

conversation, nor to the process of Dode being put on a stretcher over his protestations that he could walk or even foot-race if he had to, nor to Coffee Nerves being tugged into exit through what little was left of the catch pen gate. Instead he, Toussaint, was standing there gazing into the exact center of the arena, as if the extravaganza that Coffee Nerves and Dode had put on still was continuing out there. The walnut crinkles deepened in his face, his chuckle rippled out, and then the declaration: "That one. That one was a ride."

There of course was more on the schedule of events beyond that. Tollie inevitably thought to proclaim "Well, folks the show goes on." But the only way for it to go after that performance by Coffee Nerves and Dode was downhill, and Ray and I retained our fence perch just through the next section of calf roping to see whether Alec's 17½ seconds would hold up. Contestant after contestant rampaged out, flailed some air with a lariat, and came nowhere close to Alec's time.

It had been a rodeo. English Creek had won both the saddle bronc riding and the calf roping.

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While the rodeo grounds emptied of crowd Ray and I stretched our attendance as long as we could. We watched the wrangling crew unpen the broncs and steers and calves. Listened to as much of the chute society's post mortem as we could stand. Had ourselves another bottle of pop apiece before the beer booth closed. Then I proposed that we might as well take a horse tour of Gros Ventre. Ray thought that sounded dandy enough, so I fetched Mouse and swung into the saddle, and Ray climbed on behind.

We had sightseen most of the town before wandering back past the Medicine Lodge, which by now had its front door propped open with a beer keg, probably so the accumulating fume of cigarette smoke and alcoholic breath wouldn't pop the windows out of the place. As Dode Withrow would have said, it sounded like Hell changing shifts in there. The jabber and laughter and sheer concentration of humanity beyond that saloon doorway of course had Ray and me gazing in as we rode past, and that gaze was what made me abruptly halt Mouse.

Ray didn't ask anything, but I could feel his curiosity as to why we were stalled in the middle of the street. Nor was it anything I could put into words for him. Instead I offered: "How about you riding Mouse down to your place? I'll be along in a little. There's somebody I got to go see."

Ray's look toward the Medicine Lodge wondered In there? but his voice only conveyed "Sure, glad to" and he lifted himself ahead into the saddle after I climbed down. Best of both worlds for him. chance to be an unquestioning friend and get a horse to ride as well.

I went into the blue air of the saloon and stopped by the figure sitting on the second bar stool inside the doorway. The Medicine Lodge was getting itself uncorked for the night ahead. Above the general jabber somebody toward the middle of the bar was relating in a semi-shout: "So I told that sonofabitch he just better watch his step around me or there's gonna be a new face in Hell for breakfast." My interest, though, was entirely here at the seated figure.

The brown hat moved around as he became aware of me.

"Lo, Stanley," I began, still not knowing where I was going next with any of this.

"Well, there, Jick." The crowfoot lines clutched deeper at the corners of Stanley Meixell's eyes as he focused on me. He didn't look really tanked up, but on the other hand couldn't be called church-sober either. Someplace in between, as he'd been so much of our time together on the mountain. "Haven't seen you," he continued in all pleasantness, "since you started living aboveground."

Good Christ, Stanley had noticed my ducking act that day I was digging the outhouse hole and he rode by. Was my every moment visible to people anymore, like a planet being perpetually studied by one of those California telescopes?

"Yeah, well. How you been?"

"Fine as snoose. And yourself?"

"What I mean, how's your hand doing?"

Stanley looked down at it as if I was the first to ever point out its existence. He still had some doozies of scabs and major bruises there on the injury site, but Stanley didn't seem to regard this as anything but ordinary health. "It ain't bad." He picked up the bottle of beer from the counter before him. "Works good enough for the basics, anyway." And tipped down the last of that particular beer. "Can I buy you a snort?"

"No, no thanks."

"On the wagon, huh? I've clumb on it some times myself. All else considered, though, I'd just as soon be down off."

It occurred to me that since I was in this place anyway it didn't cost any more to be cordial. The stool between Stanley and the doorway

was vacant--an empty mixed-drink glass testified that its occupant had traveled on--so I straddled the seat and amended: "Actually I would take a bottle of orange, though."

Stanley indicated his empty beer bottle to Tom Harry, the nearest of the three bartenders trying to cope with the crowd's liquid wants. "When you get time, professor. And a sunjuice for my nurse, here."

Tom Harry studied me. "He with you?" he asked Stanley.

"Closer than kin, him and me," Stanley solemnly vouched to the barman. "We have rode millions of miles together."

"None of it aged him that much," Tom Harry observed, nonetheless setting up a bottle of orange in front of me and a fresh beer for Stanley.

"Stanley," I started again. He was pushing coins out of a little pile, to pay for the latest round. Fishing up a five-cent piece, he held it toward me between his thumb and forefinger. "Know what this is?"

"Sure, a nickel."

"Naw, it's a dollar a Scotchman's been squeezing." The fresh beer got a gulp of attention. For the sake of the conversation I intended I'd like to have known how many predecessors that bottle had had, but of course Tom Harry's style of bartending was to swoop empties out of sight so no such incriminating count could be taken.

I didn't have long to dwell on Stanley's possible intake, for some out-of-town guy wearing a panama hat zigged when he meant to zag on his way toward the door and lurched into the pair of us. Abruptly the

guy was being gripped just above the elbow by Stanley--his right hand evidently had recuperated enough from Bubbles for this, too--and was retargeted toward the door with advice from Stanley: "Step easy, buddy, so you don't get yourself hurt. In this county there's a \$5 fine for drawing blood on a fool."

Mr. Panama Hat ^{hastily} left our company, and Stanley's handling of the incident reminded me to ask something. "How you getting along with Canada Dan these days?"

"Better," Stanley allowed. "Yeah, just a whole lot better." He paid recognition to his beer bottle again. "Last I heard, Dan was up in Cut Bank. Doing some town herding."

Cut Bank? Town herding? "What, did the Busby boys can him?"

"I got them to give Dan a kind of vacation." Then, in afterthought: "Permanent."

I considered this. Up there in the Two with Stanley those weeks ago, I would not have bet a pin that he was capable of rousing himself to do justice to Canada Dan. Yet he had.

"Stanley--"

"I can tell you got something on your mind, Jick. Might as well unload it."

If I could grapple it into position, that was exactly what I intended. To ask: what was that all about, when we first met you there on the mountain, the skittishness between you and my father? Why, when I ask anyone in this family of mine about Stanley Meixell, is there never a straight answer? Just who are you to us? How did

you cross paths with the McCaskills in the past, and why are you back crisscrossing with us again?

Somebody just beyond Stanley let out a whoop, then started in on a twangy rendition of the song that goes: "I'm a calico dog, I'm a razorback hog, I'm a cowboy on the loose! I can drink towns dry, I can all but fly, I flavor my beans with snoose!" In an instant, Tom Harry was there leaning over the bar and ^{categorically} ~~with a pointed~~ finger informing the songster that he didn't care if the guy hooted, howled or for that matter blew smoke rings out his butt, but no singing.

This, Stanley shook his head over. "What's the world coming to when a man can't offer up a tune? They ruin everything these days."

First Dode, now Stanley. It seemed my mission in life this Fourth of July to steer morose beer drinkers away from even deeper gloom. At least I knew which direction I wanted to point Stanley: back into history.

"I been trying to figure something out," I undertook, honestly enough, one more time. "Stanley, why was it you quit rangering on the Two?"

Stanley did some more demolition on his beer, then cast a visiting glance around the walls at Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the stuffed herd, and eventually had to look at me and ask as if verifying:

"Me?"

"Uh huh, you."

"No special reason."

"Run it by me anyway."

"Naw, you'd be bored fast."

"Whyn't you let me judge that."

"You got better use for your ears."

"Jesus, Stanley--"

All this while I was attempting to pry sense out of Stanley, the tail of my eye was trying to tell me something again. Someone had come up behind me. Which wasn't particular news in the Medicine Lodge throng, except this someone evidently had no other site in mind; his presence stayed steadily there, close enough to make me edgy about it, sitting half-braced as I was in case this guy too was going to crash in our direction.

I ~~half~~ turned on the bar stool to cope with the interloper and gazed full into the face, not all that many inches away, of Velma Simms.

I must tell you, it was like opening a kitchen drawer to reach in for a jelly spoon and finding instead the crown jewels of England. For I had never been close enough, head-on, to Velma to learn that her eyes were gray. Gray! Like mine! Possibly our four were the world's only. And to garner further that her lipstick, on the very lips that ruled the rodeo whistle, was the beautiful dark-beyond-red of ripe cherries. And that she was wearing tiny pearl earrings, below the chestnut hair, as if her ears could be unbuttoned to further secrets even there. And that while the male population of northern Montana was focusing on the backside of Velma's renowned slacks, they were missing important announcements up front. Sure, there could be found a few ~~battle~~ lines at the corners of her eyes and across her

forehead. But to me right then, they simply seemed to be affidavits of how imaginative a life this lady had led.

Unbelievable but so. Out of all the crowded flesh in the Medicine Lodge just then, solely onto me was fixed this attention of Velma Simms.

She just stood there eyeing me while I gaped, until the point of her attention finally prodded through to me.

"Oh. Oh, hello, Mrs.--uh, Velma. Have I got your seat?" I scrambled off the bar stool as if it was suddenly red-hot.

"Now that you mention it," she replied, and even just saying that, her words were one promissory note after another. Velma floated past me and snuggled onto the stool. A little extra of that snuggle went in Stanley's direction.

"Saw you there at the announcing booth," I reminisced brightly.

"Did you," said she.

I may be a slow starter, but eventually I catch up with the situation. My quick gawp around the saloon confirmed what had been trying to dawn on me. This year's beau in the gabardine suit was nowhere.

"Yeah, well," I began to extricate myself. "I got to be getting."

"Don't feel you need to rush off," said Stanley. As if God's gift to the male race wasn't enthroned right there beside him. "The night's still a pup."

"Uh huh. That's true, but--"

"When you got to go," put in Velma, twirling the empty mixed-drink glass to catch Tom Harry's attention for a refill, "you got to go."

"Right," I affirmed. "And like I say, I, uh, got to go."

What made me add to the total of my footprints already in my mouth, I can't truly account for. Maybe the blockade I had hit again in wanting to ask all the questions of Stanley. In any case, the parting I now blurted out was:

"You two in a dancing mood tonight? What I mean, see you at the dance, will I?"

Stanley simply passed that inquiry to Velma with a look. In theory, Velma then spoke her answer to me, although she didn't unlock her gaze from him at all as she said it: "Stanley and I will have to see whether we have any spare time."

So. One more topic clambering aboard my already bent-over brain. Stanley Meixell and Velma Croake Bogan Sutter Simms.

"Ray? What kind of a summer are you having?"

We were ^{up}in the double window of his bedroom, each of us propped within the sill. A nice breeze came in on us there, the leaves of the big cottonwood in the Heaneys' front yard seeming to flutter the air our way. Downstairs the radio had just been turned on by Ed Heaney, so it was 7 o'clock, the dance wouldn't get underway for an hour or so yet, and as long as Ray and I were going to be window sitting anyway for the next while, I figured I'd broach to him some of all that was on my mind.

"Didn't I tell you? Pilot."

"No, I don't mean that. What it is--do things seem to you kind of

unsettled?"

"How?"

"Well, Christ, I don't know. Just in general. People behaving like they don't know whether to include you in or out of things."

"What kind of things?"

"Things that went on years ago. Say there was an argument or a fight or something, people fell out over it. Why can't they just say, here's what it was about, it's over and done with? Get it out of their systems?"

"That's just grown fups. They're not going to let a kid in on anything, until they figure it's too late to do him any good."

"But why is that? What is it that's so goddamn important back there that they have to keep it to themselves?"

"Jick, sometimes--"

"What?"

"Sometimes maybe you think too much."

I thought that over briefly. "What am I supposed to do about that? Christ, Ray, it's not like poking your finger up your nose in public, some kind of habit you can remind yourself not to do. Thinking is thinking. It happens in spite of a person."

"Yeah, but you maybe encourage it more than it needs."

"I what?"

"See, maybe it's like this." Ray's eyes squinched more than ever as he worked on his notion, and the big front teeth nipped his lower lip in concentration. Then: "Maybe, let's say maybe a thought comes

into your head, it's only about what you're going to do next. Saddle up Mouse and take a ride, say. That's all the thought it really needs, then put on the saddle and climb on. But the mood you're in, Jick, you'd stop first and think some more. 'But if I go for a ride, where am I going to go?' Ray here went into one of his radio voices, the words coming ~~deep and crowding each other fast~~ ^{clippity-clippity} like ~~old~~ ^{old} Kaltenborn's. "'What is it I'll see when I get there? Did anybody else ever see it? And if anybody did, is it going to look the same to me as it did to them? And old Mouse here, is it going to look the same to Mouse as it does to me?'"

Raymond Edmund Heaney Von Kaltenborn broke off, and it was just Ray again. "On and on that way, Jick. If you think too much, you make it into a whole dictionary of going for a ride. Instead of just going. See what I'm saying?"

"Goddamn it now, Ray, what I mean is more important than goddamn riding a horse."

"It's the same with anything. It'll get to you if you think about it too much, Jick."

"But what I'm telling you is, I don't have any choice. This stuff I'm talking about is on my mind whether or not I want it to be."

Ray took a look at me as if I had some sort of brain fever that might be read in my face. Then in another of his radio voices intoned: "Have you tried Vick's VapoRub? It sooooothes as it woooooorks."

There it lay. Even Ray had no more idea than the man in the moon about my perplexity. This house where we sat tucked in blue-painted

sills, above its broad lawned yard and under its high cottonwoods, this almost second home of mine: it ticked to an entirely different time than the summer that was coursing through me. The Heaney family was in place in the world. Ed was going to go on exiting the door of his lumber yard at 6 every evening and picking up his supper fork at 10 after 6 and clicking on that ^{Silverstone}~~Philco~~ radio at 7, on into eternity. Genevieve would go on keeping this house shining and discovering new sites for doilies. Mary Ellen would grow up and learn nursing at the Columbus Hospital in Great Falls. Ray would grow up and take a year of business college at Missoula and then join his father in the lumber yard. Life under this roof had the rhythm of the begattings in the Bible. The Heaneys were not the McCaskills, not even anywhere similar, and I lacked the language to talk about any of the difference, even to my closest friend.

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"Swing, swing, and swing 'em high!

Allemande left and allemande aye!

Ingo, bingo, six penny high!

Big pig, little pig, root hog or die!"

The dance was underway, but only just, when Ray and I wandered down there to the Sedgwick House to it. Which is to say the hall-- I suppose old C.E. ^{Sedgwick,} or maybe even Lila Sedge conceived of it as a ballroom, but everybody else considered it the dance hall--was crammed to an extent that made the Medicine Lodge look downright lonely across the street, but not all that many people were dancing yet. Visiting, gathering an eyeful of circulating, ~~looking~~ everybody else, ~~over,~~ joking, trying to pry out of a neighbor how many bushels an acre his wheat looked like or what his lambs weighed by now, but only one square of actual dancers out there footing it to Jerome Satterlee's calling. Partly, everybody knew it took Jerome a little while (translate that to a few drinks) to get his tonsils limbered up. And then he could call dances until your shoes fell off your feet.

