"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 beneath the cliff face of Roman Reef 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 shepherders.

"Which camp do we head for first?" I called ahead to him.

"Canada Dan's, he's the closest. About under that promontory in the Reef is where his wagon is. If we sift right along for the next couple hours or so we'll be there." Stanley and the sorrel were on the move again, in that easy style longtime riders and their accustomed horses have. One instant you see the pair of them standing and the next you see them in motion together, and there's been no rigamarole in between. Stopped and now going, that's all. But Stanley did leave behind for me the observation: "Quite a day to be going places, ain't it."

"Yeah, I guess."

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. And before long, he was absent again. This time when he didn't show up and didn't show up, I halted Pony and waited. As I was about to go back and start a search, here Stanley came, calling out as before: "Be right there,"

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 the next time Stanley lagged from sight, I was determined to wait until he 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 Suzy,  
She's got a doozy.  
Suzy take my dollar away."

When Stanley drew even with me, I still 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, black—I thought—enough to scan at the back 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, most likely. 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 Suzy 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 knotheaded packhorse.
"But she tell him no luck, 
the price is an extra buck, 
him and the banjo make two."

I spent a strong hour or so in contemplation of my father and just what he had saddled me with, here. All the while mad enough to bite sticks in two. Innocent as a goddamn daisy, I had let my father detour me up the trail with Stanley Meixell. And now to find that my trail compadre showed every sign of being a warbling boozehound. Couldn't I, for Christ's sake, be told the full extent of the situation before I was shoved into it? What was in the head of that father of mine? Anything?

After this siege of mull, a new angle of thought did break through. It occurred to me to wonder just how my father ought to have alerted me to Stanley's condition beforehand. 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 pantomimmed 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 lodgepole pine. When we rode up a lot of blattering 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. 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 theirselves before you can say sic 'em." Canada Dan reported all this as if he was an accidental passerby instead of being responsible for these animals. Remains of 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.

The three of us looked at the corpses for awhile. There's not all that much conversation to be made 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's we can lug these pelts in. We got it to do." We? "Guess I better go get at my end of 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. Manhandling each rain-soaked corpse onto its back, steadying it there, then starting in with that big incision from tail to jaw which, if your jackknife slips just a little deep there at the belly, brings the guts pouring out onto your project. Slice around above all four hooves and then down the legs to the big cut, then skin out the hind legs and
keep on trimming and tugging at the pelt, like peeling long underwear off somebody dead. It grudges me even now to say so,

but Stanley was accurate, it did have 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. That it was necessary did not make it less snotty a job, though. 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 the allergy known as wool poisoning, so that the dread 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, straddled in there over the bloated bellies and amid the 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 Canada Dan 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 goddamn 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 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 anywhere near representative, sheepherders didn't seem
to be bargains of companionship 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 climb on I did, 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 shepherder 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 front of your face," 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, 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 and then was supported by a gate leg which folded down, and Stanley had tucked himself onto the seat on one side of our dining site. 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 get 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 Walter Kyle's and Fritz Hahn's bands. 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 my father 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 toward 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 sumbitch 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 the school section. Fact is"—Stanley here took the chance to shove away his still mutton-laden plate and climb onto 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.

The line cabin stood just outside the eastern boundary of the Two forest, partway back down the mountain. We rode 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 finally run out of bottle,
and at least I could look forward to an unpickled companion from here on. I hoped he wasn't the kind who came down with the DTs as he dried out.

Our route angled us down in such a back and forth way that Roman Reef steadily stood above us now on one side, now on our other. A half-mile-high stockade of graybrown stone, claiming all the sky to the west. Even with Stanley and thunderclouds on my mind I made room in there to appreciate the might of Roman Reef. Of the peaks and buttresses of the Two generally, for as far as I'm concerned, Montana without its mountain ranges would just be Nebraska stretched north.

At last, ahead of us showed up an orphan outcropping, a formation like a crown of rock but about as big as a railroad roundhouse. Below it ran the boundary fence, and just outside the fence the line cabin. About time, too, because we were getting some first spits of rain, and thunder was telling of lightning not all that far off.

The whole way from Canada Dan's sheepwagon Stanley had said never a word nor even glanced ahead any farther than his horse's ears. Didn't even stir now as we reached the boundary fence of barbwire. 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 came a terrific yell:

"GODaMIGHTy, get aWAY from that!"
I jumped back as if flung, looking crazily around to see what had roused Stanley like this.

"Go find a club and knock the gatewire off 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 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 South Fork road from the English Creek ranger 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 trotting 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 spotty head off if the horse 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 diddling 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 stacked them in a corner.

By now thunder was applauding lightning below us as well as above 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 lit a kerosene lantern and waited for the stove to produce some result. 

"Feels in here like it's gonna frost," I muttered. 

"Yeah," Stanley agreed. "About six inches deep."

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 spattering onto the cabin window and evidently was reminded that his pronouncement came close to being good news. "Still," he amended, "you never know."

The cabin was not much of a layout. Simply a roofed-over bin of
lodgepole

logs, maybe fifteen feet long and ten wide and with a single
window beside the door at the south end. But at least it'd be drier
than outside. Outside in fact was showing every sign of anticipating
a nightlong bath. The face of the Rocky Mountains gets more weather
than any other place I know of and a person just has 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
soused from the rain but luckily 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 eternity.

His stillness set me to wondering. 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 too awful 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 began to untie 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 hoof had shaved off skin: raw and seepy and butchered-looking.


"Aw, could be worse." Even as he said so, though, Stanley seemed more pale and eroded around the eyes. "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 shirt."

"Your ma's gonna like to find that."
I shrugged. Trouble was lined up deep enough here in company with Stanley that my mother's turn at it seemed a long way off.

"Feels like new," Stanley tried to assure me, moving his bandaged hand with a flinch he didn't want to show and I didn't really want to see. What if he passed out on me? What if—I tried to think of anything I had ever heard about blood poisoning and gangrene. Supposedly those took a while to develop. But then, this stint of mine with Stanley was beginning to seem like a while.

I figured it was time to try get Stanley's mind, not to say my own, off his wound, and to bring up what I considered 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. I held another considerable mental conversation with U.S. forest ranger Varick McCaskill about that, meanwhile fighting the stove to get any real heat from it. At last I managed to warm a can of provisions I dug out of one of the packs of groceries for the herders, and exploring further I came up with bread and some promising sandwich material.
An imminent meal is my notion of a snug fortune. I was even humming the Pancho and Sancho and Suzy tune when, ready to dine, I sat myself down across the table from Stanley.

He looked a little quizzical, then drew in a deep sniff. Then queried:

"Is that menu of yours what I think it is?"

"Huh? Just pork and beans, and an onion sandwich. Why?"

"Never mind."

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 was growing steadily more rambunctious. Along those mountainsides thunder can roll and roll, and constant claps were arriving to us now like beer barrels tumbling down stairs.

Now, an electrical storm is not something I am fond of. And here along the east face of the Rockies, any of these big rock thrusts, such as that crown outcropping up the slope from the cabin, notoriously can draw down lightning bolts. In fact, the more I pondered that outcropping, the less comfortable I became with the fact that it neighbored us.

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:

\[
\text{a-mile-from-here-to-there.}
\]

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 board roof.

"Sounds like we got a dewy night ahead of us," Stanley offered. He looked a little perkier now, for whatever reason. Myself, I was beginning to droop, the day catching up with me. I did some more thunder-counting whenever I happened to glimpse a crackle of light out the window, but came up with pretty much the same mileage each time and so began to lose attention toward that. Putting this day out of its misery seemed a better and better idea.

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 prostrate 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 and light. I know I had trouble getting air into my body, past the blockade where my heart was trying to climb out my throat.

Stanley, though, didn't show any particular ruffle at all. "The quick hand of God, my ma used to say."

"Yeah, well," I informed him when I found the breath for it, "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—or if it hadn't, I might as well be dead in bed as anywhere else—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.

Leaning over to unlace my forester boots, a high-topped old pair of my father's I had grown into, I fully felt how much the day had fagged me. The laces were a downright chore. But once my boots and socks were off I indulged in a promising yawn, pulled out what was left of my shirt tail, and swung myself into the upper 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 weather of 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 while Stanley still lay flopped in the lower bunk.
First thing, I made a beeline to the window. No snow. Not only was I saved from being wintered in with Stanley, but Roman Reef and all the peaks south beyond it stood in sun, as if the little square of window had been made into a summer picture of the Alps. It still floors me, how the mountains are not the same any two days in a row. As if hundreds of copies of those mountains exist and each dawn brings in a fresh one, of new color, new prominence of some feature over the others, a different wrapping of cloud or rinse of sun for this day's version.

I lit a fire and went out to check on the horses and brought in a pail of fresh water, and even then Stanley 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 Stanley 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 did join the day. As he worked at getting his boots on I gave him some secret scrutiny. I couldn't see, though, that he assayed much better or 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 breakfast peas for him but he said no, thanks anyway.

At last Stanley seemed ready for camp tending again, and I figured it was time to broach 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 always got 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 better figure it'll 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 businesslike. "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 don't see offhand why that wouldn't work. You know this piece of country pretty good. Take along the windchester," meaning his rifle. "If any bear starts eating on me he'll pretty soon give up on account of gristle."

Stanley pondered some more to see whether anything further was going to visit his mind, but nothing did. "So, yeah. We got it to do, might as well get at it. Which ahoo do you want, Gufferson or Sanford Hebner?"

I thought on that. Sanford was in his second or third summer in these mountains. Maybe he had entirely outgrown the high-country whimwhams 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 Sanford
for the reason that he was savvy enough not to let the bands of sheep get mixed. I was more than ready to be around somebody with savvy, for a change.

"I'll take Andy."

"Okey-doke. I guess you know where he is, in west of here, about under the middle of Roman 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 hamburgered hand trying to cope with Bubbles for a day, I figured it fell to me to handle the knothead anyway. At least in my father's universe matters fell that way. So I worked the packs onto the black 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 not particularly more snorty and treacherous than usual, and with Stanley taking a left-handed death grip on the halter 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 toward Sanford'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. I have always thought that horseback is the ideal way to see
country, if you just didn't have to deal with the damn horse, and one
thing to be said for Pony was that she was so gentle and steady you
could almost forget she was down there. As for the trail itself—even
in the situation I was in, this scene was one 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 into its attic,
so to speak.

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, thirty miles away, thirty-five? About half
as far off was the bulge of trees which marked where the town of Gros
Ventre sat in the long procession of English Creek's bankside cottonwoods
and willows. Gros Ventre: pronounced GROVE on, in that front-end way
that town names of French origin get handled in Montana, making Choteau
SHOW toh and Havre HAV er and Wibaux WEE boh. Nothing entertained
residents of Gros Ventre more than hearing some tourist or other outlander
pop out with gross ventree. My father, though, figured that the joke
was also on the town: "Not a whole hell of a lot of them know that Gros
Ventre's the French for Big Belly." Of course, where all this started
is that Gros Ventre is the name of an Indian tribe, although not what
might be called a local one. The Gros Ventres originally, before Reservation days, were up in the Milk River country near the Canadian line. Why a place down here picked up that tribe's name I didn't really know. Toussaint Rennie was the one who knew A to Why about the Two country. Sometime I would have to ask him this name question.

