried Jick for supper.

So I humored him, went off and found a sizable dead limb of jackpine and tapped the hoop up off the top of the gate stick with it and then used it to fling the gate ~~off~~ to one side the way you might flip a big snake. The hell of it was, I knew Stanley was out-and-out right. A time, lightning hit Ed Van Bebber's fence up the road from the English Creek station and the whole top wire melted for about fifty yards in either direction, dropping off in little chunks as if it'd been minced up by fencing pliers. I knew as well as anything not to touch a wire fence in a storm: why then had I damn near done it? All I can say in my own defense is that you just try going around with Stanley Meixell on your mind as much as he had been on mine since mid-morning, and see if you don't do one or another thing dumb.

I was resigned by now to what was in store for me at the cabin, so

started in on it right away, the unpacking of the mare and Bubbles. Already I had size, my father's long bones the example to mine, and could do the respected packer's trick of reaching all the way across the horse's back to lift those off-side packs from where I was standing, instead of going back and forth around the horse all the time. I did the mare and then carefully began uncargoing Bubbles, Stanley hanging onto the bridle and matter-of-factly promising Bubbles he would yank his goddamn head off if he gave any trouble. Then as I swung the last pack over and off, a hefty lift I managed to do without bumping the pack saddle and giving Bubbles an excuse for excitement, Stanley pronounced: Oh, to be young and fucking twice a day again.

He took notice of the considerable impact of this on me. 'Scuse my French, Jick. It's just a saying us old coots have.

Nonetheless it echoed around in me as I lugged the packs through the cabin door and stood them in a corner. By now thunder was applauding lightning higher up the mountain and the rain was arriving in earnest, my last couple of trips outside considerably damp. Stanley meanwhile was trying to inspire a fire in the rickety stove.

The accumulated chill in the cabin had us both shivering as we waited for the stove to produce some result.

Feel^S in here like it's gonna frost, I muttered.

Yeah, Stanley agreed. About a foot.

That delivered me a thought I didn't particularly want. What, ah, what if this turns to snow? I could see myself blizzarded in here for a week with this reprobate.

Aw, I don't imagine it will. Lightning like this, it's probably just a thunderstorm. Stanley contemplated the rain spitting onto the cabin window and evidently was reminded that his pronouncement came close to being good news. Still, you never know, he amended.

The cabin wasn't much, just a roofed-over bin of jackpine logs, maybe fifteen feet long and ten wide and with a single window beside the door at the south end; but at least was drier than outside. Outside in fact was showing every sign of anticipating a night-long bath. The face of the Rocky Mountains gets more weather than any other place I know of and you just have to abide by that fact. I considered the small stash of wood behind the stove, mostly kindling, and headed back out for enough armfuls for the night and morning. Off along the tree line I found plenty of squaw wood, which already looked damp but snapped okay when I tromped it in half over a log.

With that provisioning done and a bucket of water lugged from a seep of spring about seventy yards out along the slope, I declared myself in for the evening and shed my wet slicker. Stanley through all this stayed half-propped, half-sitting on an end of the little plank table. Casual as a man waiting for a bus. His stillness set me to wondering just how much whiskey was in him--after all, he'd been like a mummy on the ride from Canada Dan's camp, too--and so before long I angled across the room, as if exercising the saddle hours out of my legs, for a closer peek at him.

At first I wasn't enlightened by what I saw. The crowfoot lines

at the corners of Stanley's eyes were showing deep and sharp, as if he was squinched up to study closely at something, and he seemed washed-out, whitish, across that part of his face, too. Like any Montana kid I had seen my share of swacked-up people, yet Stanley didn't really look liquored. No, he looked more like--

How's that hand of yours? I inquired, putting my suspicion as lightly as I knew how.

Stanley roused. Feels like it's been places. He moved his gaze past me and around the cabin interior. Not so bad quarters. Not much worse than I remember this pack rat palace, anyway.

Maybe we ought to have a look, I persisted. That wrapping's seen better times. Before he could waltz off onto some other topic I stepped over to him and untied the rust-colored wrapping.

When I unwound that fabric, the story was gore. The back of Stanley's hand between the first and last knuckles was skinned raw where the sharp edge of Bubbles' hoof had shoved off skin: raw and seepy and butchered-looking.

Jesus H. Christ, I breathed.

Aw, could be worse. I'll get it looked at when I get to town. There's some bag balm in my saddlebag there. Get the lid off that for me, will you, and I'll dab some on.