"A little thin out here on the floor, it looks to me like," Jerome was now declaring, preparatory to the next dance. "You know what I mean? Let's get one more square going here, make it look like we mean business. Adam, Sal, step on out here, you can stand around and gab any time. How about all you Busbys, you're half a square yourselves. Good, good. Come on now, one more couple. Nola plays this piano twice as good when we got two squares on the floor." At the upright, Nola Atkins sat planted as if they'd simply picked up the piano bench from

the creek picnic with her on it and set them both down here on the band platform. Beside her, Jeff Swan had his fiddle tucked under his chin and his bow down at his side as if it was a sword he was ready to draw. "One more couple. Do I have to telephone to Valier and ask them to send over four left feet? Whup, here they come now, straight from supper, dancers if I ever saw any. Leona Tracy and Alec McCaskill, step right in there. Alec, you checked your horse and rope at the door, I hope? Now, this is somewhat more like--"

Stepping in from the Sedgwick House dining room, rodeo prize money in his pocket and free supper under his belt and a grin everywhere on his face there was any space for it, Alec looked like a young king coming home from his crowning ceremony.

Even so, to notice this glorious brother of mine you had to deliberately steer your eyes past Leona. Talk about an effort of will.

Leona took the shine in any crowd, even a dance hall full. The day's green blouse was missing--I mean, she had changed out of it. Now she wore a white taffeta dress, full and flouncy at the hem. In square dancing a lot of swirling goes on, and Leona was going to be a swirl worth seeing.

I shot a glance around the dance hall. My parents had missed this grand entry. They'd gone out to J.L. and Nan Hill's ranch, a couple of miles up English Creek, for supper and to change clothes, and were taking their own sweet time about getting back in. And Pete and Marie were driving Toussaint home to the Two Medicine, so they'd be even later arriving. I was the sole family representative, so to speak,

to record the future Mr. and Mrs. Alec McCaskill come swanking in.

"Ready out there? Sure you are. You'll get to liking this so much, before the night is out you'll want to trade your bed for a lantern." Jerome, when he got to going good, put a lot of motion into his calling, using both arms to direct the traffic of dancers; kind of like a man constantly hanging things here and there in a closet. His gestures even now said he was entering into the spirit of the night. "All right, sonnies and honeys. Nola, Jim, let's make 'em prance. Everybody, here we go--

First four forward. Back to your places.

Second four follow. Shuffle on back.

Now you're getting down to cases,

Swing each other till the floorbeams crack!"

Here in the time I am now it seems hard to credit that this Fourth of July dance was the first I ever went to on my own. That is, was in company with somebody like Ray instead of being along as baggage with my parents. Of course, without fully acknowledging it Ray and I also were well on our way to another tremendous night, the one when each of us would step through this dance hall doorway with a person neither parent nor male alongside. But that lay await yet. My point just now is that where I was in life this particular Fourth night, closing in on fifteen years of age, I had been attending dances since the first few months of that total. And Alec, the all-winning rodeo-shirted sashayer out there on the floor right now, the same before me. Each, a McCaskill baby bundled in blankets and cradled in chairs beside the dance floor.

Imbibe music along with mother's milk, that was the experience of a lot of us of Two country upbringing. Successors to Alec's and my floor-side infancy were here in the Sedgwick House hall this very night: Charity Frew's half-year-old daughter, and another new Helwig baby, and a couple of other fresh ones belonging to farm folks east of town, a swaddled quartet with chairs fenced around them in the farthest corner of the dance hall.

"Salute your ladies, all together.

Ladies, to the gents do the same.

Hit the lumber with your leather.

Balance all, and swing your dame!"

It might be said that the McCaskill dancing history was such that it was the portion of lineage that came purest into Alec and me. Definitely into Alec. out there now with that white taffeta back and forth to him like a wave of the sea, he looked like he could romp on forever. What little I knew of my father's father, the first McCaskill to caper on America's soil instead of Scotland's, included the information that he could dance down the house. Schottisches and Scotch reels in particular, but he also adopted any western square dances. In his twinkling steps, so to speak, followed my mother and father. Dances held in ranch houses, my mother-to-be arriving on horseback with her party dress tied on behind the saddle, my father-to-be performing the Scotch Heaven ritual of scattering a little oatmeal on the floor for better gliding. Schoolhouse dances. In the face of the Depression even hard times dances, the women costumed in gunnysack dresses and the men

in tattered work clothes. And now Alec the latest McCaskill dancer, and me beginning to realize I was on my way.

"Bunch the ladies, there in the middle.

Circle, you gents, and dosie doe.

Pay attention to old Jeff's fiddle.

Swing her around and away you go."

Can it be that all kinds of music speak to one another? For what I always end up thinking of in this dancing respect is a hymn. To me it is the one hymn that has ever seemed to make much sense:

'Dance, dance, wherever you may be,

I am the Lord of the dance,' said he,

'And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,

And I'll lead you all in the dance,' said he.

I almost wish I had never come across those words and their tune, for they make one of those chants that slip into your mind every time you meet up with the circumstances they suggest. It was so then, even as Ray nudged me to point out the Busby brothers going through a fancy twirl with each other instead of with their wives and I joined Ray and everybody else in laughing, and it is so now. Within all else those musical words, a kind of beautiful haunting. But I suppose that is what musical words, and for that matter dances and dancers, are for.



"Gents to the center, ladies round them.

Form a circle, balance all.

Whirl your girls to where you found them.

Promenade all, around the hall!"

This concluding promenade brought Alec and Leona over toward where Ray and I were onlooking, and spying us they trooped right up. Lord ~~of mercy.~~ Leona in the flush of the pleasure of dancing was nearly more than the eyes could stand. I know Ray shifted a little nervously beside me, and maybe I did too.

"Mister Jick again," she greeted me. At least it wasn't Hello, she bestowed on Ray, John Angus. "And Raymond Edmund Heaney," which really did set Ray to shifting around.

So high in flight was Alec tonight, though, that nobody else had to expend much effort. A lank of his rich red hair was down across his forehead from the dancing, and the touch of muss just made him look handsomer. ¶ "Here's a pair of wall guards," he observed of Ray and me while he grinned mightily. "You guys better think about getting yourselves one of these things," giving Leona a waist squeeze.

Yeah, sure, right. As if Leonas were as plenty as blackberries. (I have wondered often. If Marcella Withrow had been on hand that night instead of at the Conrad hospital with her father, would Ray have nerved himself up and squired her out onto the floor?) But if you can't carry on conversation with your own brother, who can you? So to keep mouth matters in motion, I asked: "How was it?"

Alec peered at me and he let up on that Leona squeezing. "How

was what?"

"Supper. The supper you won for handcuffing that poor little calf."

"Dandy," he reported, "just dandy." And now Leona awarded him a squeeze, in confirmation.

"What'd you have, veal?" Ray put in, which I thought was pretty good. But Alec and Leona were so busy handling each other's waists they didn't catch it, and Alec said, "Naw, steaks. Dancing fuel." He looked down at his armful of Leona. "Speaking of which--"

"TIMBERRR!"

I was not the only one whose ears almost dropped off in surprise. That cry was a famous one at any dance such as this. It dated back to Prohibition days, and what it signalled back then, whenever somebody stuck his head ⁱⁿ through the dance hall doorway and cut loose the call, was the availability of Mason jar moonshine for anybody who cared to step outside for a sip.

So my surprise was double. That the cry resounded through the hall this night and that the timber crier there in the doorway, when I spun around to see, proved to be my father, with my mother on his arm.

He wore his brown pinstripe suit coat, a white shirt and his newest Levis. She was in her blue cornflower frock with the slight V neckline; it was pretty tame by today's standards, but did display enough of throat and breastbone to draw second glances. Toggled out that way, Varick and Lisabeth McCaskill made a prime pair, as rangers and wives often did.

Calls and claps greeted my father's solo.

"You'd be the one to know, ^{about timber,} Mac!"

"Hoot mon, Scotch Heaven has come to town!"

"Beth, tell us fair and square: has he been up in the Two practicing that?"

Even Alec wagged his head in--admiration? consternation? both and more?--before declaiming to Leona, "There's dancing to be done. Let's get at it before the rowdy element cuts loose with something more."

Ray and I sifted over to my parents' side of the hall. My father was joshing Fritz Hahn that if Dode could still ride a bronc like that, it was Fritz's turn next Fourth to uphold the South Fork reputation. Greta and my mother were trading laughter over something, too. Didn't I tell you a dance is the McCaskill version of bliss?

"Here they are, the future of the race," my father greeted Ray and me. "Ray, how're you summering?"

"Real good," Ray responded, along with his parenthetical grin. "Quite a rodeo, wasn't it."

"Quite a one," my father agreed, with a little shake of his head which I knew had to do with the outcome of the calf roping. But at once he was launched back into more visiting with Fritz and Ray, and I just parked myself and inventoried him and my mother. It was plain my father had timbered a couple of drinks--his left eyelid was down a little, as if listening to a nightlong joke--but no serious amount. My mother, though. My mother too looked bright as a butterfly, and as she and my father traded gab with the Hahns and other people who happened by to say good words about her Ben English speech or his timber whoop,

~~by~~, both her and him unable to keep from glancing at the back-and-forth of the dancers more than at their conversationalists, a suspicion seeded in me. Maybe, more than maybe, my mother had a drink or two in her, too.

"Where you guys been?" I voiced when I got the chance.

And received what I deserved. "Places," stated my mother, then laughed.

Well, I'd had one escape this day. Getting in and out of the Medicine Lodge without coinciding with my own parents there.

Out on the floor, the swirl was dissolving as it does after the call and music have hit their climax, and Jerome was enlisting everybody within earshot for the next variety of allemande and dosie doe. "Now I can't call dances to an empty floor, can I? Let's up the ante here. Four squares this time, let's make it. Plenty of territory, we don't even have to push out the walls yet--"

"The man needs our help," my father suggested to my mother and the Hahns, and off they all went, to take up places in the fourth square of dancers forming up.

The dance wove the night to a pattern all its own, as dances do. I remember the standard happenings. Supper hour was announced for midnight, both the Sedgwick House dining room and the Lunchery were going to close at one a.m. Ray and I had agreed that supper hour-- or rather, an invitation to oyster stew at the Lunchery, as my parents were certain to provide--would be our personal curfew. Jerome at one point sang out "Next one is ladies' choice!" and it was interesting to

see some of the selections they made, Alice Van Bebber snagging the lawyer Eli Kinder and immediately beginning to talk him dizzy, pretty Arleta Busby putting out her hand to that big pile of guff Ed Van Bebber, of all damn people. My parents too made South Fork pairings, my mother going over to Fritz Hahn, Greta Hahn coupling onto my father's arm. Then after one particularly rousing floor session, Jerome announced that if anyone cared to pass a hat he and the musicians could manage to look the other way, and collection was taken to pay him and Nola and Jeff. ⁴ As I say, all this was standard enough, and mingled with it were some particularities of this night. The arrival of Good Help and Florene Hebner, magically a minute or so after the hat had been passed. Florene still was a presentable looking woman, despite a dress that had been washed to half its original color. Good Help's notion of dressing up was to top off his overalls with a flat cap. My mother once commented, "A poor-boy cap and less under it." The departure of the grocery store family, the Helwigs, with Luther Helwig wobbling ~~grievously~~ ⁹ under the load of booze he had been taking on and his wife Erna beside him with the bawling baby plucked from the far end chair corral. In such a case you always have to wonder: was a strategic motherly pinch delivered to that baby? ^{and eventual} My inspiration for Ray and me to kill off the last of my fifty cent stake with a bottle of pop apiece. "How about stepping across for something wet?" was the way I proposed it to Ray. He took on a worried look and began, "I don't know that my folks want me going in that--" "Christ, not the Medicine Lodge," I relieved him, "I meant the Lunchery." ~~And~~ ^{And} through

it all, dance after dance after dance, my tall redheaded father and my white-throated mother in the musical swim at one end of the hall, my tall redheaded brother and Leona starrng at the other end.

It was in fact when Ray and I returned from our pop stop that we found a lull in the dancing and made our way over to my parents again, to be as convenient as possible for an oyster stew invite.

"I suppose you two could eat if you had to?" my father at once settled that issue, while my mother drew deep breaths and cast a look around the hallfull.

"Having fun?" I asked her, just to be asking something, while my father was joshing Ray about being girl-less on such a night.

"A ton," she confirmed.

Just then Jerome Satterlee appeared in our midst, startling us all a little to see him up close instead of on the platform. "What, did you come down for air, Jerome?" my father kidded.

"Now don't give an old man a hard time," responded Jerome. "Call this next one, how about, Mac. Then we can turn 'em loose for supper. Myself, I got to go see a man about a dog."

My father was not at all a square dance caller of Jerome's breadth. But he was known to be good at--well, I will have to call it a sort of Scotch cadence, a beat of the kind that a bagpipe and drum band puts out. Certainly you danced smoother to Jerome's calling, but my father's could bring out stamping and clapping and other general exuberation. I think it is not too much to say that, with my eyes closed and ears stuffed, I could have stood there in the Sedgwick

House and told you whether it was Jerome or my father calling the dance, just by the feel of how feet were thumping the hall floor.

To make sure their smooth terms could stand his absence, my father looked the question at my mother, and she told him by a nod that he ought to go do the call. She even added, "Why don't you do the Dude and Belle? This time of night, everybody can stand some perking up."

He climbed onto the band platform. "'Lo, Nola, Jeff. This isn't any idea of mine, understand."

"Been saving you the best strings of this fiddle, Mac," Jeff answered. "When you're ready."

Nola nodded, echoed: "When you're ready."

"All right, then. Try make me look like I know what I'm doing." My father tipped his left shoulder down, pumped a rhythm with his heel a number of times to get a feel of the platform. Then made a loud hollow clap with his hands which brought everybody's attention, and called out over the hall: "Jerome is taking a minute to recuperate. He said he hates to turn things over to anybody with a Scotch notion of music, but saw no choice. So you're in for it."

"What one we gonna do, Mac, the Two Medicine two-step?" some wit yelled out.

"No sir. I've got orders to send you to supper hour in style. Time to do the Dude and Belle. And let's really do it, six squares' worth." My father was thinking big. Six squares of dancers in this hall would swash from wall to wall and end to end, and onlookers already were

moving themselves into the doorway or alongside the band platform to grant space. "All right. You all know how it starts. Join hands and circle left--"

Even yet I am surprised that I propelled myself into doing it. I stepped away from Ray, soldiered myself in front of my mother, and said: # "Mrs. McCaskill, I don't talk through my nose as pretty as the guy you usually gallivant around with. But suppose I could have this dance with you anyway?"

Her face underwent that rinse of surprise that my father sometimes showed about her. She cast a look toward the top of my head as if just realizing my height. Then came her sidelong smile, and her announcement: # "I never could resist you McCaskill galoots."

Arm in arm, my mother and I took a place in the nearest square. People were marshalling everywhere in the hall, it looked like a major parade forming up. Another thunderclap from my father's hands, Nola and Jim opened up with the music, and my father chanted us into action.

"First gent, swing the lady so fair.

Now the one right over there.

Now the one with the sorrel hair.

Now the belle of the ballroom.

Swirl and twirl. And promenade all.