Distant yet familiar sites offering themselves above and below me, and a morning when 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 definitely justified the term of beast. Entrusted with a Winchester 30.06, not that I ever was one to look forward to shooting it out with a bear. A day to stand the others up against, this one. The twin feelings of aloneness and freedom seemed to lift and 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, I was glad enough to accept such soaring.

Quite possibly I ought to think about this as a way of life, I by now was telling myself. By which I didn't mean chaperoning Stanley Meixell. One round of that likely was enough for a lifetime. But packing like this, running a packstring as Isidor Pronovost did for my father—that was worth spending some daydreams on. Yes, definitely a packer's career held appeal. Be your own boss out on the trail. Fresh air, exercise, scenery. Adventure. One of the stories my father told oftenest was of being with Isidor on one of the really high trails farthest back in these mountains of the Two, where a misstep by one horse or mule might pull all the rest into a tumble a few thousand feet
down the slope, when Isidor turned in his saddle and conversationally said: "Mac, if we was to roll this packstring right about here, the buggers'd bounce till they stunk."

Maybe a quieter mountain job than packing. Forest fire lookout, up there in one of Franklin Delano's lighthouses. Serene as a hermit, a person could spend summers in a lookout cabin atop the Two. Peer around like a human hawk for smoke. Heroic work. Fresh air, scenery, some codger like Stanley to fetch your groceries up the mountainside to you. The new Billy Peak lookout might be the prime job. I'd be finding that out right now if my father hadn't detoured me into companioning damn old Stanley. Well, next year, next counting trip--

Up and up I and my horses and my dreams went, toward the angle of slope beneath the center of Roman 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.

A forest's look of being everlasting is an illusion. Trees too are mortal and they come down. I was about to face one such. In the middle of a straight tilt of trail between switchbacks, there lay a fresh downed
lodgepole pine poking out over my route, just above the height of a horse.

On one of my father's doctrines of mountain travel I had a light little cruising ax along with me. But the steep hillside made an awkward place to try any chopping and what I didn't have was 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 studied the toppled lodgepole. It barred the trail to me in the saddle, but there was just room enough for a riderless horse to pass beneath. All I needed to do was 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 pine--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 fixed 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 suppose it can be said that I flubbed the dub on all this. That the whole works came about as the result of my reluctance to clamber up that sidehill and do axwork. Yet answer me this, was I the first person not to do what I didn't want to? Nor was goddamn Bubbles blameless, now was he? After all, I had him most of the way past the windfall before he somehow managed to swing his hindquarters too close in against the hillside, where he inevitably brushed against a broken branch dangling down from the tree trunk. Even that wouldn't have set things off, except for the branch whisking in across the front of his left hip toward his crotch.

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, 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 more or less upright, though. Upright and being towed down the slope of the mountain in giant galloping strides, sinking about shin-deep every time, the dirt so softened by all the rain.
After maybe a dozen of those plowing footfalls, my journey ended. 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 fashion and you maybe someday can hope to 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 halter 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 Sanford Hebner's camp. Besides, with his hand and his thirst both the way they were, I wasn't sure how much of a repairer he would prove to be 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.

This second notion held appeal of numerous kinds. I would be rid
of Stanley and responsibility for him. I'd done all I could, in no way
was it my fault that Bubbles had schottisched off a mountaintop. Most
of all, delivering my predicament home to English Creek would serve my
father right. He was the instigator of all this; who better to haul
himself up here and contend with the mess?

Yet when I came right down to it I was bothered by the principle
of anyone venturing to my rescue. I could offer all the alibis this side
of Halifax, but the truth of it still stood. Somebody besides myself
would be fishing me out of trouble. Here was yet another consequence of
my damned in-between age. I totally did not want to be in the hell of a fix
I was. Yet somehow I just as much did not relish resorting to anybody
else to pluck me out of it. Have you ever been dead-centered that way?
Hung between two schools of thought, neither one of which you wanted to
give in to? Why the human mind doesn't positively split in half in such
a situation, I don't know.

As I was pondering back and forth that way I happened to rub my
forehead with the back of my free hand. It left moisture above my brow.
Damn. One more sign of my predicament: real trouble always makes the backs
of my hands sweat. I suppose nerves cause it. Whatever does, it spooks
a person to have his hands sweating their own worry like that.

"That's just about enough of all this," I said out loud, apparently
to Pony and Bubbles and maybe to my sweating hands and the mountainside
and I suppose out across the air toward Stanley Meixell and Varick McCaskill as well. And to myself, too. For some part of my mind had spurned the back-and-forth debate of whether to go fetch Stanley or dump the situation in my father's lap, and instead 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 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 here to hang onto him.

I started looking myself over for possibilities.

Hat, coat, shirt: no help.

Belt: though I hated to think of it, I maybe could cut that up into leather strips. Yet would they be long enough if I did. 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 lash cinch while I punched holes in it with my jackknife. All the while, of course, talking sweetly to Bubbles. When I had a set
of holes 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 insurance. In a situation like this, you had better do things the way you're supposed to do them.

I now had a boot gaping open like an unbuckled overshoe, but the lash cinch looked as if it ought to lift a boxcar. I did some more brow-wiping, and lectured Bubbles on the necessity of standing still so that I could retie his packs into place. I might as well have saved my breath. Even on level ground, contriving a forty-foot lash rope into a diamond hitch means going endlessly back and forth around the pack horse to do the loops and lashes and knots, and on a mountainside with Bubbles fidgeting and twitching every which way, the job was like trying to weave eels.

At last I got that done. Now there remained only the matter of negotiating Bubbles back up to where he had launched from. Talk about an uphill job. But as goddamn Stanley would've observed to me, I had it to do.

Probably the ensuing ruckus amounted to only about twenty minutes of fight-and-drag, though it seemed hours. Right then you could not have sold me all the packhorses on the planet for a nickel. 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. Start over on the balking.

I at last somehow worked his head up level with the trail and then simply leaned back on the lead rope until Bubbles exhausted his various acts and had to glance 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--and sort of take stock. The pulling contest definitely had taken all the jingle out of me.

There's this to be said for exertion, though. It does send your blood tickling through your brain. When I was through resting I directly went over to Bubbles, addressed him profanely, 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 to Andy Gustafson's sheep camp I was going to be able to say truthfully that I'd had lunch and did not need feeding by one more sheepherder.

I sat back down, opened two cans with my jackknife, and imbibed tomatoes. "One thing about canned tomatoes," my father had the habit of saying 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 about that one thing.

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 right under the cliff of Roman Reef. If you have the courage to let them--more of it, say, than was possessed by a certain bozo named Canada Dan--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.

I was greeted by a little stampede of about a dozen lambs toward me.
They are absent-minded creatures and sometimes will glance up and run
to the first moving thing they see, which was the case with these now.
When they figured out that Pony and Bubbles and I were not their mommas,
they halted, peered at us a bit, then rampaged off in a new direction.
Nothing is more likeable than a lamb bucking in fun. First will come that
waggle of the tail, a spasm of wriggles faster than the eye can follow.
Then a stiff-legged jump sideways, the current of joy hitting the little
body so quick there isn't time to bend its knees. Probably a bleat,
byeahhh, next, and then the romping run. Watching them you have to
keep reminding yourself that lambs grow up, and what is pleasantly
foolish in a lamb's brain is going to linger on to be just dumbness
in the mind of a full-size ewe.

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 camptending—razor blades, a pair of socks, Copenhagen snoose—and away I went.

Where a day goes in the mountains I don't know, but by the time I reached the cabin again the afternoon was almost done. 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."

"Sanford'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 Busbys' allotment and it went by the name of Canada Dan.

Stanley extended the thought aloud. "Looks like Dan's asking for a ticket to town."
This I didn't follow. In all the range ritual I knew, and even in the perpetual wrestle between Dode Withrow and Pat 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. True, Canada Dan was a prime example that even God gets careless, but--

The puzzle pursued me on into the cabin. As Stanley stepped to the stove to try rev the fire a little, I asked: "What, are you saying Canada Dan wants to get himself canned?"

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

This was a starchier 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 gray of the cliff of Roman Reef. But I wasn't in any mood for very damn much waiting.

"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."

Worth a try. Anything was. I went ahead and 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 leave me.

One chore remained. I reached around and pulled my shirt up out of the back of my pants. The remainder of the tail of it, I jackknifed off. Stanley's hand didn't look quite so hideous this time when I rewrapped it; in the high dry air of the Two, cuts heal faster than can be believed. But this paw of Stanley's 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 vital point I wanted tended to. Diplomatically I began, "Suppose maybe we ought to give some thought--

--to supper" Stanley finished for me as he dippered a little water into his prescription. "I had something when I got back from Sanford's camp. But you go ahead."

I at least knew by now I could be my own chef if I had to, and I stepped over to the packs to get started.

There a harsh new light dawned on me. 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 food--were at the mercy of whatever was on hand in Stanley's own small supply pack. Apprehensively I dug around in there, but all that I came up with that showed any promise was an aging loaf of bread and some Velveeta cheese. So I made myself a bunch of sandwiches out of those and mentally chalked up one more charge against my father.

When I'd finished it still was only twilight, and Stanley just had applied the bottle and dipper to the cup for a second time. Oh, it looked like another exquisite evening ahead, all right. A regular night at the opera.
Right then, though, a major 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. Then went over to the water bucket and dippered in a splash or so the way he had.

It is just remarkable how something you weren't aware of knowing can pop to your aid at the right moment. From times I had been in the Medicine Lodge saloon with my father, I was able to offer now in natural salute to Stanley:

"Here's how!"

"How," Stanley recited back automatically.
Evidently I swigged somewhat deeper than I intended. Or should have gone a little heavier on the splash of water. Or something.

By the time I set my cup down on the board table, I was blinking 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 draw a person's attention.

Stanley reseated himself and was gandering around the room again.

"Who's our landlord, do you know?"

"Huh?"

"This cabin. Who's got this school section now?"

"Oh. The Double W."

"Jesus H. Christ." Accompanying this from Stanley was the strongest look he had yet given me. When scrutiny told him I was offering an innocent's truth, he let out: "Is there a blade of grass anywhere those sonuvabitches won't try to get their hands on?"

"I dunno. Did you have some run-in with the Double W too?"

"A run-in." Stanley considered the weight of the words. "You might call it that, I guess. I had the particular pleasure once of telling old Warren Williamson, Wendell's daddy, that that big belly of his was a tombstone for his dead ass. 'Scuse my French again. And some other stuff got said." Stanley sipped and reflected. "What did you mean, 'too'?"