Stanley slathered the balm thick across the back of his hand and I stepped over again and began to rewrap it for him. He noticed that the wrapping was not the blood-stained handkerchief. Where'd you come up with that?

The tail off my clean shirt.

Your ma's gonna like to hear that.

I shrugged. Trouble seemed lined up deep enough here in company with Stanley that my mother's turn at it was a long way off.

Well, Stanley said, moving his bandaged hand with a wince he didn't want to show and I didn't really want to see. The Stanleys of this world do not show pain easily.

It seemed to me time to try get Stanley's mind off his wound, and to bring up what I figured was a natural topic. So I queried:

What are we going to do about supper?

Stanley peered at me a considerable time. Then said: I seem to distinctly remember Canada Dan feeding us.

That was a while back, I defended. Sort of a second lunch.

Stanley shook his head a bit and voted himself out. I don't just feel like anything, right now. You go ahead.

So now things had reached the point where I had lost out even on my father's scattershot version of cooking, and was going to have to invent my own. After fighting the stove for awhile to get any real heat from it, I managed to warm a can of pork and beans and ate them with some slices of bread smeared with mayonnaise because I knew butter would be down deeper in the pack with other unbreakables. Canada Dan's cooking must have stuck with me more than I was aware, though, as I didn't even think to open any canned fruit for dessert.

Meanwhile the weather grew steadily more rambunctious. Along those mountainsides thunder can roll and roll, and claps were

arriving to us now like beer barrels tumbling down stairs.

In my head I always counted the miles to how far away the lightning had hit--something I still find myself doing--so when the next bolt winked, somewhere out the south window, I began the formula:

One, a-thousand.

Two, a-thousand.

Three...The boom reached us then, the bolt had struck just more than two miles off. That could be worse, and likely would be. Meanwhile rain was raking the cabin. We could hear it drum against the west wall as well as on the roof.

Sounds like we got a dewy night ahead of us, Stanley offered.

He looked a little perkier now. Myself, I was beginning to droop, the day catching up with me. The cabin didn't have any beds as such, just a cobbled-together double bunk arrangement with planks where you'd like a mattress to be. But any place to be prone looked welcome, and I got up from the table to untie my bedroll from behind my saddle and spread it onto the upper planks.

The sky split white outside the cabin. That crack of thunder I honestly felt as much as heard. A jolt through the air; as if a quake had leapt upward out of the earth.

I believe my hair was swept straight on end, from that blast of noise passing through. But Stanley didn't show any ruffle at all. The quick hand of God, my ma used to say.

Yeah, well, I'd just as soon it grabbed around someplace else.

I stood waiting for the next cataclysm, although what really was

on my mind was the saying that you'll never hear the lightning bolt that hits you. The rain rattled constantly loud now. At last there came a big crackling sound quite a way off, and while I knew nature is not that regular I told myself the lightning portion of the storm had moved beyond us, and I announced to Stanley, I'm turning in.

What, already?

Yeah, already--a word which for some reason annoyed me as much as anything had all day. I swung myself into the bunk.

Guess I'm more foresighted than I knew, I heard Stanley go on, to bring Doctor Hall along for company.

Who? I asked, my eyes open again at this. Gros Ventre's physician was Doc Spence, and I knew he was nowhere near our vicinity.

Stanley lanked himself up and casually went over to the packs. Doctor Hall, he repeated as he brought out his good hand from a pack, a brown bottle of whiskey in it. Doctor Al K. Hall.

The night I suppose continued in commotion. But at that age I could have slept through a piano tuners' convention. Came morning, I was up and around--the nearest reef and the peak south beyond it both stood in sun, as if the little square of window had been made into a picture of the Alps--while Stanley still lay flopped in the lower bunk. I lit a fire and went out to check on the horses and brought in a pail of fresh water, and even then he hadn't budged, just was breathing like he'd decided on hibernation. The bottle which had nursed him into that condition, I noticed, was down by

about a third. Telling myself he could starve to death in bed for all I cared, I fashioned breakfast for myself, heating up a can of peas and more or less toasting some slices of bread by holding them over the open stove on a fork.

Eventually Stanley joined the day. As he worked at getting his boots on I gave him some secret scrutiny, but couldn't see that he assayed much better or much worse than the night before, Maybe he just looked that way, sort of absent-mindedly pained, all the time. I offered to heat up some peas for him but he said no, thanks anyway.

At least he seemed ready for campending again, and I broached what was heaviest on my mind: the calendar of our continued companionship.

How long's this going to take, do you think?