Second gent, swing the lady first-rate--"

Besides my mother and me, our square was Bob and Arleta Busby, and ~~Musgreaves~~ ^{Musgreaves} the ~~Musgroves~~ who ran the drugstore, and luck of luck, Pete and Marie,

back from returning Toussaint to the Two Medicine and dancing hard the past hour or so to make up for time lost. All of them but me probably had done the Dude and Belle 500 times in their lives, but it's a basic enough dance that I knew the ropes. You begin with everybody joining hands--my mother's firm feel at the end of one of my arms, Arleta's small cool hand at my other extreme--and circling left, a wheel of eight of us spinning to the music. Now to my father's call of "you've done the track, now circle back" the round chain of us goes into reverse, prancing back to where we started. Swing your partner, my mother's cornflower frock a blue whirlwind around the pair of us. Now the lady on the left, which in my instance meant hooking arms with Arleta, another first in my life. Now return to partner, all couples do some sashaying right and left, and the "gent" of this round steps forth and begins swinging the ladies in turn until he's back to his own partner. And with all gusto, swings her as the Belle of the Ballroom.

"Third gent, swing the lady in blue--"

What I would give to have seen all this through my father's eyes. Presiding up there on the platform, pumping rhythm with his heel and feeling it multiplied back to him by the 48 feet traveling the dance floor. Probably if you climbed the helmet spike of the Sedgwick House, the rhythm of those six squares of dancers would have come quivering up to you like spasms through a tuning fork. Figure within figure within figure, from my father's outlook over us, the kaleidoscope of six simultaneous dance patterns and inside each the hinged couple

of the instant and comprising those couples friends, neighbors, sons, wife with flashing throat. The lord of the dance, leading us all.

"Fourth gent, swing the lady so sweet--"

The fourth gent was me. I stepped to the center of our square, again made the fit of arms with Arleta Busby, and swung her.

"Now the one with dainty feet--"

Musgreave,
Grace ~~Musgrove~~, plump as a partridge, didn't exactly fit the prescription, but again I managed, sending her puffing out of our fast swirl.

"Now the one who looks so neat--"

Marie glided forth, solemnly winked at me, and spun about me light as a ghost.

"Now the Belle of the Ballroom."

The blue beauty, my mother. "Swirl and twirl." Didn't we though. "Now promenade all." Around we went, all the couples, and now it was the women's turn to court their Dudes.

First lady, swing the gent who's got sore toes.

Now the one with the great big nose.

Now the one who wears store clothes.

Now the dude of the ballroom.

—

Second lady, swing the gent in size thirteens.

Now the one that ate the beans.

Now the one in brand new jeans.

Now the dude of the ballroom.

Third lady, swing the gent with the lantern jaw.

Now the one from Arkansas.

Now the one that yells, "Ah, hah!"

Now the dude of the ballroom.

So it went. In succession I was the one in store clothes, the one full of beans, and the lantern-jawed one--thankful there, not to be the one who yells "Ah hah!" which Pete performed for our square with a dandy of a whoop.

"Fourth lady, swing the gent whose nose is blue--"

My mother and sallow Hugh Musgreave.

"Now the one that spilled the glue--"

Reese reflections dancing with each other, my mother and Pete.

"Now the one who's stuck on you--"

Her and Bob Busby, two of the very best dancers in the whole hall.

"Now the Dude of the Ballroom."

She came for me, eyes on mine. I was the proxy of all that had begun at another dance, at the Noon Creek schoolhouse twenty years before. My father's voice: "Swirl him and twirl him." My moment of Dudehood was an almighty whirl, as if my mother had been getting up the

momentum all night.

"All join hands and circle to the left,
Before the fiddler starts to swear.
Dudes and Belles, you've done your best.
Now promenade, to you know where."

"Didn't know you were a lightfoot," Ray greeted me at the edge of the throng heading through the doorway to supper hour.

"Me neither," I responded, blowing a little. My mother was with Pete and Marie right behind me, we all would have to wait for my father to make his way from the band platform. "Let's let them catch up with us outside, I can use some air."

Ray and I squirmed along between the crowd and the lobby wall, weaseling our way until we popped out the front entry of the Sedgwick House.

I was about to say here that the next historic event of this Fourth of July, Gros Ventre category, was underway as the two of us emerged into the night, well ahead of my parents and the Reeses. But given that midnight had ^{just} already happened I'd better call this the first occurrence of July 5.

The person most immediately obvious of course was Leona, white and ~~silver~~ gold in the frame of light cast onto the street by the Sedgwick House's big lobby window. And then Arlee Zane, also there on that raft of light; Arlee, ignorance shining from every pore.

Beyond them, a bigger two with the reflected light cutting a line

across their chests; face to face in the dimness above that, as if they were carrying on the nicest of private chats. Except that the beamframe build of one and the chokecherry shirt of the other showed them to be Earl Zane and Alec and therefore they were not chatting.

"Surprised to see you without a skim milk calf on the end of a string," Earl was offering up as Ray and I sidled over beside Leona and Arlee so as not to miss anything. Inspiring Arlee to laugh big as if Earl's remark deserved it.

"What, are you out here in the night looking for that cinnamon pony?" I give Alec credit for the easy way he said this, tossing it out as a joke. "He went thataway, Earl."

Earl proved not to be in the market for humor just now, however.

"I suppose you could have forked him any better?" You could all but hear the thick gears move in Earl's head to produce the next remark. "You likely had a lot of riding practice recently."

"Earl, you lardbrain," this drew from Leona.

But Alec chose to cash Earl's remark at face value. "Some of us do get paid to stay on horses instead of bailing off of them. Come on, Leona, let's go get us some supper before the dancing starts again."

Earl now had another brain movement. "Surprised you can dance at all these days, what with marriage on your mind." He leaned a little toward Alec to deliver the final part: "Tell me this, McCaskill. Has it ever climbed out the top of your pants yet?"

That one I figured was going to be bingo. After all, anybody who has grown up in Montana has seen Scotch lawsuits get underway for a

lot less commentary than that. At dances the situation was common enough almost to be a regular feature. One guy with a few too many drinks in him calls some other guy a name none too fond, and that party responds with a fist. Of course the commotion was generally harsher than the combat, but black eyes and bent noses could result.

"Earl, you jugheaded--" Leona was responding, but to my considerable disappointment Alec interrupted her by simply telling Earl, "Stash it, sparrowhead. Come on, Leona, we got business elsewhere."

"I bet you got business all right," Earl ventured on. "Leona business. Snatch a kiss, kiss a snatch, all the same to you, McCaskill, ain't it?"

I can't truly say I saw it happen. Not in any way of following a sequence: this and then this and then this. No, the event simply arrived into my mind, complete, intact, engraved before its realization could make itself felt. Versions of anything of this sort are naturally suspect, of course. Like that time Dempsey fought Gibbons up at Shelby for the heavyweight championship. Forty thousand people were there, and afterward about a quarter million could provide you an eyewitness account. But I will relate just as much of this Earl and Alec episode as I can vouch for. One instant Earl was standing there, admiring the manufacture of his last comment, and then in the next instant was bent in half, giving a nasty tossing-up noise, auheughhh, that made my own stomach turn over.

What can have inspired Alec, given that the time-honored McCaskill procedure after loss of temper was to resort to a roundhouse right, to

deliver Earl that short straight jab to the solar plexus?

~~How much~~ ^{produced plenty, though.} that economical punch of Alec's yielded. Every bit of this I can see as if it were happening over again right now. Earl now in full light, doubled down as he was, Alec stepping around him to collect Leona, and the supper crowd in its long file out of the Sedgwick House stopping and gawking.

"GodDAMN!" exploded between Ray and me, Arlee pushing through and combining his oath with the start of a ^{haymaker} ~~swing~~ targeted on Alec's passing jaw.

Targeted but undelivered. On the far side of Arlee's girth from me Ray reached up, almost casually it seemed, and latched onto Arlee's wrist. The intended swing went nowhere after that, Ray hanging onto the would-be swingster as if he'd just caught him with that hand in the cookie jar, and by the time Arlee squared around and managed to begin to tussle in earnest with Ray--thank heaven for the clomping quality of the Zane brain--I had awarded Arlee a bit of a shove to worry him from my side.

~~How far~~ ^{Where} the ruckus ^{would} ~~could~~ have progressed beyond that, I have ever been curious about. In hindsight, that is. For if Arlee had managed to shake out of Ray's grip, he was elephant enough to provide us both some pounding. # But by now my father was on hand, and Pete and two or three other men soldiered out of the crowd to help sort us into order, and somebody was fetching Tollie Zane out of the Medicine Lodge on Earl's behalf.

"Jick, that's enough," my father instructed. "Turn him loose, Ray. It's over."

This too I am clear about. Those sentences to Ray and me were the full sum of what was said by any McCaskill here in this aftermath. What traveled to Alec from my father was a stare, a studying one there in the frame of hotel light as if my father was trying to be sure this was the person he thought it was.

And got back from Alec one of the identical calibre.

Then Leona was in the grasp of my brother, and my mother stepped out alongside my father, and each couple turned and went.

"Ray?"

"What?"

We were side by side in bed, in the dark of his room. Outside the open twin windows, a breeze could be heard teasing its way through the leaves of the giant cottonwood.

"You helped a lot, there at the dance."

"That's okay."

"You'll want to watch out Arlee doesn't try get it back on you."

"Yeah."

There was silence then, and the dark, until Ray startled me with something between a giggle and a laugh. What the hell now? I couldn't see what he was doing, but as soon as words started issuing from him, I knew. He was pinching his nose closed.

"He wants to watch out around me," came droning out in

exact imitation of Tollie's rodeo announcing, "or I'll cut his heart out and drink his blood."

That got me into the act. With a good grasp on my nose, I proposed in the same tinny tone: "Yank off his arm and make him shake hands with it."

Ray giggled and offered: "Grab him by the epiglommis until his eyes pooch out."

"Sharpen the point on his head," I paused for my own giggles, "and pound him in like a post."

"Kick enough crap out of him to daub a log barn," Ray envisioned. "Goddamn booger eater him anyhow."

With each atrocity on Arlee our laughing multiplied, until the bed was shaking and we tried to tone things down before Ray's folks woke up and wondered just what was going on. But every time we got ourselves nearly under control, one or the other of us erupted again--"thump old Arlee as far into Hell"--on and on, laughing anew, snorting it out in spite of ourselves--"as a bird can fly in a lifetime"--sides shaking and throats rollicking until we were almost sick, and then of course we had to laugh at the ridiculousness of that.

Nor, when Ray finally did play out and conked off to sleep, did that fever of humor entirely leave me. I would doze for a while and then be aware I was grinning open-eyed into the darkness about one or another moment of that immense day, that never-can-be-forgotten Fourth.

Here I rest, world, as happy as if I had good sense and the patent on remembrance. My mother on the park stump giving her Ben English speech and Dode at the top of that leap by Coffee Nerves and my father calling out the Dude and Belle to the dancing crowd and my brother one-punching Earl Zane and Ray pitching in on Arlee and, you bet, Stanley Meixell collecting Velma Simms. Scene by scene they fell into place in me, smooth as kidskin and exact as chapter and verse, every one a perfect piece of that day and now of the night,

~~A set of hours worth the price of the rest of the life, those. To wake up chuckling, give the dark a great Chessy cat grin, and drop off until my own laughter woke me again.~~

The sun shines, hay is being made.

All along English Creek and Noon Creek, mowing and raking and stacking are the order of the day. As to how this year's cutting compares with those of recent years--have you seen any rancher lately who wasn't grinning like a Christian holding four aces?

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, July 20

"Hand me a half-inch, would you, Jick."

"Here you go." I passed the open-end wrench of that size to Pete beneath the power buckrake. There was a grunt of exertion, a flash of metal as the wrench flew and clattered off the chassis, and the news from Pete:

"Sonofabitch must be a three-eighths."

I had been here before. "Did you hit your knuckles?"

"Sure did."

"Did you round the head off the bolt?"

"Sure did."

"Are you sure you want to put up hay again this year?"

"Guess what, nephew. The next rusted-up sonofabitch of a bolt under here has got your name on it."

At noon of that first day of preparing Pete's haying machinery, when he and I came in to wash up for dinner Marie took one look at the

barked knuckles and skin scrapes and blood blisters on the both of us and inquired: "Did you two count your fingers before you started all this?"

Despite what it took out of a person's hide I still look back on that as topnotch employment, my job of haying for Pete.

The Reese ranch was a beauty for hay. Pete inherited not only my grandfather Isaac Reese's acreage there along Noon Creek but old Isaac's realization that nurturing more than one source of income is as good an idea as you can have in Montana. Pete was continuing with the sheep Isaac had turned to after the crash of cattle prices and also was improving the ranch's hayfields, running ditches into the bottomland meadows of wild hay to irrigate them from Noon Creek. Even in the Depression's driest years, Pete always had hay to sell during the winter. This year it looked as if he would have a world of the stuff. Those ^{wild} ~~tall-grass~~ meadows ^{of timothy and wiregrass} lay one after another along the creek like green pouches on a thong. Then there was the big field atop the Noon Creek-English Creek divide which grew dry-land alfalfa. In a wet year like this one, the alfalfa was soaring up more than knee high and that wide benchland field looked as green as they say the Amazon is.

Those first days after the Fourth of July, the hay was very nearly ready for us and I was more than ready for it. Ready to have the McCaskill family situation off my mind for the main part of each day, at least. It did not take a great deal of original thinking to realize that the deadlock between my parents and Alec now was stouter

than it had been before. If Alec ever needed any confirming in his rooting tooting cowboy notion of himself, his rodeo day calf roping and pugilistic triumphs had more than done so. Both of those and Leona too--Alec's feet might not even touch the ground until about August. Anyway, I had spent so much thought on the Alec matter already that summer that my mind was looking around for a new direction. My father, my mother, my brother: let them do the sorting out of Alec's future, I now had an imminent one--haying at Noon Creek--all my own.

I might have known. "The summer when," I have said my mother ever after called this one. For me, the summer when not even haying turned out as expected. The summer when I began to wonder if anything ever does.

To be quite honest, on a task like those first few days of readying the equipment for haying I provided Pete more company than help. I mean, I can fix machinery when I have to but I'd rather be doing anything else. My point of view is that I would be more enthusiastic about the machine era if the stuff healed itself instead of requiring all the damn repair it does. And Pete was much the same as me where wrench work was involved.

But I still maintain, companionship is no small thing to create. Amid all that damn bolting, unbolting, rebolting, bushing, shimmying, washering, greasing, oiling, banging, sharpening, straightening, wouldn't you welcome a little conversation? And the farther removed

from the mechanical chore at hand, the better? At least my uncle and I thought so. I recall Pete, just right out of the blue, telling me about the Noon Creek Kee-Kee bird. "You never heard of the Kee-Kee bird we got around here? Jick, I am surprised at you. The Kee-Kee bird shows up the first real day of winter every year. Lands on top of the lambing shed over there and takes a look all around. Then he says, 'Kee-Kee-Keerist All Mighty, this is c-c-cold c-c-country!' and heads for California." I in return favored Pete with a few of the songs from Stanley's repertoire, starting with the one about the lady who was wild and woolly and full of fleas and never had been curried above her knees. He looked a little ^{surprised} ~~startled~~ at my musical knowledge, but was interested enough.

This sticks with me, too: how startling it was to hear, from a face so reminiscent of my mother's, the kind of language Pete unloosed on the haying equipment during those repair days. It also was kind of refreshing.

All in all, then, Pete and I got along like hand and glove. And I have already recited Marie's glories, back there at the Fourth of July picnic. If anybody in the Two country could cook in the same league as my mother, it was Marie. So my ears and the rest of me both were well nourished, that couple of days as Pete and I by main strength and awkwardness got the haying gear into running order. It never occurred to me at the time but I suppose Pete welcomed having me around--and Alec in the earlier summers when he was in the raking job--because he and Marie were childless. Their son died at birth, and Marie very nearly died with him. →

Her health in fact had never been strong since. So for a limited time, at least, someone my age was a privileged character with the Reeses.