"My brother Alec, he's riding for the Double W."
"The hell you say." Stanley waited for me to go on, and when I didn't he provided: "I wouldn't wish that onto nobody. But just how does it constitute a run-in?"

"My folks," I elaborated. "They're plenty pis--, uh, peed off over it."

"Family feathers in a fluff. The old, old story." Stanley tipped a sip again, and I followed. Inspiration-in-a-cup must have been the encouragement my tongue was seeking, for 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. A little time in both Dakotas. Worked in the wheat harvest there, insofar as there was any wheat after the drouth and the grasshoppers. And Wyoming. I was an 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?"

"Like I say, by now I been every place else, and they're no better. Came back to the everloving Two to take up a career in tending camp, as you can plainly see. They advertise in those big newspapers for
one-handed raggedy ass camp tenders, don't you know. You bet they do."

He did seem a trifle sensitive on this topic. Well, there was always some other, such as the matter of who he had been before he became a wandering comet. "Are you from around here originally?"

"Not hardly. Not a Two Mediciner by birth." He glanced at me. "Like you. No, 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 had to be the picker of 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 into the tangle of downed stalks 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 out there in jayhawk country ensued for Stanley. "I can tell you a little story on that, Jick. This once we were dehorning a bunch of Texas steers. There was this one ornery sonuvabitch of a buckskin steer we never could get corraled with the others. After enough of trying, the foreman said he'd pay five dollars to anybody who'd bring that sonuvabitching steer in. Well,
don't you know, another snotnose kid and me decided we'd just be the ones. Off we rode, and we come onto him about three miles away from the corral, all by hisself, and he wasn't about to be driven. Well, then we figured we'd just rope him and drag him in. We got to thinking, though--three miles, is quite a drag, ain't it? So instead 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 on 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."

Cowboying in the high old style. Alec, I thought to myself, you're the one who ought to be hearing this.

As happens, Stanley's life history 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 jag of hay two times a day and otherwise all there was to do was sit around and do hairwork." Each time Stanley 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.
All this I found amazingly interesting. I suppose that part of
my father was duplicated in me, the fascination about pawing over old
times.

While Stanley was storying, my cup had drained itself without my
really noticing. Thus when he 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 particularly pleased that I was able to dredge back yet another
Medicine Lodge toast. I offered it heartily:

"Here's lead in your pencil!"

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

"Well, that's Missouri and Kansas accounted for," I chirped
in encouragement. "How was it you got up here to Montana?"

"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, which is over on the west
side of the Rockies, about straight across from there in the cabin where
Stanley was telling me all this. 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."

In Kalispell then, "you could hear hammers going all over town."

For the next few years Stanley grew up with the community. He worked
sawmill jobs, driving a sawdust cart, sawfiling, foremanning a lumber
piling crew. "Went out on some jobs with the U.S. Geological Survey,
for a while there." A winter, he worked as a teamster hauling lumber
from Lake Blaine into Kalispell. Another spell, he even was a river pig, during one of the log drives on the north fork of the Flathead River. "It was a world of timber over there then. I tell you something, though, Jick. People kind of got spoiled by it. Take those fires—December of my first year in Kalispell. They burned along the whole damn mountains from Big Fork to Bad Rock Canyon and even farther north than that. Everybody went out on the hills east of town at night to see the fire. Running wild on the mountains, that way. Green kid I was I asked why somebody didn't do something about it. 'That's public domain,' I got told. 'Belongs to the government, not nobody around here.' Damn it to hell, though, when I saw that forest being burned up it just never seemed right to me." Stanley here took stiff encouragement from his cup, as if quenching the distaste for forest fire.

"Damn fire anyhow," I seconded with a slurp of my own. "But what got you across the mountains, here to the Two?"

Stanley gave me quite a glance, I guess to estimate the state of my health under Dr. Hall's ministration. I felt first-rate, and blinked Stanley an earnest response that was meant to say so.

"Better go a little slow on how often you visit that cup," he advised. Then: "The Two Medicine country. Why did I ever kiss her hello. Good question. One of the best."

What ensued is somewhat difficult to reconstruct. The bald truth, I may as well say, is that as Stanley waxed forth, my sobriety waned. But even if I had stayed sharp-eared as a deacon, the headful of the past which Stanley now provided me simply was too much to keep straight.
Tale upon tale of the Two country; memories of how the range looked some certain year; people who had passed away before I was born; English Creek, Noon Creek, Gros Ventre, the Reservation; names of horses, habits of shepherders and cowboys, appreciations of certain saloons and bartenders. I was accustomed to a broth of history from my father and Toussaint Rennie, some single topic at a time, but Stanley's version was a brimming mulligan stew. "I can tell you a time, Jick, I was riding along in here under the Reef and met an old Scotch sheepherder on his horse. White-bearded geezer, hadn't had a haircut since Christmas. 'Lad!' he calls out to me. 'Can ye tell me the elevation here where we are?'' Not offhand, I say to him, why does he want to know? 'Ye see, I was right here when those surveyors of that Theological Survey come through years ago, and they told me the elevation, but I forgot. I'm pretty sure the number had a 7 in it, though.'" The forest fires of 1910, which darkened daytime for weeks on end: Stanley helped combat the stubborn one in the Two mountains west of where Swift Dam now stood. The flu epidemic during the world war: he remembered death outrunning the hearse capacity, two and three coffins at a time in the back of a truck headed for the Gros Ventre town cemetery. The legendary winter of '19: "We really caught hell, that time. Particularly those 'steaders in Scotch Heaven. Poor snowed-in bastards." The banks going under in the early Twenties, the tide of homesteaders reversing itself. "Another time I can tell. In honor of Canada Dan, you might say. Must of been the summer of '16, I was up in Browning when one of those big sheep outfits out in Washington
shipped in 5000 ewes and lambs. Gonna graze them there on the north end of the Two. Those sheep came hungry from 18 hours on the stock cars, and they hit the flats out there and got onto deathcamas and lupine. Started dying by the hundreds. We got hold of all the pinanginated potash and sulfate of aluminum there was in the drugstore at Browning, and sent guys to fetch all of it there was in Cut Bank and Valier and Gros Ventre too, and we started in mixing the stuff in wash tubs and dosing those sheep. Most of the ones we dosed pulled through okay, but it was too late for about a thousand of them others. All there was to do was drag in the carcasses and set them afire with brush. We burned dead sheep all night on that prairie."

Those sheep pyres I believe were the story that made me check out of Stanley's companionship for the evening. At least, I seem to remember counseling myself not to think about deceased sheep in combination with the social juice I'd been imbibing, by now three cups' worth. Stanley on the other hand had hardly even sipped during this tale-telling spell.

"I've about had a day," I announced. The bunk bed was noticeably more distant than it'd been the night before, but I managed to trek to it.

"Adios till the rooster crows," Stanley's voice followed me.

"Or till the crow roosts," I imparted to myself, or maybe to a more general audience, for at the time it seemed to me an exceptionally clever comment.

While my tongue was wandering around that way, though, and
my fingers were trying to solve the bootlace situation, which for some reason began halfway down my boots instead of at the top where I was sure they ought to be, my mind was not idle. Cowboying, teamstering, river pigging: 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 camptender or maybe even an association rider back when this range was occupied by mostly cattle instead of sheep. But riding along up here and being greeted by the elevation-minded shepherder as an expert on the Two: that sounded like, what, he'd been one of the early ranchers of this country? Homesteader, maybe? Fighting that forest fire of '10: must have volunteered himself onto the fire crew, association rider would fit that. But dosing all those sheep: that sounded like camptender again.

Then something else peeped in a corner of my mind. One boot finally in hand, I could spare the concentration for the question. "Stanley, didn' you say you been to this cabin before? When we got here, didn' you say that?"

"Yes sir. Been here just a lot of times. I go back farther than this cabin does. I seen it being built. We was sighting out that fenceline over there when old Bob Barclay started dragging in the logs for this."

Being built? Sighting the boundary fenceline? The history was skipping to the most ancient times of the Two forest now, and this turn and the whiskey together were compounding my confusion. Also,
somebody had put another boot in my hand. Yet I persisted.

"What, were you up here with the Theologic--the Geologic--the survey crew?"

Stanley's eyes were sharp, as if a new set had been put in amid the webs of eyelines. And the look he fastened on me now was the levelest thing in that cabin.

"Jick, I was the ranger that set up the boundaries of the Two Medicine National Forest."

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

In any Forest Service family such as ours lore of setting up the national forests, of the boundary examiners who established them onto the maps of America as public preserves, was almost holy writ. I could remember time upon time of hearing my father and the other Forest Service men of his age mention those original rangers and supervisors, 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. Elers Koch on the Bitterroot National Forest, Coert DuBois on the Lolo, other boundary men who sired the Beaverhead and the Custer and the Flathead and so on; the tales of them still circulated, refreshed by the comments of the younger rangers wondering how they'd managed to do all they had. Famous, famous guys. Sort of combinations of Old Testament prophets and mountain men, rolled into
one. 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.

"My sister is Mandy, she's got a dandy. At least so the boys say."

I woke with that in my ears and a dark brown taste in my mouth.

The serious symptoms set in when I sat up in my bunk. My eyes and temples and ears all seemed to have grown sharp points inward and were steadily stabbing each other. Life, the very air, seemed gritty, gray. Isn't there one hangover description that your tongue feels like you spent the night licking ashtrays? That's it.

"Morning there, Jick!" Stanley sang out. He was at the stove. "Here, better wash down your insides with this." Stepping over to the bunk, he handed me a tin cup of coffee turned tan with canned milk. Evidently he had heated the milk along with the coffee, because the contents of the cup were all but aflame. The heat went up my nose in search of my brain as I held the cup in front of my lips.

"No guarantee on this left-handed grub," Stanley called over his shoulder as he fussed at something on the stove top, "but how do you take your eggs?"

"Uh," I sought around in myself for the information. "Flipped, I guess."

Stanley hovered at the stove another minute or two, while I made
up my mind to try the death-defying trip to the table.

Then he turned and presented me a plate. Left-handed they may have been, but the eggs were fried to a crisp brown lace at the edges, while their pockets of yolk were not runny but not solidified either. Eggs that way are perfection. On the plate before me they were fenced in by wide tan strips of sidepork, and within a minute or so, Stanley was providing me slices of bread fried in the pan grease.

I am my mother's son entirely in this respect: I believe good food never made any situation worse.

I dug in and by the time I'd eaten about half the plateful, things were tasting like they were supposed to. I even managed to sip some of the coffee, which I discovered was stout enough to float a kingbolt.

Indeed, I swarmed on to the last bite or so of the feast before it occurred to me to ask. "Where'd you get these eggs?"