Well, you seen what we got into yesterday with Canada Dan. Herders have their own quantities of trouble. Stanley could be seen to be calculating, either the trouble capacities of our next two herders or the extent of my impatience. I suppose we got to figure that it could take most of a day apiece for this pair, too.

Two more days of messing with herders, then the big part of another day to ride back to English Creek--it loomed before me like a career.

What about if we split up? I suggested as if I was naturally business-like. Each tend one herder's camp today?

Stanley considered some more. You would have thought he was doing it in Latin, the time it took him. But finally: I guess

that'd work. You know this piece of country pretty good. So, okay.

Which yahoo do you want, Gufferson or Preston Rozier?

I thought on that. Preston Rozier was a young herder in his second or third year in these mountains. Maybe he had entirely outgrown the high-country whimsams of the sort Canada Dan was showing, and maybe he hadn't. Andy Gustafson on the other hand was a long-timer in the Two country and probably had been given the range between Canada Dan and Preston for the reason that he was savvy enough not to let the bands get mixed.

I'll take Andy.

Okay. You know he's in west of here, about under the middle of the reef. Let's go see sheepherders.

Outside in the wet morning I discovered the possible drawback to my choice, which was that Andy Gustafson's camp supplies were in the pack rig that went on Bubbles. That bothered me some, but when I pictured Stanley and his bandaged hand trying to cope with Bubbles for a day, I figured it fell to me to handle the knothed anyway. At least in my father's universe matters fell that way. So I worked the packs onto the mare for Stanley--she was so tame she all but sang encouragement while the load was going on her--and ^{then} faced the spotty-nosed nemesis. But Bubbles seemed no more snorty and treacherous than usual, and with Stanley taking a left-handed death grip on the bridle again and addressing a steady stream of threats into the horse's ear and with me staying well clear of hooves while getting the packsacks roped on, we had Bubbles loaded in surprisingly good time.

See you back here for beans, Stanley said, and as he reined north toward Preston's camp Pony and I headed west up the mountain, Bubbles grudgingly behind us.

I suppose now hardly anybody knows that horseback way of life on a trail. Even in the situation I was in, that morning was a scene to store away. Pointed west as I was, the horizon of the Rockies extended wider than my vision; to take in the total of peaks I had to move my head as far as I could to either side. It never could be said that this country of the Two didn't offer enough elbow room. For that matter, shinbone and cranium and all other kind, too. Try as you might to be casual about a ride up from English Creek into these mountains, you were doing something sizable. Climbing from the front porch of the planet up into its attic, so to speak.

And this was a morning I was on my own. Atop my own horse and leading a beast of burden, even if the one was short-legged and pudgy and the other too amply justified the term of beast. The twin feelings of aloneness and freedom seemed almost to lift me, send me up over the landscape like a balloon. Of course I know it was the steady climb of the land itself that created that impression. But whatever was responsible, before long I could look back out onto the plains and see the blue dab of Lake Frances, and the water tower of Valier on its east shore--what would that be: fifty miles away, sixty? Somewhat closer was the bulge of trees which marked where Gros Ventre sat in the long procession of English Creek's bankside cottonwoods and willows. I liked to think I could single out a tiny toothpick-point which was the

top of the Catholic steeple there amid the Gros Ventre grove, but realistically that was mostly imagination.

I and my horses went up and up, toward the angle of slope beneath the center of the reef. Eventually a considerable sidehill of timber took the trail from sight, and before Pony and Bubbles and I entered the stand of trees, I whoaed us for a last gaze along all the mountains above and around. They were the sort of thing you would have if every cathedral in the world were lined up along the horizon.

Not much ensued for the first minutes of the forested trail, just a sharpening climb and the route beginning to kink into a series of switchbacks. Sunbeams were threaded down through the pine branches and with that dappled light I didn't even mind being in out of the view for the next little while.

The constancy of a forest is an illusion, though: trees too are mortal and they come down. About in the middle of one of the straight tilts of trail between switchbacks, there lay a fresh downed one poking out over our route, just above the height of a horse. Because of the steep hillside it made an awkward place to try any chopping and I didn't have a saw of any sort. Besides, I was in no real mood to do trail maintenance for my father and the United States Forest Service. I decided I'd need to get off and lead Pony and Bubbles through. But given the disposition of Bubbles, I knew I'd damn well better do it a horse at a time.

I tied Bubbles' lead rope to a middle-sized jackpine--doubling the square knot just to be sure--and led Pony up the trail beyond the

windfall. Be right back with that other crowbait, I assured her as I looped her reins around the leftover limb of a stump.