Even so, I held off until Pete and I were finishing up the last piece of equipment, replacing broken guards on the mowing machine, before I tried him on this:

"Pete, you know Stanley Meixell, don't you?"

"Used to. Why?"

"I'm just sort of curious. My folks don't say much about him."

"He's been a long time gone from this country. Old history."

"Were you around him when he was the English Creek ranger?"

"Some. When anybody on Noon Creek who could spell K-O-W was running cattle up there on the forest. During the war and just after, that was."

"How was he as a ranger?"

"How was he?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, did Stanley go about things pretty much the way Dad does? Fuss over the forest like he was its mother hen, sort of?"

"Stanley always struck me as more of a rooster than a mother hen." That, I didn't get. Stanley hadn't seemed to me particularly strutting in the way he went about life. "But I will say this," Pete went on. "Stanley Meixell and your father know those mountains of the Two better than anybody else alive. They're a pair of a kind, on that."

"They are?" That the bunged-up whiskey-sloshing camptender I had squired around up there in the Two was as much a master of the mountains

as my father--all due respect to Pete, but I couldn't credit it.

4 Figuring maybe Pete's specific knowledge of Stanley was better than his general, I asked: "Well, after he was the English Creek ranger, where was his ticket to?"

"His ticket?"

"That's the saying ~~they have in the~~ Forest Service ^{guys have} about being transferred. After here, where ^{id} did Stanley get transferred to?"

"The Forest Service isn't my ball of string, Jick. How do you feel about sharpening some mower sickles? There's a couple against the wall of the shop somewhere."

"How's she going, Jick?"

The third morning I rode over to Pete and Marie's, the mower man Bud Dolson greeted me there at breakfast. Pete had gone into Gros Ventre to fetch him the night before, Bud having come up on the bus all the way from Anaconda. Ordinarily he was on the bull gang at the smelter there--a kind of roustabout's job as I understood it.

"Good to get out in the real air for a change," Bud claimed was his reason for coming to mow hay for Pete summer after summer. Smelter fumes would be sufficient propulsion to anywhere, yes. But I have a sneaking hunch that the job as mower man, a month of being out here by himself with just a team of horses and a mowing machine and the waiting hay, meant a lot in itself to somebody as quiet as Bud.

The first genuine scorching day of summer arrived with Bud, and

by about 9 o'clock the dew was off the hay and he was cutting the first swath of the nearest of the Noon Creek meadows, a path of fallen green beside the standing green.

"How do, Jick."

While I was saddling Pony to go home to English Creek at the end of that afternoon, Perry Fox came riding in from Gros Ventre.

You still could find Perry's species in a lot of Montana towns then, old Texas punchers who rode north on a trail drive somewhere before the turn of the century, and for this reason or that, never found their way back to Texas. Much of the time when I was growing up, Gros Ventre had as many as three of them: Andy Cratt, Deaf Smith Mitchell, and Perry Fox. They had all been hands for the old Seven Block ranch when it was the cattle kingdom of this part of Montana, then afterward hung on by helping out the various small ranchers at branding time and when the calves were shipped, and in between, breaking a horse for somebody now and again. Perry Fox was the last of them alive yet. Into his seventies, I guess he had to be, for Toussaint Rennie told my father he could remember seeing both Perry and Deaf Smith Mitchell in the roundup of 1882, skinny youngsters aboard big Texican saddles. Now too stove-up for a regular ranch job, Perry spent his winters in Dale Quigg's saddle store helping out with harness mending and other leather work and his summer job was on the dump rake for Pete.

As I responded to Perry's nod and drawl of greeting and watched him undo his bedroll and war bag from behind his saddle--like Bud, Perry

would put up in the bunkhouse here at Pete's now until haying was done-- I couldn't help but notice that he had a short piece of rope stretched snug beneath his horse's belly and knotted into each stirrup. This was a new one on me, stirrups tied like that. That night I asked my father about it.

"Come to that, has he," my father said. "Riding with hobbled stirrups."

I still didn't savvy.

"At his age Perry can't afford to get thrown any more," my father spelled it out for me. "He's too brittle to mend. So with the stirrups tied down that way, he can keep himself clamped into them if his horse starts to buck."

"Maybe he just ought to quit riding horseback," I said, without thinking it through.

My father set me straight on that, too. "Guys like Perry, if they can't ride you might as well take them out and shoot them. Perry has never learned to drive a car. The minute he can't climb onto a horse and keep himself there, he's done for."

The fourth morning, Pete had me harness up my team of horses and take my rake to the mowed field to help Perry get the dump raking underway.

4 Truth be told, that day I was the one who did the majority of the dump raking--scooping the hay into windrows, that was--while Perry tinkered and tinkered with his rake teeth and his dump lever and his horses' harness and so on. Right then I fully subscribed to what Pete said about his custom of hiring Perry haying after haying: "He's slow as the

wrath of Christ, but he is steady." I suppose if my behind was as aged and bony as Perry's, I wouldn't have been in any hurry either to apply it to a rake seat for the coming four or five weeks.

At the end of that day of windrowing, when Perry and I had unhitched our teams and Pete was helping us look them over for any harness sores, up the road to the ranch buildings came the Forest Service pickup and in it my father and my mother as well. They'd been to Great Falls on a headquarters trip my father had to make ~~for one reason or another~~, and before starting home they swung by First Avenue South to chauffeur the last of the haying crew to Pete.

He tumbled out of the back of the pickup now. The stackman, Wisdom Johnson.

"Hey, Pete!" cried Wisdom. Even after the ~~hour~~^{two-hour} ride from Great Falls in the open breezes Wisdom was not what could be called even approximately sober. On the other hand he wasn't so swacked he had fallen out of the pickup on the way to the job, which was the hiring standard that counted. "Hey, Perry!" the greeting process went on. "Hey, Jick!" If the entire population of Montana had been there in the Reese yard, Wisdom would have greeted every one of them identically. Wisdom Johnson's mind may not have been one of the world's broadest, but it liked to practice whatever it knew.

"As I savvy it, Wisdom," acknowledged Pete, "that's what you're here for, all right--hay."

"Pete, I'm ready for it," Wisdom testified earnestly. "If you want to start stacking right now, I am ready. You bet I am. How about it,

ready to go?" Wisdom squinted around like Lewis and Clark must have.

"Where's the field?"

"Wisdom, it's supertime," Pete pointed out. "Morning will be soon enough to start stacking. You feel like having some grub?"

Wisdom considered. "No. No, I don't." He swallowed to get rid of the idea of food. "What I need to do is sort of sit down for awhile."

Perry stepped forward. "I'll herd him to the bunkhouse. Right this way, Wisdom. Where'd you winter?"

"Out on the coast," reported Wisdom as he unsteadily accompanied Perry. "Logging camp, up north of Grays Harbor. Rain! Perry, do you know it'd sometimes rain a week steady? I just did not know it could rain that much--"

Chin in hand and elbow propped on the doorframe, my mother skeptically watched all this out the rolled-down window of the pickup. Now she opened the door and stepped out. Not surprisingly, she looked about two-thirds riled. I don't know of any Montana woman who has never gritted her teeth, one time or another, over that process of prying men off bar stools and getting them launched toward whatever they're supposed to be doing in life. "I'll go in and visit Marie," she announced, which my father and Pete and I all were glad enough to have happen.

Pete made sure my mother was out of earshot, then inquired:

"He in Sheba's place, was he?"

"No, in the Mint, though he did have Bouncing Betty with him. She wasn't about to turn loose of him as long as he had a nickel to his name." Upon study, my father looked somewhat peevish, too. Wisdom

Johnson must have taken considerable persuading to part with Bouncing Betty. "So at least I didn't have to shake him directly out of a whore's bed. But that's about the best I can say for your caliber of employee, brother-in-law."

Pete broke a grin at my father and razzed: "I wouldn't be so damn hard up for crew if you'd paid attention to the example of Good Help Hebner and raised anything besides an occasional scatter raker."

Somehow Pete had known what the moment needed. Pete's kidding had within it the fact that the other of the rake-driving McCaskill brothers had been Alec, and he was not a topic my father particularly cared to hear about these days. Yet here it came, the half-wink of my father's left eye and the answer to Pete's crack: "Scatter rakers were as good as I could do. Whatever that says about my caliber."

The fifth day, we made hay.

The windrows that Perry and I had raked formed a pattern I have always liked. A meadow with ribs of hay, evenly spaced. Now Perry was dump raking the next field down the creek and Bud was mowing the one beyond that.

Those of us in the stacking crew began our end of the matter. We sited the overshot stacker toward the high edge of the meadow, so the haystack would be up out of the deepest winter snowdrifts along Noon Creek. With the power buckrake, Pete shoved several loads of hay into place behind the stacker. Then Wisdom maneuvered and smoothed that accumulation with his pitchfork until he had the base of his stack

made the way he wanted it. An island of hay almost but not quite square-- 8 paces wide, 10 paces long--and about chest high.

"You said last night you're ready, Wisdom," called Pete. "Here it comes." And he bucked the first load of hay onto the fork of the stacker. "Send it to heaven, Clayton."

The final man, or I should say member, of our haying crew was the stacker team driver, 12-year-old Clayton Hebner. Pete always hired whichever Hebner boy was in the 12-to-14 year range for that stacker team job and they were pretty much interchangeable, a skinny kid with a forelock and nothing to say for himself; apparently the volume knob for that whole family was on Good Help Hebner. All that was really noticeable about Clayton was his Hebner way of always eyeing you, as if you were the latest link in evolution and he didn't want to miss the moment when you sprouted wings or fins. At Pete's words Clayton now started into motion his team of horses ~~which were~~ hitched to the cable which, through a tripod-and-pulley rig within the stacker, lifts the twin arms of the stacker and the hay-loaded fork, and the hay went up and up until--

It occurs to me: does everybody these days think that hay naturally comes in bales? That God ordained that livestock shall eat from 80-pound loaves of hay tied up in twine by \$10,000 machinery? If so, maybe I had better describe the notion of haying as it used to be. All in the world it amounted to was gathering hay into stacks about the size of an adobe house; a well-built haystack even looks as solid and straightforward as an adobe structure, though of course stands higher and has a rounded-off

top. But try it yourself sometime, this gathering of 10 or 12 tons of hay into one stack, and you will see where all the equipment comes in. Various kinds of stackers were used in various areas of the West—beaver-slides, Mormon derricks, ~~swinging forks~~^{two-poles}, jayhawks—but Pete's preference was an overshot. An overshot stacker worked as its name suggests, tossing a load of hay up over a high wide framework which served as a sort of scaffolding for the front of the haystack. If, say, you hold your arms straight out in front of you, with your hands clutching each end of a basket with hay piled in it; now bring your arms and the basket straight up over your head with a little speed, and you are tossing the hay exactly as an overshot does. In short, a kind of catapult principle is involved. But a ~~slow~~^{calculated} one, for it is the responsibility of the stacker team driver to pace his horses so that the overshot's arms and fork fling the hay onto whichever part of the stack the stackman wants it. Other than being in charge of the speed of the team, though, driving the stacker team is a hell of a dull job, walking back and forth behind the horses as they run the overshot up and down, all damn day long, and that's why a kid like Clayton usually got put on the task.

So hay was being sent up, and as this first haystack and the day's temperature both began to rise, Wisdom Johnson suffered. This too was part of the start of haying—Wisdom sweating the commerce of Great Falls saloons out of himself. Soaking himself sober, lathering into the summer's labor. We all knew by heart what the scene would be this initial morning, Wisdom lurching around up there atop the mound of hay as if he had a log chained to each leg. It was a little painful to watch, especially now that my camptending sojourn with Stanley Meixell had taught me what

a hangover truly is. ⁹ Yet agonized as Wisdom looked, the stack was progressing prettily, as we also knew it would. The stackman, he was maestro of the haying crew. When the rest of us had done our mowing or raking or bucking or whatever, the final result of it all was the haystacks the stackman built. And Wisdom Johnson could build them, as he put it, "high and tall and straight." No question about it, Wisdom was as big and brawny as they ~~come~~; ^{ideal stackman ought to be} nine of him would have made a dozen. And he also just looked as if he belonged atop a haystack, for he was swarthy enough to be able to ^{pitch hay} ~~work~~ all day up there without his shirt on, which I envied much. If I tried that I'd have burned and blistered to a pulp. Wisdom simply darkened and darkened, his suntan a litmus each summer of how far along our haying season was. As July heated up into August, more than once it occurred to me that with the sweat bathing Wisdom as he worked up there next to the sun, and his arm muscles bulging as he shoved the hay around, and that dark leathering of his skin, he was getting to look like the heavyweight fighter Joe Louis. But of course that wasn't something you said to a white person back then.

This was the second summer of Wisdom being known as Wisdom instead of his true name, Cyrus Johnson. The nickname came about because he had put up hay a number of seasons in the Big Hole Basin down in the southwestern part of the state, and according to him the Big Hole was the front parlor of heaven. The hay there was the best possible, the workhorses all but put their harnesses on themselves each morning, the pies of Big Hole ranch cooks nearly floated off into the air from the

swads of meringue atop them. The list of glories ran on and on. Inasmuch as the Big Hole had a great reputation for hay even without the testimony of Cyrus Johnson, the rest of us at the Reese table tended to nod and say nothing. But then came one suppertime, early in the first summer I hayed for Pete, when Cyrus started in on a fresh Big Hole glory. "You take that Wisdom, now. There's my idea of a town. It's the friendliest, drinkingest, prettiest place—"

"Wisdom? That burg?" Ordinarily Bud Dolson was silence himself. But Anaconda where he was from was not all that far from the Big Hole town of Wisdom and Bud had been there. As Cyrus now had the misfortune of asking him,

"I think so," replied Bud. "I blinked, I might've missed most of it."

Cyrus looked hurt. "Now what do you mean by that?"

"Cy, I mean that the town of Wisdom makes the town of Gros Ventre look like London, England."

"Aw, come on, Bud. Wisdom is a hell of a nice town."

Bud shook his head in pity. "If you say so, Wisdom." And ever since, the big stackman was Wisdom Johnson to us.

This first stack was well underway, Pete had buckraked several windrows in to the stacker. Now began my contribution to the haying process. I went over and climbed onto my scatter rake.

If you happen never to have seen one, a scatter rake simply resembles a long axle—mine was a 10-foot type—between a set of iron wheels, high

spoked ones about as big around as those you think of a stagecoach having, but not nearly so thick and heavy. The "axle," actually the chassis of the rake, carries a row of long thin curved teeth, set about a hand's width apart from each other, and it is this regiment of teeth that rakes along the ground and scrapes together any stray hay lying there. As if the hayfield was a head of hair and the scatter rake a big iron comb going over it, so to speak. Midway between the wheels a seat stuck up for the rake ^{driver} ~~drive~~ me to ride on, and a wooden tongue extended forward for a team of horses to be hitched to.

My team was in harness and waiting. Blanche and Fisheye. As workhorses go, they weren't too bad a pair; a light team, as you didn't need the biggest horses in the world just to pull a scatter rake, but more on the steady side than frisky. That Blanche and Fisheye were civilized at all was a relief to me, because you never know what you might get in a team of horses. One of them maybe can pull like a Percheron but is dumb, and the other one clever enough to teach geometry but so lazy he constantly lays back in the traces. Or one horse may be a kicker, and his mate so mild you could pass a porcupine under him without response. So except for Fisheye staring sideways at you in a fishy way as you harnessed him, and Blanche looking like she needed a nap all the time, this team of mine was better than the horse law of averages might suggest.