"Aw, I always carry a couple small lard pails of oats for the horses, and the eggs ride okay in the oats."

Breakfast made me feel restored. "Speaking of riding," I began, "how soon--"

"--can we head down the mountain." Stanley inventoried me. And I took the chance to get in my first clear-eyed look of the day at him. Stanley seemed less in pain than he had when we arrived to this cabin, but less in grasp of himself that he had during last night's recounting of lore of the Two. A man in wait, seeing which way he might turn; but
unfortunately, I knew, the bottle habit soon would sway his decision. Of course, right then who was I to talk?

Now Stanley was saying: "Just any time now, Jick. We can head out as soon as you say ready."

On our ride down Stanley of course was into his musical repertoire again, one minute warbling about somebody who was wild and woolly and full of fleas and never'd been curried above her knees, and the next crooning a hymnlike tune that went, **Oh sweet daughters of the Lord, grant me more that I can afford.**

My mind, though, was on a thing Stanley said as we were saddling the horses. In no way was it what I intended to think about, for I knew fully that I was heading back into the McCaskill family situation, that blowup between my parents and Alec. Godamighty, the supper that produced all that wasn't much more than a half a week ago. And in the meantime my father had introduced Stanley and Canada Dan and Bubbles, not to mention Dr. Al K. Hall, into my existence. There were words I intended to say to him about all this. If, that is, I could survive the matter of explaining to my mother why the tops of my boots gaped out like funnels and how come my pants legs looked like I'd wiped up a mountainside with them and where the tail of my shirt had gone. Thank the Lord, not even she could quite see into a person enough to count three tin cups of booze in him the night before. On that drinking score, I felt reasonably safe. Stanley didn't seem to me likely to trouble
himself enough to advertise my behavior. On the other hand, Stanley himself was a logical topic for my mother. More than likely my father had heard, and I was due to hear, her full opinion of my having sashayed off on this campjacking expedition.

A sufficiency to dwell on, and none of it easy thinking. Against my intentions and better interests, though, I still found myself going back and forth over the last scene at the cabin.

I had just handed the lead rope for the black pack mare and ever-loving Bubbles up to Stanley, and was turning away to go tighten the cinch on Pony's saddle. It was then that Stanley said he hoped I didn't mind too much about missing the rest of the counting trip with my father, to the Billy Peak lookout and all. "I couldn't of got along up here without you, Jick," he concluded, "and I hope you don't feel hard used."

Which of course was exactly how I had been feeling. You damn bet I was, ever since the instant my father volunteered me into Stanley's company. Skinning wet sheep corpses, contending with a pack horse who decides he's a mountain goat, nursing Stanley along, lightning, any number of self-cooked meals, the hangover I'd woke up with and still had more than a trace of—what sad sonofabitch wouldn't realize he was being used out of the ordinary?

Yet right then, 18-inch pincers would not have pulled such a confession from me. I wouldn't give the universe the satisfaction.
So, "No," I had answered Stanley shortly, and gone on over to do my cinching. "No, it's all been an education."
This will mark the fifteenth Fourth of July in a row that Gros Ventre has mustered a creek picnic, a rodeo and a dance. Regarding those festivities, ye editor's wife inquires whether somebody still has her big yellow potato-salad bowl from last year; the rodeo will feature $140 in prize money; and the dance music will again be by Nola Atkins, piano, and Jeff Swan, fiddle.

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, June 29

I have to honestly say that the next few weeks of this remembered summer look somewhat pale in comparison with my Stanley episode. Only in comparison, though.

You can believe that I arrived back to English Creek from the land of sheepherders and packhorses in no mood to take any further guff from that father of mine. What in Holy H. Hell was that all about, him and Stanley Meixell pussyfooting around each other the way they had when they met there on the mountain, then before it was over my father handing me over to Stanley like an orphan? Some counting trip, that one. I could spend the rest of the summer just trying to dope out why and what
and who, if I let myself. Considering, then, that my bill of goods against my father was so long and fresh, life's next main development caught me by entire surprise. This same parent who had just lent me as a towing service for a whiskeyfied geezer trying to find his way up the Rocky Mountains--this identical father now announced that he would be off the English Creek premises for a week, and I hereby was elevated into being the man of the house.

"Your legs are long enough by now that they reach the ground," he provided by way of justification the suppertime this was unveiled, "so I guess that qualifies you to run this place, don't you think?"

Weather brought this about, as it did so much else that summer. The cool wet mood of June continued and about the middle of the month our part of Montana had its solidiest rain in years, a toad-drowner that settled in around noon and poured on and on into the night. That storm delivered snow onto the mountains--several inches fell in the Big Belts south beyond Sun River, and that next morning here in the Two, along the high sharp parts of all the peaks a white skift shined, fresh-looking as a sugar sprinkle. You could bet, though, there were a bunch of perturbed shepherders up there looking out their wagon doors at it and not thinking sugar. Anyway, since that storm was a straightforward douser without any lightning and left the forests so sopping that there was no fire danger for a while, the desk jockeys at the national forest office in Great Falls saw this as a chance to ship a couple of rangers from the Two over to
Region headquarters for a refresher course. Send them back to school, as it was said. Both my father and Murray Tomlin of the Blacktail Gulch station down on Sun River had been so assiduous about evading this in the past that the finger of selection now never wavered whatsoever: it pointed the pair of them to Missoula for a week of fire school.

The morning came when my father appeared in his Forest Service monkey suit—uniform, green hat, pine tree badge—and readied himself to collect Murray at the Blacktail Gulch station, from where they would drive over to Missoula together.

"Mazoola," he was still grumbling. "Why don't they send us to Hell to study fire and be done with it? What I hear, the mileage is probably about the same."

My mother's sympathy was not rampant. "All that surprises me is that you've gotten by this long without having to go. Have you got your diary in some pocket of that rig?"

"Diary," my father muttered, "diary, diary, diary," patting various pockets. "I never budge without it." And went to try find it.

I spectated with some anticipation. My mood toward my father hadn't uncurdled entirely, and some time on my own, some open space without him around to remind me I was half-sore at him, looked just dandy to me. As did this first-ever designation of me as the man of the house. Of course, I was well aware my father hadn't literally meant that I was to run English Creek in his absence. Start with the basic that nobody ran my mother. As for station matters, my father's assistant ranger Paul Eliason was strawbossing a fire trail crew not
far along the South Fork and the new dispatcher, Chet Barnouw, was up getting familiar with the lookout sectors and the telephone setup which connected them to the ranger station. Any vital forest business would be handled by one of those two. No, I had no grandiose illusions.

I was to make the check.

On Walter Kyle's place sometime during the week and help Isidor Pronovost line out his pack string when he came to pack supplies up to the fire lookouts and do some barn cleaning and generally be on hand for anything my mother thought up. Nothing to get wild-eyed about.

Even so, I wasn't prepared for what lay ahead when my father came back from his diary hunt, looked across the kitchen at me, said "Step right out here for some free entertainment," and led me around back of the ranger station.

There he went to the side of the outhouse, being a little gingerly about it because of his uniform. Turned. Stepped off sixteen paces—why exactly sixteen I don't know, but likely it was in Forest Service regulations somewhere. And announced: "It's time we moved Republican headquarters. How're your shovel muscles?"

So here was my major duty of "running" English Creek in my father's absence. Digging the new hole to site the toilet over.

Let me be clear. The job itself I didn't particularly mind. Shovel work is honest sweat. Even yet I would sooner do something manual than to fiddle around with some temperamental damn piece of machinery. No, my grouse was of a different feather than that. I purely was perturbed that here was one more instance of my father
blindsiding me with a task I hadn't even dreamt of. First Stanley, now this outhouse deal. Here was a summer, it was beginning to seem like, when every time I turned around some new and strange avenue of endeavor was already under my feet and my father was pointing me along it and chirping, "Right this way--"

All this and I suppose more was on my mind as my father's pickup vanished over the rise of the Gros Ventre road and I contemplated my work site.

Moving an outhouse may not sound like the nicest occupation in the world. But neither is it as bad as you probably think. Here is the program: When my father got back from Missoula we would simply lever up each side of the outhouse high enough to slip a pole under to serve as a skid, then nail crosspieces to keep the pair of skids in place and with a length of cable attached to the back of the pickup, snake the building over atop the new pit and let it down into place, ready for business.

So the actual moving doesn't amount to all that much. The new pit, though. There's the drawback. The pit, my responsibility, was going to take considerable doing. Or rather, considerable digging.

At the spot my father had paced to and marked, I pounded in four stakes with white kitchen string from one to another to represent the outhouse dimensions. Inasmuch as ours was a two-holer, as was considered good-mannered for a family, it made a considerable rectangle; I guess about half again bigger than a cemetery grave. And now all I faced was to excavate the stringed-in space to a depth of about seven feet.
Seven feet divided by, umm, parts of five days, what with the ride I had to make to check on Walter Kyle's place and helping Isidor with his pack string and general choring for my mother. I doped out that if I did a dab of steady digging each afternoon I could handily complete the hole by Saturday when my father was due back. Jobs which can be broken down into stints that way, where you know that if you put in a certain amount of daily effort you'll overcome the chore, I have always been able to handle. It's the more general errands of life that daunt me.

I don't mean to spout an entire sermon on this outhouse topic, but advancing into the earth does get your mind onto the earth, in more ways than one. That day when I started in on the outhouse rectangle I of course first had to cut through the sod, and once that's been shoveled out, it leaves a depression about the size of a cellar door. A sort of entryway down into the planet, it looked like. Unearthing that sod was the one part of this task that made me uneasy, and it has taken me these years to realize why. A number of times since, I have been present when sod was broken to become a farmed field. And in each instance I felt the particular emotion of watching that land be cut into furrows for the first time ever---ever; can we even come close to grasping what that means?---and the native grass being tipped on its side and then folded under the brown wave of turned earth. Anticipation, fascination. Part of the feeling can be described with those words or ones close to them. It can be understood, watching the ripping plow cut the patterns that will become a grainfield, that the homesteaders
who came to Montana in their thousands believed they were seeing a new life uncovered for them.

Yet there's a further portion of those feelings, at least in me. Uneasiness. The uneasy wondering of whether that ripping-plow is honestly the best idea. Smothering a natural crop, grass, to try to nurture an artificial one. Not that I, or probably anyone else with the least hint of a qualm, had any vote in the matter. Both before and after the Depression—which is to say, in times when farmers had money enough to pay wages—kids such as I was in this particular English Creek summer were merely what you might call hired arms; brought in to pick rocks off the newly broken field. And not only the newly broken, for more rocks kept appearing and appearing. In fact in our part of Montana, rock picking was like sorting through a perpetual landslide. Anything bigger than a grapefruit—the heftiest rocks might rival a watermelon—was dropped onto a stoneboat pulled by a team of horses or tractor, and the eventual load was dumped alongside the field. No stone fences built as in New England or over in Ireland or someplace. Just raw heaps, the slag of the plowed prairie.