Bubbles was standing with his neck in the one position he seemed to know for it, stretched out like he was being towed, and I had to haul hard on his lead rope for enough slack to untie my knots.

Come on, churnhead, I said as civilly as I could--Bubbles was not too popular with me anyway, because if he originally hadn't kicked Stanley I wouldn't have been in the camptending mess--and with some tugging persuaded him into motion.

Bubbles didn't like the prospect of the downed tree when we got there. I could see his eyes fix on the shaggy crown limbs overhead, and his ears lay back a little. But one thing about Bubbles, he didn't lead much harder when he was being reluctant than when he wasn't.

I had him most of the way past the windfall when somehow he managed to get a hoof too close in against the hillside, where it brushed against a broken branch dangling straight down from the tree trunk. The branch whisked along that side of him and then in across the front of his left hip toward his crotch, and Bubbles went straight sideways off the mountain.

He of course took the lead rope with him, and me at the end of it like a kite on a string.

I can't say how far downslope I flew, but I was in the air long enough to get good and worried. Plummeting sideways as well as down is unnerving, ~~as hell,~~ your body trying to figure out how to travel in those two directions at once. And a surprising number of thoughts fan

out in your mind, such as whether you are most likely to come down on top of or under the horse below you and which part of you you can best afford to have broken and how long before a search party and why you ever in the first place--

I landed standing up, though. Standing about shin-deep into the sidehill, which had been softened by all the rain.

Horse nostrils could be heard working overtime nearby me, and I discovered the lead rope still was taut in my hand, as if the plunge off the trail had frozen it straight out like a long icicle. What I saw first, though, was not Bubbles but Pony. A horse's eyes are big anyway, but I swear Pony's were the size of Lincoln Zephyr headlights as she peered down over the rim of the trail at Bubbles and me all the way below.

Easy, girl! I called up to her. All I needed next was for Pony to get excited, jerk her reins loose from that stump and quit the country, leaving me down here with this tangled-up packhorse. Easy, Pony! Easy, there. Everything's gonna be--just goddamn dandy.

Sure it was. On my first individual outing I had rolled the packstring, even if it was only one inveterate jughead of a horse named Bubbles. Great wonderful work, campjack McCaskill. Keep on in this brilliant way and you maybe someday can work your way up to moron.

Now I had to try to sort out the situation. A little below me on the sidehill, Bubbles was floundering around a little and snorting a series of alarms. The favorable part of that was that he was up on

his feet. Not only up, but showing a greater total of vigor than he had during the whole pack trip so far. So Bubbles was in one piece, I seemed to be intact, and the main damage I could see on the packs was a short gash in the canvas where something snagged it on our way down. Sugar or salt was trickling from there, but it looked as if I could move a crossrope over enough to pinch the hole shut.

I delivered Bubbles a sound general cussing, meanwhile working along the lead rope until I could grab his bridle and then reach his neck. From there I began to pat my way back, being sure to make my cussing sound a little more soothing, to get to the ruptured spot on the pack.

When I put my hand onto the crossrope to tug it across the gash, the pack moved a bit. I tugged again in a testing way, and all the load on Bubble's back moved a bit.

Son of a goddamn sonofabitch, I remember was all I managed to come out with to commemorate this discovery. That wasn't too bad under the circumstance, for the situation called for either hard language or hot tears, and maybe it could be pinpointed that right there I grew out of the bawling age into the cussing one.

Bubble's downhill excursion had broken the lash cinch, the one that holds the packs into place on a horse's back. So I had a packhorse whole and healthy--and my emotions about Bubbles having survived in good fettle were now getting radically mixed--but no way to secure his load onto him. I was going to have to ride somewhere for a new cinch, or at the very least to get this one repaired.

Choices about like Canada Dan's menu of mutton or sheep meat, those. Stanley by now was miles away at Preston Rozier's camp. Besides, with his hand and his thirst both the way they were, I wasn't sure he would be much of a repairer anyway. Or I could climb on Pony, head back down the trail all the way to the English Creek station, and tell that father of mine to come mend the fix he'd pitched me into.

That second notion held appeal of several kinds. I would be rid of Stanley and responsibility for him. I'd done all I could, it was in no way my fault that Bubbles had schottished off a mountaintop. Most of all, delivering my predicament home to English Creek would serve my father right.

Yet when I came right down to it, I was bothered by the principle of anyone coming to my rescue. There was that about this damned in-between age, too. I totally did not want to be in the hell of a fix I was. Yet somehow I just as totally did not relish resorting to anybody else to pluck me out of it.