I believe I am right in saying Pete was the first rancher in the Two country to use a power buckrake—an old automobile chassis—and-engine with a fork mounted on it to buck the hay in from the field to

the stack. Wisdom Johnson a few summers before had brought word of the invention of the power buckrake in the Big Hole: "I tell you, Pete, they got them all over that country. They move hay faster than you can see." That proved to be not quite the case, but the contraption could bring in hay as fast as two buckrakes propelled by horses. Thus the internal combustion engine roared into the Reese hayfields and speeded matters up, but it also left dabs of hay behind it, scatterings which had either blown off the buckrake fork or which it simply missed. The scatter raker was the gatherer of that leftover hay, which otherwise would be wasted. In place on my rake seat, I now clucked to Blanche and Fisheye, reined them toward the part of the meadow Pete had been bucking in loads from, and my second summer of scatter raking was begun.

I suppose I have to admit, anybody who could handle a team of workhorses could run a scatter rake. But not necessarily run it as it ought to be done. The trick was to stay on the move but at an easy pace. Keep the horses in mild motion and the rake teeth down there gathering leftover hay, instead of racing around here and yon. Roam and glean, by going freestyle over a field as a fancy skater swoops around on ice. Well, really not quite that free and fancy, for ~~with~~ you do have to tend to business enough to dump your scatterings in some good place for the buckrake to get it, and not in a boggy spot or on top of a badger mound. But still I say, the more you could let yourself go and just follow the flow of the hayfield, so to speak--keep swooping back and forth where the power buckrake had recently been, even if there wasn't much spilled hay



there—the better off you were as a scatter raker. A mind as loose as mine was about right for scatter raking.

"How did it go?" my mother asked, that first night of full haying.

We were waiting supper for my father, who was somewhere up the North Fork inspecting the progress of a CCC trail crew there. *[doing a show-me trip for some muchy much from the Forest Service Dept. of Recreation & Lands.]*

"A stack and a half," I reported offhandedly as if I had been a hayhand for centuries. "About usual, for first day."

"How did you get along with Blanche and Fisheye?"

"They're kind of a logey pair of sonsa—" I remembered in time to mend my mouth; the vocabulary I'd been using around Pete and the crew was a quick ticket to trouble here at home— "of so and sos. But they're okay."

She appraised me from where she was leaning against the kitchen sink, arms folded across her chest. Then surprised me with her smile and: "It's quiet around here, without you."

I chose to take that as a compliment. More than that, I risked ribbing her in return, a little. "Well, I guess I could call you up on the telephone every noon from Pete and Marie's, and sing you a song or tell you a joke."

"Never mind, Mister Imagination," she declined. "I'll adjust."

I didn't pay it sufficient mind at the time, but in truth my mother did have to adjust. Alec in exile. Me rationed between English Creek and the Noon Creek hayfields. My father beginning to be gone

more and more as fire danger increased in the forest. The reverse of her usual situation of a houseful of male McCaskills—a genuine scarcity of us. There is another topic which occupies my mind these days. The way life sorts us into men and women, not on any basis of capability that I have ever been able to see. High on the list of questions I wish I'd had the good sense to ask, throughout that immense summer, is the one to my mother. Her view about being born as a woman into a region which featured male livelihoods.

"You finally starved out, did you," she now greeted my father's late arrival. "Wash up and sit up, you two, supper will be just a minute now."

"How'd it go today?" my father asked me, and I repeated my report of Reese haying. Through that and other supper conversation he nodded and said uh huh a lot, which signaled that he was only half-listening. The symptom was annual. At this point of the summer, and hot as this one suddenly had turned, fire was forever on the mind of a forest ranger. The joke was told that when the preacher at a funeral asked if anyone wanted to memorialize the deceased, a ranger was the first one onto his feet and began: "Old Tom wasn't the worst fellow I ever knew. Now ^{prevention."} I'd like to add a few words about fire ~~control."~~

When you think about it, my father's yearly deep mood about fire was understandable enough. He was responsible for an entire horizon. The skyline made up of peaks and reefs and timbered slopes and high grasslands: that conglomeration of nature was designated his district of the Two Medicine National Forest, and every blessed inch of it was

prey to lightning storms and careless campfires and flipped cigarettes.

His line of defense was a light thread of men across that mass of mountain

and forest; the lookouts in the tall towers, and at this time of year,

or had ~~smokechasers and~~ ^{hiring and} the fire guards, he would start stationing ~~in camps and cabins~~ for quick

combat against lightning strikes or smolders of any other sort. My

father entirely subscribed to the theory that the time to fight a

forest fire was before it got going. True, the timber of the Two

here on the east face of the Rockies was not as big and dense and

incendiary ~~flammable~~ as the forests farther west in Montana and Idaho. "But that

doesn't mean they're made of goddamn asbestos either," ran the complaint

of east-side rangers on the Two, the Lewis and Clark, the Custer and the

Helena, against what they saw as a westward tilt in the thinking and

the fire budget of Region One headquarters. It was a fact that the

legendary fires occurred over there west of the Continental Divide. The

Bitterroot blaze of 1910 was an absolute hurricane of flame. Into

smoke went 3 million acres of standing trees, a lot of it the finest

white pine in the world. And about half the town of Wallace, Idaho,

burned. And this too--the Bitterroot fire killed 85 persons, 84 of them

done in directly by the flames and the other one walked off a little

from a hotshot crew on Setzer Creek and put a pistol to himself. The

Forest Service, which was only a few years old at the time, was bloodied

badly by the Bitterroot fire. And as recently as 1934 there had been

the fiasco of the Selway fires along the Idaho-Montana line. That

summer, the Selway National Forest became the Alamo of Region One. Into

those back-country fires the regional forester, Major Kelley, and his

August

headquarters staff poured 5400 men, and they never did get the flames under control. The Pete King ^{Creek} fire, the McClendon Butte fire, the Hell Gate fire east of the Lochsa River, the ^{the Fish Butte fire,} Coolwater fire, a spot fire at ^{Fish Butte} Canyon Creek, all were roaring at once. When the ~~fire~~ fire blew up, a couple of hundred CCC guys had to run like jackrabbits to escape it. Five fire camps went up in smoke, the ^{Pete King} ranger station almost did. Nothing the Forest Service tried on the Selway worked. Nothing could work, really. An inferno has no thermostat. ~~In those years the official notion of fighting a forest fire was what was called the 10 a.m. policy: aim for control of the fire by 10 the next morning. My father was following the reports from the Selway and said, "The Major better just aim for 10 a.m. on Christmas Day for this one." Actually the rains~~ of late September finally slowed the Selway fires, and only weeks after that, the Major killed off the Selway National Forest, parceled out its land to the neighboring Clearwater and Nezperce forests and scattered its staff like the tribes of Israel. The Selway summer sobered everybody working in Region One—the total defeats by fire and the Major's obliteration of a National Forest unit—and for damn sure no ranger wanted any similar nightmare erupting in his own district.

I stop to recount all this because of what happened now, as my father finished supper and thumbed open the day's one piece of mail, an official Forest Service envelope. "What've we got here," he wondered, "the latest kelleygram?"

His next utterance was: "Sonofabitch."

He looked as if he had been hit with a 2 X 4, stunned and angry. Then, as if the words would have to change themselves when read aloud,

ENGLISH CREEK ms changes:

p. 355, line 2 from bottom, change "summer" to "August"

p. 356, change lines 2-6 to:

under control. The Pete King Creek fire and the McLendon Butte fire and about fifteen smaller ones all were roaring at once; the worst afternoon, an average of ten square miles of the Selway forest were bursting into flame every hour. And when the fire at Fish Butte blew up, a couple of hundred CCC guys had to run like jackrabbits. Five fire camps eventually went up in smoke, both the Pete King and Lochsa ranger stations almost did.

he recited from the letter:

"Placement of manpower this fire season will be governed by localized fire danger measurements. An enforced lag of manning below current danger will eliminate over-manning designed to meet erratic peak loads and will achieve material decrease in FF costs over past years' expenditures. Organization on east-side forests in particular is to be held to the lowest level consistent with carefully analyzed current needs."

My mother oh so slightly shook her head, as if this confirmed her suspicions of brainlessness in the upper ranks of the U.S. Forest Service. My father crumpled the letter and crossed the kitchen to the window looking out on Roman Reef and Rooster Mountain and Phantom Woman peak and other profiles of the ~~mountains~~ of the Two.

I asked, "What's all that mean?"

~~smokechasers or~~

"No fire guards on our side of the Divide until things start burning," said my father without turning from the window.

Right up until the time haying started, I had been rehearsing to myself how to talk my parents into letting me live in the bunkhouse at Pete's with the rest of the hay crew. It was something I imagined I much wanted to do. Be in on the gab of Wisdom and Perry and Bud, hear all the tales of the Big Hole and First Avenue South and Texas and Anaconda and so on and so on. Gain one more rung towards being a grown-up, I suppose was what was working on me. Yet when haying time arrived I did not even bring up the bunkhouse issue.

For one thing, I could anticipate my mother's enunciation about

one shavetail McCaskill already living in a bunkhouse "and to judge by Alec's recent behavior One Is More Than Enough." For another, with my father on the go as much as he was this summer it seemed plain that he would prefer for me to be on hand at English Creek whenever he couldn't. But do you know, I actually made it unanimous against myself. What the matter came right down to was that I didn't want to give up the porch bedroom at English Creek for the dubious gain of bunking with hay hands.

Which is how I became a one-horsepower commuter. The one horse being Pony, whom I found I regarded with considerable more esteem ever since Mouse decided to hose down the rodeo grounds that time in front of Leona. Each morning now I got up at 5, went out and caught and saddled Pony outside the barn—quite a lot of light in the sky that time of year—and the pair of us would head for the Reese ranch.

Where morning is concerned, I am my father all over again. "The day goes downhill after daybreak," was his creed. I don't suppose there are too many people now who have seen a majority of the dawns of their life, but my father did, and I have. And of my lifetime of early rising I have never known better dawns than those when I rode from English Creek to my haying job on Noon Creek.

The ford north of the ranger station Pony and I would cross—if there was enough moon the wild roses along the creek could be seen, pale crowds of them—and in a few minutes of climbing we came atop the bench of land which divides the two creek drainages. Up there, at that brink of dawn hour, the world reveals^{ed} all its edges. Dark lines

of the tops of buttes and benches to the north, towards the Two Medicine River and the Blackfeet Reservation. The Sweetgrass Hills bumping up far on the eastern horizon like five dunes of black sand. The timbered crest of Breed Butte standing up against the stone mountain wall of the west. What trick of light it is I can't really say, but everything looked as if drawn in heavy strokes, with the final shade of night penciled in wherever there was a gulch or coulee.

The only breaks in the stillness were Pony's hooves against the earth, and the west breeze which generally met us atop that broad benchland. I say breeze. In the Two country anything ^{wind} that doesn't lift you off your horse is only a breeze. My mountain coat was on me, my hat pulled low, my hands in leather work gloves, and I was just about comfortable.

Since Pete's haying season always lasted a month or a little more, I rode right through the phases of the moon. My favorite you can guess on first try. The fat full moon, resting there as if it was an agate marble which had rolled into the western corner of the sky. During the early half of my route the mountains still drew most of their light from the moon, and I watched the reefs and other rock faces change complexion—from light gray to ever so slightly pink—as the sunrise began to touch them. Closer to me, the prairie flowers now made themselves known amid the tan grass. Irises, paintbrushes, bluebells, ^{shooting stars,} sunflowers.

Then this. The first week or so of those daybreak rides, the sun was north enough that it came up between the Sweetgrass Hills. They

stand 60 or 70 miles across the prairie from where I was riding, way over towards Havre, so there was a sense that I was seeing a sunrise happening in a far land. The gap between the mounded sets of hills first filled with a kind of ^{orange} film; a haze of coming light, it might be called. Then the sun would slowly present itself, like a big glowing coal burning its way up through the horizon,

Those dawns taught me that beauty makes the eyes greedy. For even after all this, mountains and moon and earth edges and the coming of the sun, I considered that what was most worth watching for was the first shadow of the day. When the sun worked its way about half above the horizon, that shadow emerged to stretch itself off from Pony and me--horse and youngster melded, into an apparition of leftover dark a couple of hundred feet in length. Drawn out on the prairie grass in that far-reaching first shadow, Pony and I loomed like some new creature put together from the main parts of a camel and a giraffe.

Is it any wonder ~~then~~ ^g that each of these haying-time dawns made me feel remade?

Meanwhile it continued to be the damndest summer of weather anybody could remember. All that rain of June, and now July making a habit of 90 degrees. The poor damn farmers out east of Gros Ventre and north along the High Line were fighting a grasshopper invasion again, the hot days hatching out the 'hoppers faster than the farmers could spread poison against them. And for about five days in the middle of July, an epidemic of lightning storms broke out in all the national

forests of Region One. A lookout reported a plume of smoke up the South Fork of English Creek, on a heavily-forested north slope of Grizzly Reef. This of course caused some excitement in the ranger station, and my father hustled his assistant ranger Paul Eliason and some trail men and a nearby CCC brush crew up there. "Paul's used to those big trees out on the coast," my father remarked to my mother. "It won't hurt him to find out that the ones here are big enough to burn." That Grizzly Reef smoke, though, turned out to be a rotten log and some other debris smoldering in a rocky area, and Paul and his crew handled it without much sweat.

That mid-July dose of lightning and his dearth of fire guards ^{to be} and smoke chasers put my father in what my mother called "his prowly mood." But then on the morning of the 21st of July we woke up to snow in the mountains. Fire was on the loose elsewhere in Montana--spot fires across the Continental Divide in the Flathead country and others up in Glacier Park, and a big blaze down in Yellowstone Park that hundreds of men were on--while my father's forest lay snoozing under a cool sheet of white.

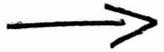
"How did you arrange that?" my mother mock-questioned him at breakfast. "Clean living and healthy thoughts?"

"The powerrr of Scotch prrayerrr," he rumbled back at her in his preacher voice. Then with his biggest grin in weeks: "Also known as the law of averages. Tough it out long enough in this country and a snowstorm will eventually happen when you actually want it

—————
to."

As I say, putting up Pete's hay always took about a month, given some days of being rained out or broke down. This proved to be a summer when we were reasonably lucky about both moisture and breakage. So steadily that none of us on the crew said anything about it for fear of changing our luck, day on day along Noon Creek our new stacks appeared, like fresh green loaves.

My scatter raking became automatic with me. Of course, whenever my mind doesn't have to be on what I am doing, it damn well for sure



is going to be on some other matter. Actually, though, for once in my life I did a respectable job of combining my task at hand and my wayfaring thoughts. For if I had a single favorite daydream of those hayfield hours, it was to wonder why a person couldn't be a roving scatter raker in the way that sheep shearers and harvest hands moved with their seasons. I mean, why not? The principle seems to me the same: a nomad profession. I could see myself traveling through Montana from hay country to hay country—although preferably with better steppers than Blanche and Fisheye, if there was much distance involved—and hiring on, team and rake and all, at the best-looking ranch of each locale. Maybe spend a week, ten days, at the peak of haying at each. Less if the grub was mediocre, longer if a real pie maker was in the kitchen. Dwell in the bunkhouse so as to get to know everybody on a crew, for somehow every crew, every hay hand, was discernibly a little different from any other. Then once I had learned enough about that particular country and earned from the boss the invite, "Be with us again next year, won't you?", on I would go, rolling on, the iron wheels and line of tines of my scatter rake like some odd over-wide chariot rumbling down the road.