I cite all this because by my third afternoon shift of digging, I had confirmed for myself the Two country's reputation for being a toupee of grass on a cranium of rock. Gravel, more accurately, there so close to the bed of English Creek, which in its bottom was 100% small stones. We had studied in school that glaciers bulldozed through this part of the world, but until you get to handling the evidence shovelful by shovelful the fact doesn't mean as much to you.
I am dead sure this happened on the third afternoon, a Wednesday, because that was the day of the month the English Creek ladies' club met. There were enough wives along the creek to play two tables of cards, and so have a rare enough chance to visit without males cluttering up the scene; club day always found my mother in a fresh dress right after our noon meal, ready to go. This day, Alice Van Bebber stopped by to pick her up. "My, Jick, you're growing like a weed," Alice crooned out the car window to me as my mother got in the other side. Alice always was flighty as a chicken looking in a mirror—living with Ed likely would do it to anybody—and away the car zoomed, up the South Fork road toward Withrows', as it was Midge's turn to be hostess.

I know too that when I went out for my comfort station shift, I began by doing some work with a pick. Now, I didn't absolutely have to swing a pick on this project. With a little effort the gravel and the dirt mixed with it were shovelable enough. But I simply liked to do occasional pick work. Liked the different feel and rhythm of that tool, operating overhand as it does rather than the perpetual reach-down and-heave of shoveling. Muscles too need some variety in life, I have always thought.

So I was loosening the gravelly earth at the bottom of the hole with swings of the pick, and on the basis of Alice Van Bebber's blab was wondering to myself why a grownup never seemed to say anything to me that I wanted to hear, and after some minutes of this, stopped for breath. And in looking up, saw just starting down the rise of the county road a string of three horses.
Sorrel and black and ugly gray.

Or, reading back down the ladder of colors, Bubbles and the pack mare and the saddle horse that Stanley Meixell was atop.

I didn't think it through. I have no idea why I did it. But I ducked down and sat in the bottom of the hole.

The moment I did, of course, I began to realize what I had committed myself to. They say nine-tenths of a person is above the ears, but I swear the proportion sometimes gets reversed in me. Not that I wasn't safely out of sight squatting down there; when I'd been standing up working, my excavation by now was about shoulder deep on me. No problem there. No problem so long as Stanley didn't get a direct look down into the hole. But what if that happened? What if Stanley stopped at the station, for some reason or other? And, say, being stopped anyway he decided to use the outhouse, and as he was headed out there decided to amble over to admire this pit of mine? What then? Would I pop up like a jack-in-the-box? I'd sure as the dickens look just as silly as one.

I was also learning that the position I had to squat in wasn't the world's most comfortable. And it was going to take a number of minutes for Stanley and company to saunter down from the rise and pass the station and go off up the North Fork road, before I could safely stand up. Just how many minutes began to interest me more than anything else. Of course I had no watch, and the only other way I knew to keep track of time was to count it off like each second between lightning and thunder, one a-thousand, two-a-thousand— But the problem there, how much time did I have to count off? That I'd have to work out in my
head, Alec style. Let's say Stanley and his horses were traveling 5 miles an hour, which was the figure the Major was always raising hell with the Forest Service packers about, insisting they by god and by damn ought to be able to average that. But the Major had never encountered Bubbles. Bubbles surely would slow down any enterprise at least half a mile an hour, dragging back on his lead rope like a tug of war contestant the way he did. Okay, 4 1/2 miles an hour considering Bubbles, and it was about a mile from the crest of the county road to down here at the ranger station; then from here to where Stanley would pass out of sight beyond the North Fork brush was, what, another third of a mile, maybe more like half a mile. So now: for Stanley to cover one mile at 4 1/2 miles an hour would take—well, 5 miles an hour would be 12 minutes; 4 miles an hour would be 15 minutes; round the 4 1/2 mile an hour pace off to say 13 minutes; then the other 1/3 to 1/2 mile would take somewhere around 6 minutes, wouldn't it be? So, 13 and 6, 19 minutes. Then 19 times 60 (60 seconds to the minute), and that was, was, was…1100-something. And divide that by the five seconds it took to say each—

Never mind, I decided. This hunching down in a toilet hole was all getting dismal enough without me trying to figure out how many a-mile-from-here-to-there's there are in 1100-something. Besides, I had no idea how much time I had already spent in the calculating.

Besides again, numbers weren't really what needed thinking on. The point to ponder was, why was I hiding anyway? Why had I plunked myself into this situation? Why didn't I want to face Stanley? Why had I let the sight of him hoodoo me like this? Some gab about the
weather, inquire as to how his hand was getting along, say I had to
get back to digging, and that would have been that. But no, here I was,
playing turtle in the bottom of an outhouse pit. Sometimes there's nobody
stranger in this world than ourselves.

So I squatted and mulled. There's this for sure about doing those
two together, they fairly soon convince you that you can think better
standing up. Hell with it, I eventually told myself. If I had to pop
up and face Stanley with my face all pie, so be it.

I unkinked and came upright with some elaborate arm stretching,
as if I'd just had a nice break from work down there. Then treated
myself to a casual yawn and began eyeing around over the rim of the
pit to determine which direction I had to face embarrassment from.

And found nobody.

No Stanley. No Bubbles. Nothing alive anywhere around, except
one fourteen-year-old fool.

"So," my mother inquired upon return from her ladies' club,
"everything peaceful around here?"

"Downright lonesome," I said back.

Now let me tell of my mother's contribution to that week.

It ensued around mid-day on Thursday. First thing that morning
my father's packer Isidor Pronovost showed up, and I spent the front of
the day working as cargodier for Isidor, helping him make up packs of
supplies to take up to the fire lookouts. Isidor sermoned as he always did. "We got to balance the buggers,
Jick, that's every secret of it." Harking back to my Bubbles experience I thought to myself, don't I know it. Then Isidor was not much more than out of sight with his pack string when here came my mother's brother, Pete Reese. English Creek was getting about as busy as Broadway.

Pete had driven into town from his ranch on Noon Creek on one errand or another, and now was looping home by way of English Creek to drop off our mail and see how we were faring. He stepped over and admired my progress on the outhouse hole. "Everybody on the creek'll be wanting to patronize it. You thought of charging admission?" Then handed me the few letters and that week's Cleaner. His doing so reminded me I was the temporary host of the place and I hurriedly invited, "Come on over to the house."

We no sooner were through the door than my mother was saying to Pete, "You're staying for dinner, aren't you," more as declaration than question. So Pete shed his hat and offered that he supposed he could, "if it's going to be something edible." Pete got away with more with my mother than just about anyone else could, including my father. "Park your tongue then," she simply retorted, and went to work on the meal while Pete and I chinned about the green year.

That topic naturally was staying near the front of everybody's mind. By now the weather service was declaring this the wettest June in Montana since 1916, news which was more than welcome. In Montana too much rain is just about enough. All the while the country had been greening and greening, the crop and livestock forecasts were flourishing, too.
Pete imparted that Morrel Loomis, the biggest lamb buyer operating in the Two country, had come up from Great Falls for a look at the Reese and Hahn and Withrow bands, and that Pete and Fritz and Dode all decided to go ahead and contract their lambs to Loomis on his offer of 21½¢ a pound. "Enough to keep me floating toward bankruptcy," Dode had been heard to say, which meant that even he was pretty well pleased with the price.

"Beats last year by a couple of cents, doesn't it?" I savvily asked Pete.

"Uh huh, and it's damn well time. Montana has got to be the champion next year country of the entire damn world."

"How soon did you say you'd be haying?" my mother interrogated without looking around from her meal work at the stove. I wish now that she had in fact been facing around toward Pete and me, for I am sure my gratitude for that question was painted all over my face. Whenever haying began I was to drive the scatter rake for Pete, as I had done the summer before and Alec had for the few summers before that. But getting a rancher to estimate a date when he figured his hay crop would be ready was like getting him to confess to black magic. The hemming and hawing did have the basis that hay never was really ready to mow until the day you went out and looked at it and felt it and cocked an eye at the weather and decided this was as good a time as any. But I also think ranchers cherished haying as the one elastic part of their year. The calendar told them when lambing or calving would begin, and shipping time loomed as another constant, so when they had a chance
to be vague—even Pete, of the same straightforward lineage as my mother, now was pussyfooting to the effect that "all this rain, hay's going to be kind of late this year"—they clung to it.

"Before the Fourth?" my mother narrowed the specification.

"No, I don't suppose." It was interesting to see comments go back and forth between this pair; like studying drawings of the same face done by two different artists. Pete had what might be called the kernel of my mother's good looks. same neat nose, apple cheeks, roundish jaw; but proportioned smaller, thriftier.

"The week after?"

"Could be," Pete allowed. "Were you going to feed us sometime today or what?"

Messages come in capsules as well as bottles. The content of "could be" was that no hay would be made by Pete Reese until after the Fourth of July and until then, I was loose in the world.

There during dinner, it turned out that Pete now was on the question end of the conversation:

"Alec been around lately?"

"Alec," my mother reported in obituary tones, "is busy Riding the Range."

"Day and night?"

"At least. Our only hope of seeing him is if he ever needs a clean shirt."
My personal theory is that a lot of misunderstanding followed my mother around just because of her way of saying. Lisabeth Reese McCaskill could give you the time of day and make you wonder why you had dared to ask. I recall once when I was about eleven that we were visited for the morning by Louise Bowen, wife of the ranger at the Indian Head district to the south of us. Cliff Bowen was newly assigned onto the Two, having held down an office job at Region headquarters in Missoula all the time before, and Louise was telling my mother how worried she was that her year-old, Donny, accustomed to town and a fenced yard, would wander off the station, maybe fall into the Teton River. I was in the other room, more or less reading a Collier's and minding my own business, but I can still hear how my mother's response suddenly seemed to fill the whole house:

"Bell him."

There was a stretch of silence then, until Louise finally kind of peeped: "Beg pardon? I don't quite--"

"Put a bell on him. The only way to keep track of a wandering child is to hear him."

Louise left not all too long after that, and that was the extent of our visits from her. But I did notice, when my father drove down to borrow a saw-set from Cliff a month or so later and I rode along, that Donny Bowen was toddling around with a lamb bell on him.

Pete was continuing on the topic of Alec. "Well, he's at that age--"

"Pete," she headed him off, "I know what age my own son is."
"So you do, Bet. But the number isn't all of it. You might try
keep that in mind."

My mother reached to pass Pete some more fried spuds. "I'll
try," she allowed. "I Will Try."