So I got to wondering. There ought to be some way in this world to contrive that damn cinch back together. If you're going to get by in the Forest Service you better be able to fix anything but the break of day, my father said every spring when he set in to refurbish all the English Creek equipment. Not that I was keen on taking him as an example just then, but--

No hope came out of my search of Bubbles and the packs; any kind of thong or spare leather was absent. The saddlestrings on my saddle up there where Pony was I did think of, but couldn't figure how to

let go of Bubbles while I went to get them; having taken up mountaineering so passionately, there was no telling where Bubbles would crash off to if I wasn't there to hang onto him.

I started in to look myself over for possibilities. Hat, joseph coat, ~~short~~ⁱ: no help. Belt--though I hated to think of it, I maybe could cut that up into leather strips. No, better, down there: my forester boots, a bootlace: a bootlace just by God might do the trick.

By taking a wrap of Bubbles' lead rope around the palm of my left hand I was more or less able to use the thumb and fingers to grasp the last^h cinch while I punched holes in it with my jackknife. When I had a set of them accomplished on either side of the break, I threaded the bootlace back and forth, back and forth, and at last tied it to make a splice. Then, Bubbles' recent standard of behavior uppermost in my mind, I made one more set of holes farther along each part of the cinch and wove in the remainder of the bootlace as a second splice for safety's sake. I now had a boot gaping open like an unbuckled overshoe, but the cinch looked as if it ought to lift a boxcar.

Now there remained only the matter of getting Bubbles back up where he had launched from.

Probably the ensuing ruckus amounted to only about twenty minutes of fight-and-drag, though it seemed hours. Bubbles would take a step and balk. Balk and take a step. Fright or exasperation or obstinance or whatever other mood can produce it had him dry-farting like the taster in a popcorn factory. Try to yank me back down the

slope. Balk again, and let himself slide back down the slope a little. Sneeze, then fart another series. Shake the packs in hope the splice would let go.

I at last somehow worked his head up level with the trail and then simply leaned back on the lead rope until he exhausted his various acts and had to look around at where he was. When the sight of the trail registered in his tiny mind, he pranced on up as if it was his own idea all along.

I sat for awhile to recover my breath--after tying Bubbles to the biggest tree around, with a triple square knot^z--and sort of take stock. There's this to be said for exertion, it does send your blood tickling through your brain. When I was through resting I directly went over to Bubbles, thrust an arm into the pack with the canned goods and pulled cans out until I found the ones of tomatoes. If I ever did manage to get this ^{menagerie} ~~expedition~~ to Andy Gustafson's camp I was going to be able to say truthfully that I'd had lunch and did not need feeding by one more shepherd. Then I sat back down, opened two cans with my jackknife, and imbibed tomatoes. One thing about canned tomatoes, my father every so often said during a trail meal, if you're thirsty you can drink them and if you're hungry you can eat them. Maybe, I conceded, he was right once in his life.

By the time I reached Andy Gustafson's camp my neck was thoroughly cricked from the constant looking back over my shoulder to see if the packs were staying on Bubbles. They never shifted, though. Thank God

for whoever invented bootlaces.

Andy's band was spread in nice fashion along both sides of a timbered draw. If you have the courage to let them, sheep will scatter themselves into a slow comfortable graze even in up-and-down country. But it takes a herder who is sure of himself and has a sort of sixth sense against coyotes and bear. Les Withrow claimed that the best herder he ever had on the Two, prior to Pete Hoy, was an irrigator he'd hired in one of the war years when he couldn't find anybody else. The guy never had herded before and didn't even take much interest in the band of sheep; What he did was ride the canyon and shoot at everything that was just a little suspicious. If it was black, a burnt stump, he'd have to blaze away at it. Tending his camp this one time, I happened to look up over onto the opposite ridge and I said, "Say, there's something over there that kind of resembles a bear." Jesus, he jumped for that rifle and BOOM! BOOM! After he got those touched off he stopped to take a look. "No," he says, "no, I guess it ain't, it didn't run." While he terrorized anything shaggy the sheep did pretty much as they pleased, and Les said that year's lambs were just beautiful, averaging 91 pounds. These sheep of Andy's in contentment along this draw were going to yield the Busby brothers some dandy poundage, too. They would need to, to offset Canada Dan's jumpy band.