An abrupt case of wanderlust, this may sound like, but then it took very little to infect me at that age. Can this be believed? Except for once when all of us at the South Fork school were taken to Helena to visit the capitol, a once-in-awhile trip with my father when he had to go to forest headquarters in Great Falls was the farthest I had ever been out of the Two country. Ninety miles; not much of a

grand tour. There were places of Montana I could barely even imagine. Butte. All I knew definitely of Butte was that when you met anyone from there, even somebody as mild as Ray Heaney's father Ed, he would announce "I'm from Butte" and his chin would shoot out a couple of inches on that up-sound of yewt. In the midst of all this wide Montana landscape a city where shifts of men tunneled like gophers. Butte, the copper kingdom. Butte, the dark mineral pocket. Or the other thing that was always said: "Butte's a hole in the ground and so's a grave." That, I heard any number of times in the Two country. I think the truth may have been that parts of Montana like ours were apprehensive, actually a little scared, of Butte. There seemed to be something spooky about a place that lived by eating its own guts, which is the way mining sounded to us. Butte I would surely have to see someday. And the Big Hole Basin. As Wisdom Johnson told it, as haying season approached in the Big Hole the hay hands—they called them haydiggers down there, which I also liked—began to gather about a week ahead of time. They sifted in, "jungled up" in the creekside willows at the edge of town, and visited and gossiped and just laid around until haying started. I savored the notion of that, the gathering, the waiting. Definitely the Big Hole would be on my hay rake route. And the dry Ingomar country down there in the southeastern part of the state, where Walter Kyle had done his hotel style of sheep ranching. The town water supply was a tank car, left off on the railroad siding each week. Walter told of coming back to town from sheep camp one late fall day and seeing flags of celebration flying. His immediate

thought was that somebody had struck water, "but it turned out to be just the armistice ending the war." Havre and the High Line country. Fork Peck dam. Miles City. Billings. Lewistown. White Sulphur Springs. Red Lodge. Bozeiman and the green Gallatin Valley. For that matter, Missoula. Montana seemed to be out there waiting for me, if I only could become old enough to get there.

But. There's always a "but" when you think about going everywhere and doing everything. But how old was that, when I would be advanced enough to sample Montana to the full?

North of the ears strange things will happen. Do you know who kept coming to mind, as I thought my way hither and thither from those Noon Creek hay meadows? Stanley Meixell. Stanley who had gone cowboying in Kansas when he was a hell of a lot younger than I was. Stanley who there in the cabin during our camptending journey told me of his wanders, down to Colorado and Wyoming and over into the Dakotas, in and out of jobs. Stanley who evidently so much preferred the wandering life that he gave up being a forest ranger, to pursue it. Stanley who could plop himself on a bar stool on the Fourth of July and be found by Velma Simms. But Stanley who also looked worn down, played out and overboozed, by the footloose way of life. The example of Stanley bothered me no little bit. If the wanderer's way was as alluring as it seemed from my seat on the scatter rake, how then did I account for the eroded look around Stanley Meixell's eyes?

Almost before I knew it the first few weeks of haying were behind

us and we were moving the equipment onto the benchland for the ten days or so of putting up the big meadow of dry-land alfalfa there. "The alfaloofee field," as Perry Fox called it. This was another turn of the summer I looked forward to with interest, for this alfalfa haying was far enough from the Reese ranch house that we no longer went in at noon for dinner. Now began field lunches.

My stomach aside, why did I look forward to this little season of field lunches? I think the answer must be that the field lunches on the bench constituted a kind of ritual that appealed to me. Not that I would want to eat every meal of my life in the stubble of a hayfield. But for ten days or so, it was like camping out or being on an expedition; possibly even a little like "jungling up" the way the Big Hole hayhands started off. Whatever, the alfaloofee field lunch routine went like this. A few minutes before noon, here came Marie in the pickup. She had with her the chuck box, the old Reese family wooden one with cattle brands burned everywhere on its sides, and when a couple of us slid it back to the tailgate and lifted it down and opened it, in there waited two or three kinds of sandwiches wrapped in dishtowels, and a bowl of potato or macaroni salad, and a gallon jar of cold tea or lemonade, and bread and butter and jam, and pickles, and radishes and new garden carrots, and a pie or cake. Each of us chose a dab of shade around the power buckrake or the pickup--my preference was to sit on the running board of the pickup; somehow it seemed more like a real meal when I sat up to eat--and then we ploughed into the lunch. Afterward, which is to say the rest of the noon hour, Pete was a napper, with his hat down

over his eyes. I never was; I was afraid I might miss something. Clayton too was open-eyed, in that silent sentry way all the Hebner kids had. Perry and Bud smoked, each rolling himself a handmade. This was the cue for Wisdom to pull out his own sack of Bull Durham, pat his shirt pocket, then say to Perry or Bud, "You got a Bible on you?" One or the other would loan him the packet of cigarette papers and he'd roll himself one. Strange how he could always have tobacco but perpetually be out of papers, which were the half of smoking that cost almost nothing. But that was Wisdom for you.

The womanly presence of Marie, slim and dark, sitting in the shade of the pickup beside the chuck box and the dozing Pete, posed the need for another ritual. As tea and lemonade caught up with kidneys, we males one after another would rise, carefully casual, and saunter around to the far side of the haystack and do our deed. Then saunter back, trying to look like we'd never been away and Marie showing no least sign that we had.

Eventually Pete would rouse himself. He not only could nap at the drop of an eyelid, he woke up just as readily. "I don't suppose you characters finished this field while I was resting my eyes, did you?" Then he was on his feet, saying the rest of the back-to-work message: "Until they invent hay that puts itself up, I guess we got to."

Our last day of haying the benchland alfalfa brought two occurrences out of the ordinary.

The first came at once, when I headed Blanche and Fisheye to the

southwest corner of the field to start the morning by raking there a while. Maybe a quarter of a mile farther from where I was lay a nice grassy coulee, ^{at the base of} ~~along~~ that slope of Breed Butte. The ground there was part of Walter Kyle's place, and with Walter summering in the mountains with his sheep, Dode Withrow always put up the hay of this coulee for him on shares. The Withrow stacking crew had pulled in and set up the afternoon before—I could pick out Dode over there, still with a cast on his leg, and I could all but hear him on the topic of trying to run a haying crew with his leg set in cement. If I hadn't been so content with haying for Pete, Dode would have been my choice of somebody to work for.

Maybe scatter rakers are all born with similar patterns of behavior in them, but in any case, at this same time I was working the corner of our field the Withrow rake driver was doing the nearest corner of theirs. Naturally I studied how he was going about matters, and a minute or so of that showed me that he wasn't a he, but Marcella Withrow.

I had no idea what the odds must be against a coincidence like that-- Marcella and me having been the only ones in our class those 8 years of grade school at South Fork, and now the only English Creek ones in our particular high school class in Gros Ventre, and this moment both doing the same job, in the same hay neighborhood. It made me grin. It also caused me to peek around with care, to make sure that I wouldn't be liable for any later razzing from our crew, and when the coast looked clear I waved to Marcella. She did the same, maybe even to checking over

her shoulder against the razzing possibility, and we rattled past one another and raked our separate meadows. Some news to tell Ray Heaney the next time I got to town, anyway.

The other event occurred at noon, and this one went by the name of Toussaint Rennie.

He arrived in the pickup with Marie and the chuck box of lunch. "I came to make sure," Toussaint announced, his tan gullied face solemn as Solomon. "Whether you men build haystacks right side up."

Actually the case was that Toussaint had finished ditch-riding for awhile, with everybody harvesting now instead of irrigating, and Marie had driven up to the Two Medicine to fetch him for company for the day. What conversations went on between those two blood-and-soulmates, I've always wished I could have overheard.

The gab between the hay crew and Toussaint was pretty general, though, until we were done eating. Pete then retired to his nap spot, and Perry and Bud and eventually Wisdom lit up their smokes, and so on. A little time passed, then Toussaint leaned from where he was sitting and laid his hand on the chuck box. "Perry," he called over to Perry Fox. "We ate out of this, a time before."

"That we did," agreed Perry. "But Marie's style of grub is a whole helluva lot better."

Toussaint put his finger to the large ^F burnt into the end of the chuck box. "Dan Floweree."

EF

The finger moved to the 9R brand on the box's side. "Louis Robare." (DF)

To the T beside it: "Billy Ulm."

Then to the lid, where the space had been used to burn in a big D-S.

"This one you know best, Perry."

I straightened up. It had come to me: where Perry and Toussaint would have first eaten out of this chuck box. When those cattle brands were first seared into its wood. The famous roundup of 1882, from the elbow of the Teton River to the Canadian line; the one Toussaint told my father about, the one he said was the biggest ever in this part of Montana. Nearly 300 men, the ranchers and their cowhands and horse wranglers and night herders and cooks--40 tents it took, to hold them all. Each morning the riders fanned out in half circles of about ^{advised} ~~15~~ miles' ride and rounded in the cattle for sorting; each afternoon the branding fires of the several outfits sent smoke above the prairie as the irons wrote ownership onto living cowhide. When the big sweep was over, coulees and creek bottoms searched out over an area bigger than some eastern states, about 100,000 head of cattle were accounted for.

"Davis-Hauser-Stuart," Perry was saying of the brand on the chuck box lid. "My outfit at the time. DHS, the Damn Hard Sittin'."

Wisdom Johnson was beginning to catch up with the conversation.

"Where was this you're talking about?"

"All in through here," Perry indicated with a slow swing of his head from shoulder to shoulder. "Roundin'up cattle."

"Cattle?" Wisdom cast a look around the benchland, as if a herd

might be pawing out there this very moment. "Around here?" It did seem a lot to believe, that this alfalfa field and the farmland on the horizon east of us once was a grass heaven for cows.

"Everywhere from the Teton to Canada, those old outfits had cattle," Perry confirmed. "If you could find the buggers."

Bud Dolson spoke up. "When'd all this take place?"

Toussaint told him: "A time ago, '82."

"1882? queried Wisdom. "Perry, how ungodly old are you?"

Perry pointed a thumb at Toussaint. "Younger'n him."

Toussaint chuckled. "Everybody is."

How can pieces of time leap in and out of each other the way they do? There I sat, that noontime, listening to Toussaint and Perry speak of eating from a chuckwagon box all those years ago; and hearing myself question my mother about how she and her mother and Pete were provisioned from the same chuck box on their St. Mary's wagon trip a quarter of a century ago; and gazing on Pete, snoozing there in the shade of the pickup, simultaneously my admired uncle and the boy who helloed the horses at St. Mary's.

Toussaint and the history that went everywhere with him set me to thinking. Life and people were a kind of flood around me this summer, yet for all my efforts I still was high and dry where one point of the past was concerned. ^{4/} When Toussaint climbed to his feet to visit the far side of the alfalfa stack, I decided. Hell, he himself was the

one who brought the topic up, back at the creek picnic on the Fourth. You are a campjack these days. And an outhouse engineer and a dawn rider and a hay equipment mechanic and a scatter raker, and an inquisitive almost-15-year-old. I got up and followed Toussaint around the haystack.

"Jick," he acknowledged me. "You are getting tall. Mac and Beth will need a stepladder to talk to you."

"Yeah, I guess," I contributed, but my altitude was not what I wanted discussed. As Toussaint tended to his irrigation and I to mine, I asked: "Toussaint, what can you tell me about Stanley Meixell? I mean, I don't know him real well. That time up in the Two, I was only lending him a hand with his campending, is all."

"Stanley Meixell," Toussaint intoned. "Stanley was the ranger. When the national forest was put in."

"Yeah, I know that. But more what I was wondering—did he and my folks have a run-in, sometime? I can't quite figure out what they think of Stanley."

"But you," said Toussaint. "You do thinking, too, Jick. What is it you think of Stanley?"

He had me there. "I don't just know. I've never come up against anybody like him,"

Toussaint nodded. "That is Stanley," he affirmed. "You know more than you think you do."

Well, there I was as usual. No more enlightened than when I started. The chronic condition of Jick McCaskill, age 14 11/12 years, prospects for a cure debatable.

—————

At least the solace of scatter raking remained to me. Or so I thought. As I say, this day I have just told about was the one that finished off the benchland alfalfa. A last ~~week~~^{stint} of haying, back down on the Noon Creek meadows, awaited. Even yet I go over and over in my mind the happenings which that last ~~week~~^{spell of haying} was holding in store. Talk about a chain of events. You could raise and lower the anchor of an ocean liner on the string of links that began to happen now.

Our new venue for haying was the old Ramsay homestead. The "upper place," my mother and Pete both called it by habit, because it was the part of the Reese ranch farthest up Noon Creek, farthest in toward the mountains. The meadows there ~~was~~^{were} small but plentiful, tucked into the willow bends of Noon Creek the way pieces of a jigsaw puzzle clasp into one another. Pete always left the Ramsay hay until last because its twisty little fields were so hard to buckrake. In some cases he had to drive out of sight around two or three bends of the creek to bring in enough hay for a respectable stack. "You spend all your damn time here going instead of doing," was his unfond sentiment.

For me on the scatter rake, though, the upper place was just fine. Almost any direction I sent Blanche and Fisheye prancing toward, there stood Breed Butte or the mountains for me to lean my eyes on. In this close to them, the Rockies took up more than half the edge of the earth, which seemed only their fair proportion. And knowing the reefs and peaks as I did I could judge where each sheep allotment was, there along the mountain wall of my father's forest. Walter Kyle atop Roman Reef

with his sheep and his telescope. Andy Gustafson with one of the Busby hands, under the middle of the reef where I had camped him; farther south, Sanford Hebner in escape from his family name and situation. Closer toward Flume Gulch and the North Fork, whatever human improvement had replaced Canada Dan as herder of the other Busby band. Lower down, in the mix of timber and grass slopes, Pat Hoy and the Withrow sheep; and the counting vee where my father and I talked and laughed with Dode. Already it was like going back to another time, to think about that first day of the counting trip.

The upper place, the old Ramsay place, always presented me new prospects of thought besides its horizons, though. For it was here that I was born. Alec and I both, in the Ramsay homestead house that still stands there today, although abandoned ever since my father quit as the Noon Creek association rider and embarked us into the Forest Service life. I couldn't have been but a year or so old when we moved away, yet I felt some regard for this site. An allegiance, even, for a bond of that sort will happen when you have been the last to live at a place. Or so I think. Gratitude that it offered a roof over your head for as long as it did, this may be, and remorse that only emptiness is your successor there.

Alec and I, September children, native Noon Creekers. And my mother's birthplace down the creek at the Reese ranch house itself. Odd to think that of the four of us at the English Creek ranger station all those years, the place that answered to the word "home" in each of us, only my father originated on English Creek, he alone was our

link to Scotch Heaven and the Montana origins of the McCaskills. We Americans scatter fast.

And something odder yet. In a physical sense, here at the upper place I was more distant from Alec than I had been all summer. The Double W lay half the length of Noon Creek from where my rake now wheeled and glided. Mentally, though, this advent to our mutual native ground was a kind of reunion with my brother. Or at least with thoughts of him. While I held the reins of Blanche and Fisheye as they clopped along, I wondered what saddle horse Alec might be riding. When we moved the stacker from one site to the next, I thought of Alec on the move too, likely patrolling Double W fences this time of year, performing his quick mending on any barbwire or post that needed it. By this stage of haying Wisdom Johnson a time or two a day could be heard remembering the charms of Bouncing Betty, on First Avenue South in Great Falls. I wondered how many times a week Alec was managing to ride into Gros Ventre and see Leona. Leona. I wondered—well, just say I wondered.