When we'd eaten and Pete declared "It's time I wasn't here" and
headed home to Noon Creek, my mother immediately began drowning dirty
dishes and I meanwhile remembered the mail I'd been handed, and fetched
it from the sideboard where I'd put it down. There was a letter to my
mother from Mr. Vennaman, the Gros Ventre principal—even though Alec
and I were gone from the English Creek school my mother still was on
its school board and so had occasional dealings with the education
muckymucks in Gros Ventre and Conrad—and a couple of Forest Service
things for my father, probably the latest Kelleygrams. But what I was
after was the Gleaner, thinking I'd let my dinner settle a little while
I read. As usual, I opened to page 5. The newspaper was always 8
pages and page 5 was always the At Random page, carrying the editor
Bill Reinking's own comments, and syndicated features about famous
people or events, and local history, and even poetry or quotations
if Bill felt like it. Random definitely was the right word for it,
yet every week that page was a magnet for a mind like mine.

I'd been literary for maybe three minutes when I saw the names.

"Mom? You and Pete are in the paper."

She turned from where she was washing dishes and gave me her look
that said, you had now better produce some fast truth.

I pinned down the newsprint evidence with my finger. "See, here."
Anna Reese and children Lisabeth and Peter visited Isaac Reese at St. Mary's Lake for three days last week. Isaac is providing the workhorses for the task of building the roadbed from St. Mary's to Babb. Isaac sends word through Anna that the summer's work on this and other Glacier National Park roads and trails is progressing satisfactorily.
As she read over my shoulder I thought about the journey that would have been in those days. Undoubtedly by democrat wagon, all the way north from the Reese place on Noon Creek. Past the landmark of Heart Butte, across the Two Medicine River, and then on even beyond Cut Bank Creek. Very nearly to Chief Mountain, the last peak that could be seen on the northern horizon. I of course had been over that total route with my father, but only a piece at a time, on various riding trips and by pickup to the northernmost part. But to do the whole journey at once, by hoof and iron wheel, a woman and two kids, struck me as a notable expedition.

"Sounds like a long time in a wagon," I prompted cannily. "You never told me about that."

"Didn't I." And she turned and went back to her dishpan.

Well, sometimes you could prompt my mother, and sometimes you might as well try conversing with the stove poker.

I retreated into my hole, so to speak. Yet, you know how it is when you're doing something your body can take care of by itself. Your
mind is going to sneak off somewhere on its own. As the rest of me dug, mine was on that wagon journey with my mother and Pete and their mother.

There wouldn't have been the paved highway north to Browning and the Park then, just the old road as the wheels of the freight wagons had rutted it into the prairie. Some homesteads must have still existed between Gros Ventre and the Reservation boundary at Birch Creek, but probably not many. Those were the years when the Valier irrigation project was new and anybody who knew grain grew on a stem was over there around Lake Francis trying to be a farmer. Mostly empty country, then, except for livestock, all the way to Birch Creek and its ribbon line of trees. Empty again from there north to Badger Creek, where I supposed some of the same Blackfeet families lived then as now. There near Badger the Reese wagon would have passed just west of the place where, a century and some before, Meriwether Lewis and the Blackfeet clashed. That piece of Reservation country to us was simply grass, until my father deduced from reading in a book of the Lewis and Clark journals that somewhere off in there near where Badger flows into the Two Medicine River was the place Lewis and his men killed a couple of Blackfeet over a stealing incident and began the long prairie war between whites and Indians. Passing that area in a pickup on paved highway never made that history seem real to me. I would bet it was more believable from that wagon. Then up from Badger, the high benches to where the Two Medicine trenched deep through the landscape. Maybe another day and a half of travel beyond that, through Browning and west and then north across Cut Bank
Creek and over the divide to St. Mary's, and there at the end of it all the road camp, its crews and tents and workhorses. In my imagination I saw it as somewhat like a traveling circus, but with go-devils fresnos and graders and scrapers and other road machines instead of circus wagons. And its ringmaster, my grandfather, Isaac Reese. He was the only one of my grandparents yet alive when I became old enough to remember and I could just glimpse him in a corner of my mind. A gray-mustached man at the head of the table whenever we had Sunday dinner at the Reeses', using his knife to load his fork with food in a way which would have caused my mother to give Alec or me absolute hell if we had dared try it. I gather, though, that Isaac Reese got away with considerably more than that in life—I suppose any horse dealer worth his reputation did—and it was a thriving Reese ranch there on Noon Creek that Pete took over after the old man's death.

This Reese side of the family wandered into the conversation whenever someone would learn that my mother, although she was married to a man only a generation or so away from kilts, herself was just half-Scottish. "The other half," my father would claim when he judged that she was in a good enough mood he could get away with it, "seems to be something like a badger." Actually, that lineage was Danish. Isak Riiis departed Denmark aboard the ship King Carl sometime in the 1880s, and the pen of an immigration official greeted him onto American soil as Isaac Reese. In that everybody-head-west-and-grab-some-land period, counting was more vital than spelling anyway. By dint of what his eyes told him on the journey west, Isaac arrived to North Dakota determined on a living
from workhorses. The Great Northern railroad was pushing across the top of the Western United States—this was when Jim Hill was promising to cobweb Dakota and Montana with railroad iron—and Isaac began as a teamster on the roadbed. His ways with horses and projects proved to be as sure as his new language was shaky. My father claimed to have been on hand the famous time, years later, when Isaac couldn't find the words "wagon tongue" and ended up calling it "de Godtamm handle to de Godtamm vagon." Within days after sizing up the railroad situation "the old boy was borrowing money right and left from anybody who'd take his note, to buy horses and more horses"—my father was always a ready source on Isaac, I guess greatly grateful to have had a father-in-law he both admired and got entertainment from—and soon Isaac had his own teams and drivers working on contract for the Great Northern.

When construction reached the east face of the Rockies, the mountains held Isaac. Why, nobody in the family ever could figure out. Certainly in Denmark he must have never have seen anything higher than a barnyard manure pile. And unlike some other parts of Montana, this one had no settlement of Danes. (Though as my father pointed out, maybe those were Isaac's reasons.) In any case, while his horses and men worked on west through Marias Pass as the railroad proceeded toward the coast, Isaac stayed and looked around. In a week or so he horsebacked south along the mountains toward Gros Ventre, and out of that journey bought a homestead relinquishment which became the start of the eventual Reese ranch.

Isaac Reese was either shrewd as hell or lucky as hell. Even at my stage of life I am not entirely clear whether there is any appreciable difference between the two. By whichever guidance he lit here in a
region of Montana where a couple of decades of projects were standing in line waiting for a man with workhorses. The many miles of irrigation canals of the water schemes at Valier and Bynum and Choteau and Fairfield. Ranch reservoirs (fessavoys" to Isaac). The roadbed when the branch railroad was built north from Choteau to Pendroy. Street grading when Valier was built onto the prairie. All those Glacier Park roads and trails. As each appurtenance was put onto the Two country and its neighboring areas, Isaac was on hand to realize money from it.

"And married a Scotchwoman to hang onto the dollars for him," my father always injected at this point. She was Anna Ramsay, teacher at the Noon Creek school. Her, I knew next to nothing about. Just that she died in the influenza epidemic during the war, and that in the wedding picture of her and Isaac that hung in my parent's bedroom she was the one standing and looking in charge, while Isaac sat beside her with his mustache drooping whimsically. Neither my mother nor my father ever said much about Anna Ramsay Reese—which helped sharpen my present curiosity, thinking about her trundling off to St. Mary's in that wagon. Like my McCaskill grandparents she simply was an absent figure back there, cast all the more into shadow by my father's supply of stories about Isaac.

In a sense, the first of those Isaac tales was the genesis of our family. The night my father, the young association rider, was going to catch Isaac by ambush and request my mother in marriage, Isaac greeted him at the door and before they were even properly sat down, had launched into a whole evening of horse topics, Clydesdales and Belgians and Morgans and fetlocks and withers and hocks and pasterns. Never tell me a
Scandinavian harbors no sense of humor. When my father at last managed to wedge the question in, Isaac tried to look taken aback, eyed him hard and repeated as if he was making sure: "marriage?"

Or as my father said Isaac pronounced it: "mare itch?"

Then Isaac looked at my father harder yet and asked: "Tell me dis. Do you ever took a drink?"

My father figured honesty was the best answer in the face of public knowledge. "Now and then, yes, I do."

Isaac weighed that. Then he got to his feet and loomed over my father. "Ve'll took one now, den." And with Mason jar moonshine reached down from the cupboard, the pairing that began Alec and me was toasted.

When I considered that I'd done an afternoon's excavating, physically and mentally, I climbed out and had a look at the progress of my sanitation engineering. By now the pile of dirt and gravel stood high and broad, the darker tone on its top showing today's fresh shovel work and the drier faded-out stuff beneath, the previous days'. With a little imagination I thought I could even discern a gradation, like layers on a cake, of each stint of my shovelfuls of the Two country, Monday's, Tuesday's, Wednesday's, and now today's light-chocolate top. Damn interesting, the ingredients of this earth.

More to the immediate point, I was pleased with myself that I'd estimated the work into the right daily dabs. Tomorrow afternoon was going to cost some effort, because I was getting down so deep the
soil would need to be bucketed out. But the hole looked definitely finishable.

I must have been more giddy with myself than I realized, because when I went over to the chopping block to split wood for the kitchen woodbox, I found myself using the axe in rhythm with a song of Stanley's about the gal named Lou and what she was able to do with her wingwangwoo.

When I came into the kitchen with the armload, my mother was looking at me oddly.

"Since when did you take up singing?" she inquired.

"Oh, just feeling good, I guess," I said and dumped my cargo into the woodbox loud enough to try prove it.

"What was that tune, anyway?"


That brought a further look from her. "While I'm at it I might as well fill the water bucket," I proposed, and got out of there.

After supper, lack of anything better to do made me tackle my mother on that long ago wagon trip again. That is, I was doing something but it didn't exactly strain the brain. Since hearing Stanley tell about having done that winter of hair work a million years ago in Kansas, I had gotten mildly interested and was braiding myself a horsehair hackamore. I was discovering, though, that in terms of entertainment, braiding is pretty much like chewing gum with your fingers. So—
"Where'd you sleep?"

She was going through the Gleaner. "Sleep when?"

"That time. When you all went up to St. Mary's." I kept on with my braiding just as if we'd been having this continuing conversation every evening of our lives.

She glanced over at me, then said: "Under the wagon."

"Really? You?" Which drew me more of her attention than I was bargaining for. "Uh, how many nights?"

I got quite a little braiding done in the silence that answered that, and when I finally figured I had to glance up, I realized that she was truly studying me. Not just taking apart with a look: studying. Her voice wasn't at all sharp when she asked: "Jick, what's got your curiosity bump up?"

"I'm just interested, is all." Even to me that didn't sound like an overly profound explanation, so I tried to go on. "When I was with Stanley, those days camp tending, he told me a lot about the Two. About when he was the ranger. It got me interested in, uh, old times."

"What did he say about being ranger?"