Andy Gustafson had no trove of dead camased ewes, nor any particular complaints, nor even much to say. He was wrinkled up in puzzlement for awhile as to why it was me that was tending his camp, even after I explained as best I could, and I saw some speculation again when he

noticed me slopping along with one boot unlaced. But once he'd checked through the groceries I'd brought to make sure that a big can of coffee and some tins of sardines were in there, and his weekly newspaper as well--Norwegian sheepherders seemed to come in two varieties, those whose acquaintance with the alphabet stopped stubbornly with the X they used for a signature and those who would quit you in an instant if you ever forgot to bring their mail copy of Nordiske Tidende--Andy seemed perfectly satisfied. He handed me his list of personals for the next campending--razor blades, a pair of socks, Bull Durham--and away I went.

Where a day goes in the mountains I don't know, but by the time I reached the cabin again it was almost the end of afternoon. Stanley's saddle sorrel and the black packhorse were picketed a little way off, and Stanley emerged to offer me as usual whatever left-handed help he could manage in unsaddling Bubbles.

He noticed the spliced cinch. See you had to use a little wildwood glue on the outfit.

I grunted something or other to that, and Stanley seemed to divine that it was not a topic I cared to dwell on. He switched to a question: How's old Gufferson?

He said about three words total. I wouldn't exactly call that bellyaching. This sounded pretty tart even to me, so I added: And he had his sheep in a nice Wyoming scatter, there west of his wagon.

Preston's on top of things, too, Stanley reported. Hasn't lost

any, and his lambs are looking just real good. Plain as anything, then, there was one sore thumb up here on the Busby^Ws allotment and its name was Canada Dan.

Stanley extended the thought aloud. Looks like Dan's asking for a ticket to town.

I didn't follow that. In all the range ritual I knew, and even in the perpetual wrestle between ~~Dede Spencer~~ ^{Les Withrow} and Pete Hoy, the herder always was angling to provoke a reason for quitting, not to be fired. Being fired from any job was a taint; a never-sought smudge.

The puzzle pursued me on into the cabin. As Stanley stepped to the stove to try rev the fire a little, I asked: You mean Canada Dan wants to get canned?

Looks like. It can happen that way. A fellow'll get in a situation and try make it worse so he'll get chucked out of it. My guess is, Dan's feeling thirsty and is scared of this timber as well, but doesn't want to admit either one to himself. Easier to blame onto somebody else. Stanley paused. Question is, whether to try disappoint him out of the idea or just go ahead and can him. I will say that Canada Dan is not such a helluva human being that I want to put up with an entire summer of his crap.

This was a stiffer Stanley than I had yet seen. This one you could imagine giving Canada Dan the reaming out he so richly deserved.

The flash of backbone didn't last long, though. But I guess he's the Busby boys' decision, not mine.

Naturally the day was too far gone for us to ride home to English

Creek, so I embarked on the chores of wood and water again, at least salving myself with the prospect that tomorrow I would be relieved of Stanley. We would rise in the morning--and I intended it would be an early rise indeed--and ride down out of here and I would resume my summer at the English Creek ranger station and Stanley would sashay on past to the Busby brothers' ranch and that would be that.

When I stumped in with the water pail, that unlaced left boot of mine all but flapping in the breeze, I saw Stanley study the situation. Too bad we can't slice up Bubbles for bootlaces, he offered.

That'd help, I answered shortly.

I never like to tell anybody how to wear his boots. But if it was me, now--

I waited while Stanley paused to speculate out the cabin window to where dusk was beginning to deepen the color of the peaks. But I wasn't in any mood to wait very damn long.

You were telling me all about boots, I prompted kind of sarcastically.

Yeah. Well. If it was me now, I'd take that one shoestring you got there, and cut it in half, and lace up each boot with a piece as far as it'll go. Ought to keep them from slopping off your feet, anyhow.

I did the halving, and the boots then laced firm as far as my insteps. The high tops pooched out like funnels, but at least now I could get around without one boot always threatening to slop off.

One chore remained. I went over to the bunks, reached into my bedroll and pulled out my clean shirt. The remainder of the tail of it, I jackknifed off. Stanley's hand didn't look quite so hideous this time when we rewrapped it, but still was no prize winner.

Well, Stanley announced now, you got me nursed. Seems like the next thing ought to be a call on the doctor. And almost before he was through saying it, last night's bottle reappeared over the table, its neck tilted into Stanley's cup.

Before Stanley got too deep into his oil of joy, there was one more major point I wanted tended to. Diplomatically I began, Suppose we ought to give some thought--

--to supper Stanley finished for me. I had something when I got back from Preston's camp. But you go ahead.