With all this new musing to be done, the first day of haying the Ramsay meadows went calmly enough. A Monday, that was, a mild day following what had been a cool and cloudy Sunday. Wisdom Johnson, I remember, claimed we now were haying so far up into the polar regions that he might have to put his shirt on. Anyway, a Monday, a getting-underway day.

The morning of the second Ramsay day, though, began unordinary. I started to see so as soon as Pony and I were coming down off the benchland to the Reese ranch buildings. My mind as usual ~~was~~ at that

^{was}
 point on sour milk soda biscuits and fried eggs and venison sausage
 and other breakfast splendors as furnished by Marie, but I couldn't
 help watching the other rider who always approached the Reeses' at about
 the time I did. This of course was Clayton Hebner, for as I'd be
 descending from my benchland route Clayton would be riding in from the
 Hebner place on the North Fork, having come around the opposite end of
 Breed Butte from me. Always Clayton was on that same weary ^{bay}mare my
 father and I had seen the two smaller Hebner jockeys trying to urge
 into motion, at the outset of our counting trip, and always he came
 plodding in at the same pace and maybe even in the same hooftracks as
 the morning before. The first few mornings of haying I had waved to
 Clayton, but received no response. And I didn't deserve any. I ought
 to have known Hebners didn't go in for waving. ⁴ But etiquette of greet-
 ing was not what now had my attention. This particular morning, Clayton
 across the usual distance between us looked larger. Looked slouchy, as
 if he might have nodded off in the saddle. Looked somehow—well, the
 word that comes to mind is dormant.

I had unsaddled Pony and was turning her into the pasture beside
^{Pete's}
~~the~~ barn when it became evident why Clayton Hebner didn't seem himself
 this morning. He wasn't.

"Hello there, Jick!" came the bray of Good Help Hebner. "Unchristly
 hour of the day to be out and about, ain't it?"

—"Clayton bugged his ankle up," Good Help was explaining in a
 fast yelp. Even before the sire of the Hebner clan managed to unload
 himself from the swaybacked mare, Pete had appeared in the yard with

an expression that told me ranch house walls did nothing to dim the identification of Good Help Hebner. "Sprained the goshdamn thing when him and Melvin was grab-assing around after supper last night," Good Help sped on to the two of us. "I tell you, Pete, I just don't know—" --what's got into kids these days, I finished for Good Help in my mind before he blared it out.

Yet just about the time you think you can recite every forthcoming point of conversation from a Good Help Hebner, that's when he'll throw you for a loop. As now, when Good Help delivered himself of this:

"Ought not to leave a neighbor in the lurch, though, Pete. So I'll take the stacker driving for you a couple days till Clayton mends up."

Pete looked as though he'd just been offered something nasty on the end of a stick.

But there just was no way around the situation. Someone to drive the stacker team was needed, and given that 12-year-old Clayton had been performing the job, maybe an outside chance existed that Good Help could, too. Maybe.

"Dandy," uttered Pete without meaning a letter of it. "Come on in and sit up for breakfast, Garland. Then Jick can sort you out on the horses Clayton's been using."

"Kind of a racehorse pair of bastards, ain't they?" Good Help evaluated Jocko and Pep, the stacker team.

"These? Huh uh," I reassured him. "They're the oldest tamest team on the place, Garland. That's why Pete uses them on the stacker."

"Horses," proclaimed Good Help as if he had just been invited to address Congress on the topic. "You just never can tell about horses. They can look logey as a preacher after a chicken dinner and the next thing you know they turn themselves into ~~goddamn~~^{goshdamn} mustangs. One time I—"

"Garland, these two old grandmas could pull the stacker cable in their sleep. And just about do. Come on, I'll help you get them harnessed. Then we got to go make hay."

The next development in our making of hay didn't dawn on me for quite some time.

That is, I noticed only that Wisdom Johnson today had no cause to complain of coolness. This was an August day with its furnace door open. Almost as soon as all of us got to the hayfield at the upper place, Wisdom was stripping off his shirt and gurgling a drink of water.

How Wisdom Johnson did it I'll never know, but he drank water oftener than the rest of us on the hay crew all together and yet never got heat-sick from doing so. I mean, an ordinary person had to be careful about putting cool water inside a sweating body. Pete and Perry and Clayton and I rationed our visits to the burlap-wrapped water jug that was kept in the shade of the haystack. But Wisdom had his own waterbag, hung on the stacker frame up there where he could reach it anytime he wanted. A hot day like this seemed to stoke both Wisdom's stacking and his liquid consumption. He'd swig, spit out the stream to rinse hay dust from his mouth. Swig again, several Adam's apple swallows this time. Then, refreshed, yell down to Pete on the

buckrake: "More hay! Bring 'er on!"

Possibly, then, it was the lack of usual exhortation from Wisdom that first tickled my attention. I had been going about my scatter raking as usual, my mind here and there and the other, and only eventually did I notice the unusual silence of the hayfield. Above the brushy bend of the creek between me and the stack, though, I could see the stacker arms and fork taking load after load up, and Wisdom was there pitching hay energetically, and all seemed in order. The contrary didn't seep through ^{to} me until I felt the need for a drink of water and reined Blanche and Fisheye around the bend to go in to the stack and get it.

This haystack was distinct from any other we had put up all summer.

This one was hunched forward, leaning like a big hay-colored snowdrift against the frame of the stacker. More like a sidehill than a stack. In fact, this one so little resembled Wisdom's straight high style of haystack that I whoaed my team and sat to watch the procedure that was producing this leaning tower of Pisa.

The stacker fork with its next cargo of hay rose slowly, slowly, Good Help pacing at leisure behind the stacker team. When the arms and the fork neared the frame, he idly called "whoap," eased Jocko and Pep to a stop, and the hay gently plooped onto the very front of the stack, adding to the forward-leaning crest.

Wisdom gestured vigorously toward the back of the stack. You did not have to know pantomime to decipher that he wanted hay flung into that neighborhood. Then Wisdom's pitchfork flashed and he began

to shove hay down from the crest, desperately parceling it toward the lower slope back there. He had made a heroic transferral of several huge pitchforkfuls when the next stacker load hovered up and plooped exactly where the prior one had.

Entrancing as Wisdom's struggle was, I stirred myself and went on in for my slug of water. Not up to me to regulate Good Help Hebner. Although it was with difficulty that I didn't make some crack when Good Help yiped to me: "Yessir, Jick, we're haying now, ain't we?"

From there on Wisdom's sidehill battle was a lost cause. When that haystack was done, or at least Wisdom called quits on it, and it was time to move the stacker to the next site, even Perry stopped dump raking in the field next door and for once came over to help.

The day by now was without a wisp of moving air, a hot stillness growing hotter. Yet here was a haystack that gave every appearance of leaning into a 90-mile-an-hour wind. Poles and props were going to be necessary to keep this stack upright until winter, let alone into winter.

Wisdom glistened so wet with sweat, he might have just come out of swimming. Side by side Perry and I wordlessly appraised the cattywampus haystack, a little like mourners to the fact that our raking efforts had come to such a result. Pete had climbed off the buckrake and gained his first full view and now looked like he might be coming down with a toothache.

"Pete," Wisdom started in, "I got to talk to you."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," said Pete. "Let's get the

stacker moved, then we'll gab."

After the stacker was in place at the new site and Pete bucked in some loads as the base of the next stack, he shut down the buckrake and called Wisdom over. They had a session, with considerable head-shaking and arm-waving by Wisdom. Then Pete went over to Good Help, and much more discussion and gesturing ensued.

Finally Good Help shook his head, nodded, spat, squinted, scratched and nodded again.

Pete settled for this and climbed on the buckrake.

For the next little while of stacking hay, there was slightly more snap to Good Help's teamstering. He now had Jocko and Pep moving as if they were only half asleep instead of sleepwalking. Wisdom managed to get his back corners of the stack built good and high, and it began to look as if we were haying semi-respectably again.

Something told me to keep informed as I did my scatter raking, though, and gradually the story of this new stack became clear. Once more, hay was creeping up and up in a slope against the frame of the stacker. But that was not the only slope. Due to Wisdom's determined efforts to build up the back corners, the rear also stood high.

Something new again in the history of hay, a stack shaped like a gigantic saddle, prominent behind, low in the middle, and loftiest at the front where Good Help ^{again} was dropping the loads softly, softly.

Wisdom Johnson now looked like a man standing in a coulee and trying to shovel both sidehills down level.

My own shirt was sopping, just from sitting on the rake. Wisdom surely was pouring sweat by the glassfull. I watched as he grabbed his waterbag off the frame and took a desperate swig. It persuaded me that I needed to come in and visit the water jug again.

I disembarked from my rake just as Wisdom floundered to the exact middle of the swayback stack and jabbed his pitchfork in as if planting a battle flag.

"Drop the next frigging load right on that fork!" he shouted down to Good Help. So saying, he stalked up to the back of the haystack, folded his arms, and glowered down toward the pitchfork-target he had established for the next volley of hay.

This I had to watch. The water jug could wait, I planted myself just far enough from the stack to take in the whole drama.

Good Help squinted, scratched, spat, etcetera, which seemed to be his formula of acknowledgment. Then he twirled the ends of the reins and whapped the rumps of Jocko and Pep.

I suppose a comparison to make is this: how would you react if you had spent the past hours peacefully dozing and somebody jabbed a thumb between your ribs?

I believe even Good Help was more than a little surprised at the flying start his leather message produced from Jocko and Pep. Away the pair of horses jogged at a harness-rattling pace. Holding their reins, Good Help toddled after the team a lot more rapidly than I ever imagined he was capable of. The cable whirred snakelike through the pulleys of the stacker. And the load of hay was going up as if it was

being fired from one of those Roman catapults.

I spun and ran. If the arms of the stacker hit the frame at that runaway velocity, there was going to be stacker timber flying throughout the vicinity.

Over my shoulder, though, I saw it all.

Through some combination of stumble, lurch, and skid, Good Help at last managed to rare back on the ~~reins~~^{reins} with all his weight and yanked the horses to a stop.

Simultaneously the stacker arms and fork popped to a halt just inches short of the frame, the whole apparatus quivering up there in the sky like a giant tuning fork.

The hay. The hay was airborne. And Wisdom was so busy glowering he didn't realize this load was arriving to him as if lobbed by Paul Bunyan. I yelled, but anything took some time to sink in to Wisdom. His first hint of doom was as the hay, instead of cascading down over the pitchfork Good Help was supposed to be sighting on, kept coming and coming and coming. A quarter of a ton of timothy and ~~bluestem~~ on a trajectory to the top of Wisdom's head.

Hindsight is always 20-20. Wisdom ought to have humped up and accepted the avalanche. He'd have had to splutter hay the next several minutes, but a guy as sturdy as he was wouldn't have been hurt by the big loose wad.

But I suppose to look up and see a meteorite of hay dropping on you is enough to startle a person. Wisdom in his surprise took a couple of wading steps backward from the falling mass. And had forgotten how

far back he already was on the stack. That second step carried Wisdom to the edge, at the same moment that the hayload spilled itself onto the stack. Just enough of that hay flowed against Wisdom to teeter him. The teetering slipped him over the brink. "Oh, hell," I heard him say as he started to slide.

Every stackman knows the danger of falling from the heights of his work. In Wisdom's situation, earth lay in wait for him 20 feet below. This lent him incentive. Powerful as he was, the desperately grunting Wisdom clawed his arms into the back of the haystack as he slid, ~~down~~. Like a man trying to swim up a waterfall even as the water sluices him down.

"Goshdamn!" Good Help marveled somewhere behind me. "Will you look at that!"

Wisdom's armwork did slow his descent, and meanwhile a sizable cloud of hay was pulling loose from the stack and coming down with him, considerably cushioning his landing. As it turned out, except for scratched and chafed arms and chest and a faceful of hay Wisdom met the ground intact. He also arrived to earth with a full head of steam, all of which he now intended to vent on Good Help Hebner.

"You satchel-ass old son of a frigging goddamn"--Wisdom's was a rendition I have always wished I'd had time to commit to memory. An entire opera of cussing, as he emerged out of the saddleback stack. But more than Wisdom's mouth was in action, he was trying to lay hands on Good Help. Good Help was prudently keeping the team of horses between him and the stackman. Across the horses' wide backs they eyed one

another, Wisdom feinting one way and Good Help going the other, then the reverse. Since the stacker arms and fork still were in the sky, held there only by cable hitched to the team, I moved in and grabbed the halters of Jocko and Pep so they would stand steady.

By now Pete had arrived on the buckrake, to find his stacking crew in this shambles,

"Hold everything!" he shouted, which indeed was what the situation needed.

Pete got over and talked Wisdom away from one side of the team of horses, Good Help pussyfooted away from their opposite side, and I backed Jocko and Pep toward the stack to let down the arms and fork.

Diplomacy of major proportions now was demanded of Pete. His dilemma was this: If he didn't prune Good Help from the hay crew, Wisdom Johnson was going to depart soonest. Yet Pete needed to stay on somewhat civil terms with Good Help, for the sake of hanging on to Clayton and the oncoming lineage of Hebner boys as a ready source of labor. Besides all that, it was simply sane general policy not to get crosswise with a neighbor such as Good Help, for he could just as readily substitute your livestock for those poached deer hanging in his jackpines.

Wisdom had stalked away to try to towel some of the chaff off himself with his shirt. I hung around Pete and Good Help. I wouldn't have missed this for the world.

"Garland, we seem to have a problem here," Pete began with sizable understatement. "You and Wisdom. He doesn't quite agree with the way you drive stacker team."

"Pete, I have stacked more hay than that guy has ever^{even} seen."

By which, Good Help must have meant in several previous incarnations, as none of us who knew him in this lifetime had ever viewed a pitchfork in his hands. "He don't know a favor when it's done to him. If he'd let me place the loads the way they ought to be, he could do the stacking while setting in a goshdamn rocking chair up there."

"He doesn't quite see it that way."

"He don't see doodly-squat about putting up hay, that fellow. I sure don't envy you all his haystacks that are gonna tip assy-turvy before winter, Pete."

"Garland, something's got to give. Wisdom won't stack if you're going to drive."

The hint flew past Good Help by a Texas mile. "Kind of a stubborn bozo, ain't he?" he commiserated with Pete. "I was you, I'd of sent him down the road long since."

Pete gazed at Good Help as if a monumental idea had just been presented. As, indeed, one had.

"I guess you're right, I'd better go ahead and can him," Pete judiciously agreed with Good Help. I gaped at Pete. But he was going right on: "I do need to have somebody on the stack who knows what he's doing, though. Lucky as hell you're on hand, Garland. Nobody else on this crew is veteran to the stacking job like you are. What we'll do, I'll put you up on the stack and we'll make some hay around here for a change, huh?"

Good Help went as still as Lot's wife, and I swear he even turned

about as white.

"Ordinarily, now"—I didn't get to hear all of the ensuing catalogue of excuse, because I had to saunter away to keep my giggles in, but—"this goshblamed back of mine"—I heard more than enough—"if it'll help you out with that stubborn bozo I can just head on home, Pete"—to know that it constituted Good Help's adieu to haying.

That night at English Creek, my father and mother laughed and laughed at my retelling of the saga of Wisdom and Good Help.