"That he was the one here before Dad. And that he set up the Two as a national forest." It occurred to me to try her on a piece of chronology I had been attempting to work out ever since that night of my cabin binge. "What, was Dad the ranger at Indian Head while Stanley still was the ranger here?"

"For a while."

"Is that where I remember Stanley from?"
"I suppose."

"Did you and Dad neighbor back and forth with him a lot?"

"Some. What does any of that have to do with how many nights I slept under a wagon twenty-five years ago?"

She had a reasonable enough question there. Yet it somehow seemed to me that a connection did exist, that any history of a Two country person was alloyed with the history of any other Two country person. That some given sum of each life had to be added into every other, to find the total. But none of which sounded sane to say. All I did finally manage was: "I just would like to know something about things then. Like when you were around my age."

No doubt there was a response she had to bite her tongue to keep from making: that she wasn't sure she'd ever been this age I seemed to be at just now. Instead came: "All right. That wagon trip to St. Mary's. What is it you want to know about it?"

"Well, just--why was it you went?"

"Mother took the notion. My father had been away, up there, for some weeks. He often was, contracting horses somewhere." She rustled the Gleaner as she turned a page. "About like being married to a ranger," she added, but lightly enough to show it was her version of a joke.

"How long did that trip take then?" Now, in a car, it was a matter of a couple or three hours.

She had to think about that. After a minute: "Two and a half Three days. Two nights," she underscored for my benefit, "under the wagon. Badger Creek and one on the flat outside Browning. One at the Two Medicine and one at Cut Bank Creek."
"My mother held the opinion that the prairie was a more civilized place than Browning."

"What did you do for food?"

"We ate out of a belted box. That old one from chuckwagon days, with all the cattle brands on it. Mother and I cooked up what was necessary, before we left."

"Were you the only ones on the road?"

"Pretty much, yes. The mail stage still was running then. Somewhere along the way we met it."

She could nail questions shut faster than I could think them up. Not deliberately, I see now. That was just the way she was. A person who put no particular importance on having made a prairie trek and seen a stagecoach in the process.

My mother seemed to realize that this wasn't exactly flowering into the epic tale I was hoping for. "Jick, that's all I know about it. We went, and stayed a few days, and came back."

Went, stayed, came. The facts were there but the feel of them wasn't.

"What about the road camp?" I resorted to next. "What do you remember about that?" The St. Mary's area is one of the most beautiful ones, with the mountains of Glacier National Park sheering up beyond the lake. The world looks to be all stone and ice and water there. Even my mother might have noticed some of that glory.

Here she found a small smile. "Just that when we pulled in, Pete began helloing all the horses."
She saw that didn't register with me.

"Calling out hello to the workhorses in the various teams,"
she explained. "He hadn't seen them for awhile, after all. 'Hello,
Moses.' 'Hello, Sneezer!' Runt. Copenhagen.

Mother let him go on with it until he came to a big gray mare called
Second Wife. She never thought the name of that one was as funny as
Father did."

There is this about history, you never know which particular ember
of it is going to glow to life. As she told this, I could all but hear
Pete heloing those horses, his dry voice making a chant which sang
across that road camp. And the look on my mother told me she could, too.

Not to be too obvious, I braided a moment more. Then decided to
try the other part of that St. Mary's scene. "Your own mother. What
was she like?"

"That father of yours has been heard to say I'm a second serving of
her."

Well, this at least informed me that old Isaac Reese hadn't gotten
away with nearly as much in life as I'd originally thought. But now, how
to keep this line of talk going--

"Was she an April Fool too?"

"No," my mother outright laughed. "No, I seem to be the family's
only one of that variety."

Probably our best single piece of family lore was that my mother,
our unlikeliest candidate for any kind of foolery, was born on the first
of April of 1900. "Maybe you could get the calendar changed," I recall
that my father joked this particular year, when he and Alec and I were spoofing her a little—careful not to make it too much—about the coincidence of her birthday. "Trade dates with Groundhog Day, maybe." She retorted, "I don't need the calendar changed, just slowed down." It sobered me to realize that when she made that plaint about the speed of time, she was not yet two-thirds of the age I am now.

"Why did I What?" The Gleaner was forgotten in front of her now, her gaze was on me: not her look that could skin a rock, just a highly surprised once-over.

I swear that what I'd had framed in mind was only further inquiry about my grandparents, how Anna Ramsay and Isaac Reese first happened to meet and when they'd decided to get married and so on. But somewhere a cog slipped, and what had fallen out of my mouth instead was: "Why'd you marry Dad?"

"Well, you know," I now floundered, searching for any possible shore, "what I mean, kids wonder about something like that. How we got here."
Another perilous direction, that one. "I don't mean, uh, how, exactly. More like why. Didn't you ever wonder yourself? Why your own mother and father decided to get married? I mean, how would any of us be here if those people back then hadn't decided the way they did? And I just thought, since we're talking about all this anyway, you could fill me in on some of it. Out of your own experience, sort of."

My mother looked at me for an eternity more, then shook her head. "One of them goes head over heels after anything blonde, the other one wants to know the history of the world. Alec and you, where did I get you two?"

I figured I had nothing further to lose by taking the chance: "That's sort of what I was asking, isn't it?"

"All right." She still looked skeptical of the possibility of common sense in me, but her eyes let up on me a little. "All right, Mr. Inquisitive. You want to know the makings of this family, is that it?"

I nodded vigorously.

She thought. Then: "Jick, a person hardly knows how to start on this. But you know, don't you, that I taught most of that—-that one year at the Noon Creek school?"

I did know that chapter. That when my mother's mother, Anna Ramsay Reese, died in the 'flu epidemic of 1918, my mother came back from what was to have been her second year in college and became, in her mother's stead, the Noon Creek teacher.

"If it hadn't been for that, who knows what would have happened,"
she went on. "But that did bring me back from college, about the same

time a long-haired galoot named Varick McCaskill came back from the

Scotch army. His father still was in here up the North Fork. Scotch Heaven.

So Mac was back in the country and the two of us had known each other,
oh, all our lives, really. Though mostly by sight. Our families didn't
always get along. But that's neither here nor there. That spring when
this Mac character was hired as association rider--"

"Didn't get along?"

I ought to have known better. My interruption sharpened her right
up again. "That's another story. There's such a thing as a one-track

mind, but honestly, Jick, you McCaskill men sometimes have no-track
minds. Now. Do you want to Hear This, Or--"

"You were doing just fine. Real good. Dad got to be the association

rider and then what?"

"All right then. He got to be the association rider and--well, he got to paying attention to me. I suppose it could be said I paid
some back."

Right then I yearned the impossible. To have watched that double-
sided admiration. My mother had turned 19 the last of February (or March 1)
of that teaching year; a little older than Alec was now, though not a
whole hell of a lot. Given what a good-looker she was even now, she must
have been extra special then. And my father the cowboy—hard to imagine
that—would have been in his early twenties, a rangy redhead who'd been
out in the world all the way to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Varick and
Lisabeth, progressing to Mac and Bet, and then to some secret territory of
love language that I couldn't even guess at. They are beyond our knowing, those once young people who become our parents, which to me has always made them that much more fascinating.

"There was a dance, that spring. In my own schoolhouse, so your father ever since has been telling me I have nobody to blame but myself." She again had a glow to her, as when she'd told me about Pete helloing the horses. "Mac was on hand, by then he'd been hired by the Noon Creek ranchers and was around helping them brand calves and so on. That dance--" she shrugged, as if an impossible question had been asked--"that dance I suppose did it, though neither of us knew it right then. I'd been determined I was never going to marry into a ranch life. Let alone to a cow chouser who didn't own much more than his chaps and hat. And later I found out from your father that he'd vowed never to get interested in a schoolmarm. Too much for intentions.

Anyway, now here he was, in my own schoolroom. I'd never seen a man take so much pleasure in dancing. Most of it with me, need I say. Oh, and there was this. I hadn't been around him or those other Scotch Heaveners while I was away at college, and I'd lost the knack of listening to that burr of theirs. About the third time that night he said something I couldn't catch, I asked him: 'Do you always talk through your nose?' And then he put on a real burr and said back, 'Lass, it saves wearrr and tearrr on my lips. They'rrre in prrrime condition, if you'rrre everrr currrious.'

My father the flirt. Or flirrrt. I must have openly gaped over this, for my mother reddened a bit and stirred in her chair and declared,
"Well, you don't need full details. Now then. Is that enough family history?"

Not really. "You mean, the two of you decided to get married because you liked how Dad danced?"

"You would be surprised how large a part something like that plays. But no, there's more to it than that. Jick, when people fall in love the way we did, it's—I don't mean this like it sounds, but it's like being sick. Sick in a wonderful way, if you can imagine that. The feeling is in you just all the time, is what I mean. It takes you over. No matter what you do, what you try to think about, the other person is there in your head. Or your blood, however you want to say it. It's"—she shrugged at the impossible again—"there's no describing it beyond that. And so we knew. A summer of that—a summer when we didn't even see each other that much, because your father was up in the Two tending the association cattle most of the time—we just knew. That fall, we were married." Here she sprung a slight smile at me. "And I let myself in for all these questions."

There was one, though, that hovered. I was trying to determine whether to open my yap and voice it, when she took it on herself. "My guess is, you're thinking about Alec and Leona, aren't you."

"Yeah, sort of."

"Lord knows, they imagine they're in a downright epidemic of love," my mother acknowledged. "Alec maybe is. He's always been all go and no whoa. But Leona isn't. She can't be. She's too young and—" my mother scouted for aptness—"flibbertty. Leona is in love with the idea of men, not one man. And that's enough on that subject." She looked across at me in a way that made my fingers quit even pretending they were
manufacturing a horsehair hackamore. "Now I have one for you. Jick, you worry me a little."

"Huh? I do?"

"You do. All this interest of yours in the way things were. I just hope you don't go through life paying attention to the past at the expense of the future. That you don't pass up chances because they're new and unexpected." She said this next softly, yet also more strongly than anything else I'd ever heard her say. "Jick, 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, each in his own way, looks to the past to find life, you needn't. They are both good men. I love the two of them—the three of you—in the exact way I told you about, when your father and I started all this. But Jick, be ready for your life ahead. It can't all be read behind you."

I looked back at her. I wouldn't have bet I had it in me to say this. But it did come out: "Mom, I know it all can't. But some?"

That next afternoon, Friday, was the homestretch of my digging. It needed to be, with my father due home sometime the next morning. And so once more unto the bowels of the earth, so to speak, taking down with me into the outhouse pit an old short-handled lady shovel Toussaint Rennie had given my father and a bucket to pack the dirt out with.