It dawned on me that now that we had tended the camps the packs were empty of groceries, which meant that we--or at least I, because so far I had no evidence that Stanley ever required any food--were at the mercy of whatever was on hand in Stanley's own small supply pack. I dug around in there, but about all I saw that looked promising was an aging loaf^f of bread and some Velveeta cheese. So I made some sandwiches out of that and mentally marked up one more charge against my father.

When I'd finished it still was only twilight, and Stanley just had applied the bottle to the cup for a second time. Oh, it looked like another dandy evening ahead, all right.

Right then, though, a big idea came to me.

I cleared my throat to make way for the words of it. Then:

I believe maybe I'll have me one, too.

Stanley had put his cup down on the table but was resting his good hand over the top of it as if there was a chance it might hop away. One what?

One of those--doctor visits. A swig.

This drew me a considerable look from Stanley. He let go of his cup and scratched an ear. Just how old 're you?

Fifteen, I maintained, borrowing the next few months.

Stanley did some more considering, but by now I was figuring out that if he didn't say no right off the bat, chances were he wouldn't get around to saying it at all. At last: Got to wet your wick sometime, I guess. Can't see how a swallow or two can hurt you. He transferred the bottle to a place on the table nearer me.

Copying his style of pouring, I tilted the cup somewhat at the same time I was tipping the bottle. Just before I thought Stanley might open his mouth to say something, I ended the flow.

It is just remarkable how a little piece of memory can help you out at the right time. I recalled something I'd heard once when I was in Medicine Lodge saloon with my father and repeated it now in salute to Stanley:

Here's how.

How, Stanley said back automatically.

Evidently I swigged somewhat deeper than I intended. By the time I set my cup down on the board table, I had to blink hard.

While I was at this, Stanley meanwhile had got up to shove wood into the stove.

So what do you think? he inquired. Will it ever replace water?

I didn't know about that, but the elixir of Doctor Hall did thaw my tongue. Before long I heard myself asking, You haven't been in the Two country the last while, have you?

Naw.

Where you been?

Oh, just a lot of places. Stanley seemed to review them on the cabin wall. Down in Colorado for awhile. Talk about dry. Half that state was blowing around chasing after the other half. And Wyoming. I was association rider in that Cody country a summer or two. Then Montana here again for a while, over in the Big Hole Basin. A couple of haying seasons there. He considered, summed: Around. Which moved him to another drag from his cup.

I had one from mine, too. What're you doing back up in this country?

Taking up a career in tending camp, as you can plainly see. Don't you know, Jick, they advertise in those big newspapers for one-handed raggedy-ass camptenders? You bet they do.

He seemed sort of sensitive on that topic, so I switched around to something I knew would take him in a different direction. Are you from around here originally?

Not hardly. Not a Two Medicine man by birth. He glanced at me. Like you. Naw, I--

Stanley Meixell originated in Missouri, on a farm east of St. Joe in Daviess County. As he told it, the summer he turned thirteen he encountered the down-row of corn--that tumbled line of cornstalks knocked over by the harvest wagon as it straddled its way through the field. Custom was that the youngest of the crew always was put on the down-row, and Stanley was the last of five Meixell boys. Ahead of him stretched a green gauntlet of down-row summers. Except that by the end of the first sweltering day of stooping and ferreting for ears of corn, Stanley came to his decision about further Missouri life. Within the week I was headed out to the Kansas high plains. If you're like me you think of Kansas as one eternal wheatfield, but actually western Kansas then was cattle country; Dodge City was out there, after all.

Four or five years of ranch jobs ensued for Stanley, and also a reputation for being able to cope. We were dehorning these Texas steers one time. There was one old ornery sonofabitch of a buckskin steer we never could get corralled with the rest. After so long the ~~for~~^sman said he'd pay five dollars for anyone that would bring this steer in. Another snot-nose kid and I decided we'd just be the ones and bring him on in. We come onto him about three miles away from the corral, all by himself, and he was really on the prod. Tried to drive him and couldn't. Well, then we figured we'd rope him and drag him in. Then we got to thinking, three miles is quite a drag, ain't it? So we each loosed out our lariat, about ten feet of it, and took turns to get out in front of him and pop him across the nose with that rope. When we done that he'd make a hell of a big run at us and we'd dodge ahead out of his way, and he choused us

back toward the corral that way. We finally got him up within about a quarter of a mile of the dehorning. Then each of us roped an end and tied him down and went into the ranch and hitched up a stoneboat and loaded him on and boated him in in high old style. The foreman was waiting for us with five silver dollars in his hand.