"A pair of dandies, they are," my father adjudged. Recently he seemed to take particular pleasure in any evidence that jugheaded behavior wasn't a monopoly of the Forest Service.

But then a further point occurred to him, and he glanced at my mother. She looked soberly back at him. It had occurred to her, too. She in fact was the one who now asked it: "Then who's going to drive the stacker team?"

"Actually," I confessed, "I am."

—————



So that was how I went from haying's ideal job to its goddamn dullest.

Back and forth with that stacker team. All of haying until then I had idly glanced at those little towpaths worn into the meadow, ~~and~~ out from the side of each stack we put up, identical routes the exact length of the stacker cable. Now it registered on me how many footsteps, horse and human, it took to trudge those patterns into creation. The scenery meanwhile constant: the rear ends of Jocko and Pep looming ahead of me like a pair of circus fat ladies bending over to ~~the~~ tie their shoelaces. Too promptly I discovered a charm of Pep's, which was to hoist his tail and take a dump as soon as we were hitched up at a new stack site, so that I had to remember to watch my step or find myself ~~ankle~~^{shin} deep in fresh horse apples.

Nor did it help my mood that Clayton with his tender ankle was able to sit on the seat of the scatter rake and do that job. My scatter rake. The first long hours of driving the stacker team, I spent brooding about the presence of the Hebner tribe in this world.

I will say, the stacker team job shortly cured me of too much thinking. The first time I daydreamed a bit and was slow about starting the load up onto the stack, Wisdom Johnson brought me out of it by shouting down: "Hey, Jick! Whistle or sing, or show your thing!" I was tempted to part Wisdom's hair with that particular load of hay, but I forebore.

Maybe my stacker team mood was contagious. Suppertime of the

second day, when I got back to English Creek I found my mother frowning over the week's Gleaner. "What's up?" I asked her.

"Nothing," she said and didn't convince me. When she went to the stove to wrestle with supper and I had washed up, I zeroed in on the article she'd been making a mouth at. It was one on the Random page:

Phantom Woman:

When Fire Ran

On The Mountain

Editor's note: The fire season is once again upon us, and lightning needs no help from the carelessness of man. It is just 10 years ago that the Phantom Woman Mountain conflagration provided an example of what happens when fire gets loose in a big way. We reprint the story as a reminder. When in the woods, break your matches after blowing them out, crush cigarette butts, and douse all campfires.

Forest Service crews are throwing everything in the book at the fire on Phantom Woman mountain--but so far, the roaring blaze has thrown it all back. The inferno is raging in up-and-down country near the headwaters of the North Fork of English Creek, about 20 miles west of Gros Ventre. Reports

from Valier and Conrad say the column of smoke can be seen from those communities. How many acres of forest have been consumed is not known. It is certain the loss is the worst in the Two Medicine National Forest since the record fire season of 1910.

One eyewitness said the crews seemed to be bringing the fire under control until late yesterday afternoon. Then the upper flank of the fire broke loose "and started going across that mountain as fast as a man can run."

H.T. Gisborne, fire research specialist for the U.S. Forest Service at Missoula explained the "blowup" phenomenon: "Ordinarily the front of a forest fire advances like troops in skirmish formation, pushing ahead faster here, slower there, according to the timber type and fuels, but maintaining a practically unbroken front. Even when topography, fuels, and weather result in a crown fire, the sheet of flames leaps from one tree crown to the next at a relatively slow rate, from one-half to one mile an hour. But when such 'runs' throw spots of fire ahead of the advancing front, the spots burn back to swell the main front and add to the momentum of

the rising mass of heat. Literally, a 'blowup' of the front of the fire may then happen."

No word has been received of casualties in the Phantom Woman fire, although reports are that some crews had to flee for their lives when the 'blowup' occurred.

When my father came in for supper, my mother liberated the Gleaner from me and handed it to him, saying: "Mac, you might as well see this." Meaning, you might as well see it before our son the asker starts in on you about it.

The headline stopped him. Bill Reinking always got in touch with him about any story having to do with the Two Medicine National Forest. "Why's this in the paper?" my father now demanded of the world at large.

"It's been ten years, Mac," my mother told him. "Ten years ago this week."

He read it through. His eyes were intent, his jaw was out, as if stubborn against the notion that fire could happen in the Two Medicine National Forest. When he tossed the Gleaner aside, though, he said only: "Doesn't time fly."

The next day, two developments.

I took some guilty pleasure at the first of these. Not long before noon, Clayton dropped one wheel of the scatter rake into a

ditch that was closer than he'd noticed, and the impact broke one of the brackets that attaches the dumping mechanism to the rake frame. Clayton himself looked considerably jarred, although I don't know whether mostly by the jolt of the accident or the dread that Pete would fire him for it.

But Pete being Pete, he instead said: "These things happen, Clayton. We'll cobble it with wire until we can get a weld done on it." And once I got over my secret satisfaction about the superiority of my scatter raking to Clayton's, I was glad Pete didn't come down hard on the boy. Being a son of Good Help Hebner seemed to me punishment enough for anybody.

Then at the end of the workday, as Pony and I came down the benchland to the ford of English Creek, I saw a second Forest Service pickup parked beside my father's outside the ranger station. I figured the visitor might be Cliff Bowen, the young ranger from the Indian Head district just south of us, and it was. When I stepped in to say hello, I learned Cliff had been to headquarters in Great Falls and had come by with some fire gear for my father. And with some rangerly gripes he was sharing as well. Normally Cliff Bowen was mild as milk, but his headquarters visit left him pretty well steamed.

"Mac, Sipe asked me how things are going." Sipe was Ken Sipe, the superintendent of the Two Medicine National Forest. "I told him, about as good as could be expected, but ^{we're going to} we need more smokechasers and fire ^{east-of-the-Divide} guards." July and now August had stayed so hot and dangerous that rangers had been permitted to hire some fire manpower, but only enough, as my father had said, "to give us a taste."

"How'd that go over with him?" my father wondered.

"About like a fart in church. He told me it's Missoula policy. Hold down on the hiring, on these east-side forests. Goddamn it, Mac, I don't know what the Major's thinking of. This forest is as dry as paper. We get one good lightning storm in the mountains and we'll have fires the whole sonofabitching length of the Two."

"Maybe the Major's got it all arranged with upstairs so there isn't going to be any lightning the rest of the summer, Cliff."

"Yeah, maybe. But if any does get loose, I hope to Christ it aims for the rivets on the Major's hip pocket."

My father couldn't help but laugh. "You think snag strikes are trouble. Figure how long the Major'd smolder."

Two developments, I said back there. Amend that to three. As I led Pony to her pasture for the night, the heat brought out sweat on me, just from that little walk. When I reached the house the thermometer in our kitchen window was catching the western sun. 92°, it read. The hot heavy weather was back. The kind of weather that invites lightning storms.

But all we got that night was a shower, a dab of drizzle. When I climbed out of bed in the morning I debated whether Pete's hay would be too wet to stack today. So that I wouldn't make my ride for nothing, I ^{tele}phoned the Reese ranch.

"Pete thinks it'll be dry enough by middle of the morning," Marie's voice told me. "Come on for breakfast. I have sourdough

hotcakes."

It turned out that the sourdough hotcakes were the only real gain of the morning for our hay crew. We took our time at the breakfast table and then did a leisurely harnessing-up of our teams and made no hurry of getting to the Ramsay place's hayfields, and still Perry and Bud and Wisdom had a lot of smoke time while Pete felt of the hay and gandered at the sky. Finally Pete said, "Hell, let's try it." We would do okay for a while, put up a dozen or so loads, then here would come a sun shower. Just enough moisture to shut us down. Then we'd hay a little more, and another sun shower would happen. For a rancher trying to put up hay, that is the most aggravating kind of day there can be. Or as Pete put it during one of these sprinkly interruptions: "Goddamn it, if you're gonna rain, rain."

By about 2 o'clock and the fourth or fifth start-and-stop of our stacking, he had had enough. "The hell with it. Let's head for home."

I naturally anticipated an early return to English Creek, and started thinking about where I might go fishing for the rest of the afternoon. My theory is, the more rotten the weather, the better the fishing. But as I was unharnessing Jocko and Pep, Pete came out of the house and asked:

"Jick, how do you feel about a trip to town?"

Inasmuch as we were rained out anyway, he elaborated, I might just as well take the scatter rake in to Grady Tilton's garage and

get the broken bracket welded, stay overnight at the Heaneys' and in the morning drive the repaired rake back here to the ranch. "I checked all this out with headquarters"--meaning my mother--"and she said it'd be okay."

"Sounds good to me," I told Pete. The full fact was, after the days of trudging back and forth behind the stacker team it sounded like an expedition to Africa.

So I set off for Gros Ventre, about mid-afternoon. Roving scatter raker Jick McCaskill hitting the road, even if the route only was to town and back.

The first couple of miles almost flew by, for it was remarkable what a pair of steppers Blanche and Fisheye now seemed to me; speed demons in comparison to Jocko and Pep. My thoughts were nothing special. Wondering what Ray Heaney would have to report. Mulling the rest of the summer. Another week or so of haying. The start of school ~~was--~~ Christamighty, only 30 days away. And my 15th birthday, one day less than that. I ask you, how is it that after the Fourth of July each summer, time somehow speeds up?

I like to believe that even while curlicues of this sort are going on in my head, the rest of me is more or less on the job. Aiming that scatter rake down the Noon Creek road I took note of Dill Egan's haystacks, which looked to me like poor relations of those Wisdom built. Way over on the tan horizon to the northeast I could

see specks that would be Double W cattle, and wondered where Alec was riding or fence-fixing today. And of course one of the things a person always does a lot of in Montana is watching other people's weather. All that sky and horizon around you, there almost always is some atmospheric event to keep track of. At the top of the county road's rise from Dill Egan's place, I studied a dark anvil cloud which was sitting over the area to the northwest of me. My father was not going to like the looks of that one, hovering along the edge of his forest, ~~and the Ramsay place~~ ^{our Ramsay hayfield} is going to have itself a bath, I told myself.

In a few more minutes I glanced around again, though, and found that the cloud wasn't sitting over the Ramsay place. It was on the move. Toward Noon Creek and me. A good thing I was bright enough to bring my slicker along on the rake; the coat was going to save me from some wet.

But the next time I ~~glanced back~~ ^{reconnoitered,} rain was pushed off my mental agenda. The cloud was bigger, blacker, and closer. A whole hell of a lot closer. It also was rumbling now like it was the engine of the entire sky. That may sound fancy, but view it from my eyes at the time: a dark block of storm, with pulses of light coming out of it like flame winking from firebox doors. And even as I gawked at it, a jagged rod of lightning stabbed from the cloud to the earth. Pale lightning, nearer white than yellow. The kind a true electrical storm employs.

As I have told, I am not exactly in love with lightning anyway. Balling the reins in both my hands I slapped Blanche and Fisheye some encouragement across their rumps. "Hyaah, you two! Let's go!" Which may sound drastic, but try sitting on a ten-foot expanse of metal rake with lightning approaching and then prescribe to me what you would have done.

Go we did, at a rattling pace, for the next several minutes. I did my best to count distance on the thunder, but it was that grumbling variety that lets loose another thump before you've finished hearing the one before. My eyes rather than my ears had to do the weather forecasting, and they said Blanche and Fisheye and the rake and I were not going as fast as the stormcloud was traveling or growing or whatever the hell it was doing.

The route ahead stretched on and on, for immediately after coming up out of Dill Egan's place the Noon Creek road abandons the bottomland and arrows along the benchland between Noon Creek and English Creek until it eventually hits the highway north of Gros Ventre. Miles of country as exposed as a table top. I tell you, a situation like that reminds a person that skin is damn thin shelter against the universe.

One thing the steady thunder and the pace of the anvil cloud did tell me was that I somehow had to abandon that road. Find a place to pull in and get myself and my horses away from this ten-foot lightning rod on wheels. The question was, where? Along the English Creek road I'd have had no problem; within any little way there,

a ranch could be pulled into for shelter. But around here the Double W owned everything, and wherever there did happen to be a turnoff into one of the abandoned sets of Noon Creek ranch buildings, the Double W kept the gate padlocked against fishermen. As I verified for myself, by halting my team for a quick ~~look~~^{scan} at the gate into the old Nansen place.

A lack of choices can make your mind up for you in a hurry. I whapped Blanche and Fisheye again and on down the county road we clattered, heading for a high frame of gateposts about three-quarters of a mile off. The main gate into the Double W.

It took forever, but at last we pulled up at that gateframe and the Double W turnoff. From the crosspiece supported by the big gateposts--the size and height of telephone poles, they really were--hung the sign:

WW RANCH

WENDELL & MEREDICE WILLIAMSON

The sign was creaking a little, the wind starting to stir in front of the storm.

Neither the sign nor the wind I gave a whit about just then. What I had forgotten was that this turnoff into the Double W had a cattleguard built in there between the gateposts. A pit overlaid with a grill of pipes, which vehicles could cross but hooped creatures such as cattle couldn't. Hooped creatures such as cattle and horses. To put Blanche and Fisheye through here, I would have

to open the barbwire livestock gate beside the cattleguard.

You know what I was remembering. "GODaMIGHTy, get aWAY from that!"--Stanley's cry as I approached the wire gate at the cabin during our campending trip. "You happen to be touching that wire and lightning hits that fence--" This coming rumblebelly of a storm made that June one look like a damp washcloth. Every time I glanced in its direction now, lightning winked back. And nowhere around this entrance to the Double W was there a stick of wood, not one sole single goddamn splinter, with which to knock the hoop off the gate stick and flip the wire gate safely aside.

Holy H. Hell. Sitting here telling this, all the distance of years between that instant and now, I can feel again the prickling that came across the backs of my hands, the sweat of dismay on its way up through my skin there. Grant me three moments which could be erased from my life, and that Double W gate scene would be one.

I wiped my hands against my pants. Blanche swished her tail, and Fisheye whinnied. They maybe were telling me what I already knew. Delay was my worst possible behavior, for that storm was growing nearer every second that I stood there and stewed. I wiped my hands again. And jumped at the gate as if in combat against it. One arm grappling around the gatepost, the other arm and hand desperately working the wire hoop up off the gatestick--oh yes, sure, this gate was one of those snug obstinate bastards, I needed to mightily hug the stick and post together to gain enough slack for the hoop to loosen. Meanwhile

every place my body was touching a strand of barbwire I could feel a kind of target line, ready to sizzle: as if I was trussed up in electrical wiring and somebody was about to throw the switch.

I suppose in a fraction of what it takes to tell about it, I wrestled that gate open and slung it wide. Yet it did seem an immense passage of time.

And I wasn't on easy street yet. Blanche and Fisheye, I have to say, were taking all of this better than I was, but even so they were getting a little nervous about the storm's change in the air and the loudening thunder. "Okay, here we go now, nothing to it, here we go," I soothed the team and started them through the gate. I could have stood some soothing myself, for the scatter rake was ten feet wide and this gate was only about eleven. Catch a rake wheel behind a gatepost and you have yourself a first class hung-up mess. In my case, I then would have the rake in contact with the barbwire fence, inviting lightning right up the seat of my pants, while I backed and maneuvered the rake wheel out of its bind. Never have I aimed anything more carefully than that wide scatter rake through that just-wide-enough Double W gateway.

We squeaked through. Which left me with only one more anxious act to do. To close the gate, for there were cattle in this field. Even if they were the cattle of the damn Double W, even if it mattered nothing to me that they got out and scattered to Tibet--if you have been brought up in Montana, you close a gate behind you.