My mood was first-rate. My mother's discourse from the evening before still occupied my thinking. The other portion of me by now was accustomed to the pit work, muscles making no complaint whatsoever, and
in me that feeling of endless stamina you have when you are young, that you can keep laboring on and on and on, forever if need be. The lady shovel I was using was perfect for this finishing-off work of dabbing dirt into the bucket. To make it handy in his ditch riding Toussaint always shortened the handle and then ground off about four inches of the shovel blade, cutting it down into a light implement about two-thirds of a normal shovel but which still, he proclaimed, "carries all the dirt I want to." And working as I had been for a while each day without gloves to get some good calluses started, now I had full benefit of the smooth old shovel handle in my bare hands. To me, calluses have always been one of the marks of true summer.

How long I lost myself to the rhythm of the lady shovel and the bucket, I don't know. But definitely I was closing in on the last of my project, bottoming the pit out nice and even, when I stepped toward my ladder to heft up a pailful of dirt and found myself looking into the blaze face of a horse. And above that, a hat and grin which belonged to Alec.

"Going down to visit the Chinamen, huh?"

Why did that get under my skin? I can run that remark of Alec's through my ears a dozen times now and find no particular reason for it to be rilesome. In my brother's lofty position I'd likely have commented something similar. But evidently there is something about being come upon in the bottom of an outhouse hole that will unhinge me, for I snapped right back to Alec:

"Yeah, we can't all spend our time roosting on top of a horse and
looking wise."

Alec let up on his grinning at that. "You're a little bit owly there, Jicker. You maybe got a touch of shovelitis."

I continued to squint up at him and had it framed in my mind to retort "Is that anything like wingwangwoo fever?" when it dawned on me that Alec was paying only about half-attention to our conversation anyway. His gaze was wandering around the station buildings as if he hadn't seen them for a decade or so, yet also as if he wasn't quite seeing them now either. Abstracted, might be the twenty-five cent word for it. A fellow with a lot on his mind, most of it blonde and warm.

One thing did occur to me to find out:

"How much is 19 times 60?"

"1140," replied Alec, still looking absent. "Why?"

"Nothing." Damned if I was going to bat remarks back and forth with somebody whose heart wasn't in it, so I simply asked, "What brings you in off the lone prairie?" propped an arm against the side of my pit and waited.

Alec finally recalled that I was down there and maybe was owed some explanation for the favor of his presence, so he announced: "I just came by for that town shirt of mine. Need it for rodeo day."

Christamighty. The powers of mothers. Barely a full day had passed since Mom forecast to Pete that it would take the dire necessity of a shirt to draw Alec into our vicinity, and here he was, shirt-chaser incarnate.
It seemed to me too good a topic to let him have for free. "What, are you entering the pretty shirt contest this year?"

Now Alec took a squint down at me from the summit of the horse, as if I only then really registered on him. "No, wisemouth, the calf roping." Hoohoo. Here was going to be another Alec manoeuvre just popular as all hell with our parents, spending money on the entry fee for calf roping.

"I guess that color of shirt does make calves run slower," I deadpanned. The garment in question was dark purplish, about the shade of chokecherry juice. Distinctive, to put it politely. "It's in the bottom drawer there in our--the porch bedroom." Then I figured since I was being helpful anyway, I might as well clarify the terrain for Alec. "Dad's in Missoula. But maybe you'd already heard that, huh?"

But Alec was glancing around in that absent-minded way again, which was nettling me a little more every time he did it. I mean, you don't particularly like to have a person choosing when to phase in and out on you. We had been brothers for about 14 5/6 years, so a few seconds of consecutive attention didn't strike me as too awful much to expect of Alec. Evidently so, though. He had reined his horse's head around to start toward the station before he thought to ask: "How's Mom's mood?"

"Sweet as pie," He might as well know there was an early limit on my aid to this visitation of his. "How's yours?"

I got nothing back from that. Alec simply passed from sight, his horse's tail giving a last little waft as if wiping clean the field of
vision which the pit framed over me.

As I was reaching down to resume with my bucket of earth, though, I heard the hooves stop and the saddle creak.

"Jicker?" Alec's voice came.

"Yeah?"

"I hear you been running the mountains with Stanley Meixell."

While I knew you couldn't have a nosebleed in the English Creek valley without everybody offering you a hanky for a week afterward, it had never occurred to me that I too was automatically part of this public pageant. I was so surprised by Alec knowing of my Stanley sojourn that I could only send forth another "Yeah?"

"You want to be a little more choosy about your company, is all."

"Why?" I asked earnestly of the gape of the pit over me. Two days ago I was hiding out from Stanley in this very hole like a bashful badger, and now I sounded like he was my patron saint. "What the hell have you got against Stanley?"

No answer floated down, and it began to seem to me that this brother of mine was getting awful damn cowboyish indeed if he looked down on a person for tending sheep camp. I opened my mouth to tell him something along that line, but what leaped out instead was: "Why's Stanley got everybody in this damn family so spooked?"

Still nothing from above, until I heard the saddle leather and hooves again, moving off toward the ranger station.

The peace of the pit was gone. Echoes of my questions to Alec
drove it out. In its stead came a frame of mind that I was penned down here, seven feet below the world in a future outhouse site, while two members of this damn McCaskill family were resting their bones inside the ranger station and the other one was gallivanting off in Missoula. To each his own and all that, but this situation had gotten considerably out of proportion.

The more I steamed, the more a dipper of water and a handful of gingersnaps seemed necessary to damper me down. And so I climbed out with the bucket of dirt, flung it on the pile as if burying something smelly, and headed into the house.

"Your mind is still set," my mother was saying as I came through the doorway, into the kitchen.

"Still is," agreed Alec, but warily. Neither of them paid me any particular attention as I dippered a drink from the water bucket. That told me plenty about how hot and heavy the conversation was in here.

"A year, Alec." So she was tackling him along that angle again. Delay and live to fight again another day. "Try college for a year and decide then. Right now you and Leona think the world begins and ends in each other. But it's too soon to say, after just these few months."

"It's long enough."

"That's what Earl Zane likely thought, the day before Leona dropped him for you." That seemed to me to credit Earl Zane with more thought capacity than he'd ever shown. Earl was a year or so older than Alec, and his brother Arlee was a year ahead of me in school, and so far as
I could see the Zane boys were living verifications that the human head is mostly bone.

"That's past history," Alec was maintaining.

I punctuated that for him by popping the lid off the Karo can the gingersnaps were kept in. Then there was the sort of scrabbling sound as I dug out a handful. And after that the little sharp crunch as I took a first bite. All of which Alec waited out with the too patient annoyance of somebody held up while a train goes by. Then declared: "Leona and I ain't--aren't skim milk kids. We know what we're doing."

My mother took a breath which probably used up half the air in the kitchen. "Alec. What you're doing is rushing into trouble. You can't get ahead on ranch wages. And just because Leona is horse happy at the moment doesn't mean she's going to stay content with a ranch hand for a husband."

"We'll get by. Besides, Wendell says he'll boost my wages after we're married."

This stopped even my mother, though not for long. "Wendell Williamson," she said levelly, "has nobody's interest at heart but his own. Alec, you know as well as anybody the Double W has been the ruin of that Noon Creek country. Any cattle ranch he hasn't bought outright, he has sewed up with a lease from the bank--"

"If Wendell hadn't got them, somebody else would have," Alec recited.

"Yes," my mother surprised him, "maybe somebody like you. Somebody who doesn't already have more money than he can count. Somebody
who'd run one of those ranches properly, instead of gobbling it up just for the sake of having it. Alec, Wendell Williamson is using you the way he uses a handkerchief to blow his nose. Once he's gotten a few years of work out of you"--another kitchen-clearing breath here--"and evidently gotten you married off to Leona, so you'll have that obligation to carry around in life, too--once he's made enough use of you and you start thinking in terms of a real raise in wages, down the road you'll go and he'll hire some other youngster--"

"Youngster? Now wait one damn min--"

"--with his head full of cowboy notions. Alec, staying on at the Double W is a dead end in life."

While Alec was bringing up his forces against all this, I crunched into another ginger snap.

My brother and my mother sent me looks from their opposite sides of the room, a convergence about as taut as being roped with two lassoes simultaneously. She suggested: "Aren't you supposed to be shoveling instead of demolishing cookies?"

"I guess. See you around, Alec."

"Yeah. Around."

Supper that night was about as lively as dancing to a dead march.

Alec had ridden off toward town--Leona-ward--evidently altered not one whit from when he arrived, except for gaining himself the rodeo shirt. My mother was working out her mood on the cooking utensils. I was a little surprised the food didn't look pulverized
when it arrived to the table. So far as I could see, I was the only person on the place who'd made any true progress that day, finishing the outhouse hole. When I came in to wash up I considered announcing cheerfully "Open for business out there," but took a look at my mother's stance there at the stove and decided against.

So we just ate, which if you're going to be silent is probably the best thing to be doing anyway. I was doubly glad I had coaxed as much conversation out of her last night as I had. I sometimes wonder if life is anything but an averaging out. One kind of day and then its opposite.

Likely, though, the mother of Alec McCaskill would not have agreed just then that life has its own simple average. For by the time my mother washed the supper dishes and I was drying them, I began to realize she wasn't merely in a maternal snit. She was thinking hard about something. And if I may give myself credit, it occurred to me that her thinking deserved my absence. Any new idea anybody in the McCaskill family could come up with deserved all encouragement.

"Need me any more?" I asked as I hung the dish towel. "I thought I might ride up to check on Walter's and fish my way home till toward dark." The year's longest day was just past, twilight would go on for a couple or three hours yet.

"No. No, go ahead." Her cook's instinct roused her to add:

"Your father will be home tomorrow, so catch us a big mess." In those times a person could, the limit was 25 fish a day.

And then she was back into the thinking.

Nothing was amiss at Walter Kyle's place. As I closed the door
on that tidy sparse room, I wondered if Walter didn't have the right idea. Live alone and let everybody else knock bruises on one another.

The fishing was as close to a cinch as fishing can ever be. Since I was using an honest-to-God pole and reel and it was a feeding time of evening, the trout in those North Fork beaver dams all but volunteered. Do I even need to say out loud that I limited? One more time I didn't owe my father a theoretical milkshake, and there still was evening left when the gill of that fifteen trout was threaded onto my willow fish stringer and I went to collect Pony from the tall meadow grass where she was grazing.

My mother still was in her big think when I came back into the ranger station toward the last of dusk. I reported that the mess of cleaned fish was in a pan of water in the spring house, then stretched myself in an obvious sort of way, kissed her goodnight, and headed for the north porch and my bed. I honestly didn't want to be around any more heavy cogitation that day.

That north porch, a screened-in affair, had been built to take advantage of the summer shade on that side of the English Creek ranger station house, but in late spring Alec and I always moved out there to use it as our bedroom. Now that he was bunking at the Double W, I of course had the room to myself and I have to testify here that gaining a private bedroom goes far toward alleviating the absence of a brother.

Not just the privacy did I treasure, though. It seemed to me at the time, and still does, that a person could not ask for a better site than that one for day's end. That north porch made a sort of copperwire