I was surprised at how interesting I found all this. As Stanley talked my cup had drained itself without my really noticing. When Stanley stopped to tip another round into his cup, I followed suit. The whiskey was weaving a little bit of wooze around me, so I was especially pleased that I was able to dredge back from something I'd overheard yet another toast. I offered it heartily:

Here's lead in your pencil!

That one made Stanley look at me sharply for a moment, but he said only as he had the first time, How, and tipped his cup.

As happens, Stanley's story went on, something came along to dislodge him from that cowboying life. It was a long bunkhouse winter, weather just bad enough to keep him cooped on the ranch. I'd go give the cows a little hay two times a day and otherwise all there was to do was sit around and do hairwork. Each time he was in the barn he would pluck strands from the horses' tails, then back he went beside the bunkhouse stove to braid horsehair quirts and bridles and eventually even a whole damn lasso. By the end of that hairwork winter the tails of the horses had thinned drastically, and so had Stanley's patience with Kansas.

On the 17th of March of 1898, to be real exact, Stanley boarded

the first train of his life. From someone he had heard about Montana and a go-ahead new town called Kalispell. Two days and two nights on that train. The shoebox full of fried chicken one of those Kansas girls fixed for me didn't quite last the trip through. As the train descended from the Rockies to the Flathead Valley Stanley became curious as to what kind of country he was getting into. Just in east of Columbia Falls I went out on the back platform and stood there all the way to Kalispell, and you'd never believe it now, Jick, but it was solid timber across that valley, forest and more forest just whirling past that train. Two or three times, I saw cabins in little clearings. The sight is still clear in my mind because it was early in the morning and each one of those cabins had a thread of smoke rising out of it, people having just got up and started their day's fire.

In Kalispell then, you could hear hammers going all over town. For the next few years Stanley grew up with the community. He worked mill jobs, driving a sawdust cart, sawfiling, foremaning a lumber piling crew. Another spell, he even was a river pig, during one of the log drives on the north fork of the Flathead. Then in '02, a fellow came to me and wanted to know if I would manage his outfit that winter. He had a contract for hauling lumber from Lake Blaine into Kalispell. Had a bunch of four-horse teams, about half a dozen of them, on this job, and the scissorbill he'd had in charge was inclined to hang around the saloons and poker tables and let the setup go to general hell. So right away I made it ^t~~y~~aw that the drivers had to be at the barn 6:30 every morning so as to hitch up and be on that road by 7. It'd been their

habit under the scissorbill to get away from the barn late as 8 or 9 o'clock and then trot those horses out about ten miles to Lake Blaine. Well, hell, by the time they got out there to the lumber mill naturally they were all warmed up and then would stand there and get cold during the loading and so of course were all getting sick and losing flesh. All I did was to make the drivers walk those teams both ways, and we never had a sick horse all that winter.

Teamstering, river pigging, foremanning: all this history of Stanley's was unexpected to me. I'd supposed, from my distant memory of him having been in our lives when I was so small, that he was just another camp tender or maybe even the association rider back when this range was occupied by cattle instead of sheep. Then something else peeped in a corner of my mind. You said when we got here that you'd been to this cabin before?

Lots of times. I go back farther than it does: I seen it being built. We were sighting out that fenceline over there when Dode Spencer's daddy started dragging in the logs for it.

Being built? Sighting the boundary fenceline? The history was skipping to ancient times of the Two now, and it and the whiskey together were compounding my confusion. What, were you up here with a Geological Survey crew or something?

The look Stanley fastened on me now was the levellest thing in that cabin.

Jick, I was the ranger that set up the Two.

Surely my face hung open so far you could have trotted a cat

through it. It was part of all I could remember, hearing my father and the other Forest Service men of his age mention those original rangers, the ones who were sent out in the first years of the century with not much more than the legal description of a million or so acres and orders to transform them into a national forest. The forest arrangers, the men of my father's generation nicknamed them. Glen Smith down on the Custer National Forest, Ellers Koch on the Bitterroot, Brady Coover on the Libby, Joe Quisenberry on the Beaverhead; the tales of them still circulated, refreshed by the comments of the younger rangers wondering how they'd managed to do all they had. I could imagine that once, young officers in blue and gray had talked in similar tones about Grant and Lee. Everybody in the Forest Service told forest arranger stories at any chance. But that Stanley Meixell, wronghanded campjack and frequenter of Doctor Al K. Hall, had been the original ranger of the Two Medicine National Forest, I had never heard a breath of; and this was strange.

#