It was Written

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IT WAS WRITTEN

By
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To Georgia, whose patient understanding and extra effort made this book possible.
Early Indian legend had it that the broad river was the restless spirit of the tribal lands on the Upper Muskie and that the river must obey its own god that drove it inexorably south-by-east toward the far-distant languor of the warm gulf. The Indians had lived many years on the lands of their ancestors and worshipped their gods. They had dug gardens on the fertile river banks and planted maize and tubers and sung gutteral chants to propitiate the river god. It was said the Indians had kept a pictographic record of past transgressions in one of the deep caves of Muskagganaga Rock. The early pictographs chiseled into the compacted sandstone with crude obsidian tools from the badlands told of years of desecration by dry winds sweeping the burnt country, of scourging hordes of winged insects clouding the sun and stripping leaves to skeletons and grass blades to roots, and of pollution with the reek of the rotting flesh of men and bloated carcasses of animals infecting the spring breezes after heavy winter snows. It was said the Indians believed that the river god would in time set all past transgressions against the tribal lands aright. Few white men had believed the legend. Trappers and traders paddling up the river in their big pirogues had lived among the cottonwoods on the river banks in the
way of the Indians but had appropriated heavy bales of skins and pelts from them as though they were first fruits and drifted downstream again. Steamboatmen, buffalo hunters, miners, cattlemen, and farmers had followed. They had gradually usurped control of the tribal lands from the Indians and asked for pony soldiers to sequester their fraudulent titles. Some had believed the legend and so had done no violence to the lands. Others had laughed or sneered at it and abused the lands as they saw fit. The third wave of conquerors, the homesteaders who had in turn usurped control from earlier settlers, had pre-empted the lands on government patent but rarely heard the legend anymore. For by this time the Indians themselves had been decimated by war and smallpox and tuberculosis and banished from their tribal lands to government reservations. Yet the legend had not died entirely. In later years it was said the Indians had painted scenes of buffalo hunts and of fierce skirmishes with the pony soldiers. They had used red ochre and yellow ochre and red and orange vermilion to write their legend on the smooth planes of the sandstone cave. Some said these later writings evoked the anger of the river god against the white man. Others thought the pictographs only represented a living history of recorded tribal deeds. Sometimes men talked about the legend when grasshoppers swarmed in clusters over their
wheat fields or when hailstones as big as a man's fist pummelled entire counties of ripe grain level with the ground.

In late December of Jerome's seventh year on the Upper Muskie Creek the faraway river formed a long sinuous ghost of winter along the dusty valley and dusty hills. Frozen in thin sheets where eddies washed and tugged at miles of crumbling bluffs and where pools backed into groves of giant cottonwoods and slender birch and drooping willows and scattered red maples, the main current ran open. Wherever steep banks afforded protection from chill winds, wisps of steam floated wraith-like above the swift-flowing waters. In many places where the protecting bluffs and sheltering trees gave way to bare sandbars and empty gravelbeds, icy blasts riffled the brown waters into stiff furrows. The river meandered and looped and gouged new channels and left isolated many miles of alluvial deposits in its wake.

Now the lands lay barren on the Upper Muskie. The parched grain fields yielded only patches of fibrous tumbleweeds.

Jerome sat cross-legged on the frozen earth at the lee side of the gambrel-roofed barn. His gray eyes, usually too large for his solemn face, squinted into the howling dust storm from beneath the visor of a striped-denim cap.
He held his lanky body erect, elbows on knees and toes of rough cowhide shoes tucked under him, Indian fashion. He meditated and he watched. He watched tumbleweeds nine to twelve handspans across and half as many high spring from their own puffs of dust. They bobbed and tilted lopsided on the forty-acre plateau just east of the gully by the wire cow-corrail. Whenever the gale subsided to a momentary lull, the prickly tumblers tugged back to hug the earth, and so the next blast would catch them with a new roothold, clutching to the heavy loam beneath the piled-up inches of blowdirt. They rose and fell in unison with the fierce gusts like worshippers at morning devotions. Sometimes the sullen wind swooped close to the powder-dry earth in a sustained push and raised stinging flurries of gritty blowdirt. Then the tumblers arose together and settled again, as though they too were seeking harmony through mortification after being out of tune with the Great Powers. Jerome's hams ached from squatting on the cold ground so long, but he had not yet reached any clear discernment of will attributed to the Great Powers. So he sat rigid, arms folded, and kept his eyes fixed on the tumbleweeds, waiting for his vision to occur.

Sometimes a few tumbleweeds would break away from the gathering and veer crazily downwind. Tumbling and lifting and bouncing down the long narrow field they whirled into
the buckbrush of the gully and rolled and caught and rolled and caught again until the shifting blowdirt piled in on them. Matted drifts of driven tumblers and whipped blowdirt had heaped up over the drouth-ridden years to close the gully in a half-dozen places.

One big loner hit a fencepost, spun to the gully below, and hopped uphill over small sandpiles and sparse buckbrush like a kicked maverick. It wobbled eerily to the bare hilltop, bounced over the far side of the wire corral, and caught at the barbs right by the barn corner where Jerome sat entranced. It hung there, captive, performing headstands and pratfalls as the gale alternately whistled and sighed through the wire strands. Jerome remained motionless, elbows on knees and hands tucked into the opened flap of his worn sheepskin coat. After a long time the whistling and sighing sloughed away, and Jerome rubbed dust from his eyes and rolled to his knees, slapping the numbness from his thighs. Between wires twisted with barbs he stuck his bare hands and jerked. The thick root of the thorny interloper turned sideways, snagged between post and wire. He reached over the fence and pushed down. The tumbleweed came free. He poked both hands through and jerked again. The sudden-swooping wind caught him unawares. It buffeted the tumbleweed. It slacked off. It butted again. Jerome pulled away. Little drops of red blood
clung like fresh berries to a long thin line from wrist to knuckle.

Jerome shouted into the wind, "Blow, damned ol' wind! Blow forever!" He scooped up a handful of blowdirt and hurled it into the rising gale. "Blow some more!" The flung grit pelted back. It stung his face. He tasted the dust on his lips and shut his eyes. Blinded, he kicked the rising and falling tumbleweed. "Move on! Move on!" he said. "Don't bow and scrape in this small corner! Move on!" The wind lashed. The freed tumbleweed corkscrewed over the fence where it bowled him over. It whipped at his face and hands. He got up and spit a cotton of grit. Red oozes coursed down his cheek. He knuckled them and rubbed the salty smear across his tongue. The thorny traveller lunged down the wind. Jerome threw a big chunk of dried cow manure after it and shouted, "Move on, you ol' tumbleweed! Move on!" He raised his fist to the east, "Crack your knuckles, you wind! Blow anyhow! Blow!" The wind lashed again.

The sullen dust storms died away in March. Slow drizzles misted down from low-hanging clouds. Drifts of blowdirt up to eight feet high and a half-mile long dampened and held firm. By April the drizzles turned to heavy rain storms. Jerome often awoke nights, head cradled in his palms and snug in his warm feather tick, to sniff the
fresh rain where it leaked through the warped wooden shingles and dripped into buckets and pans arranged on the floor. He would turn sleep-heavy eyes toward the bare rafters of the dark low-roofed attic and lull his senses with the melodic rainbeat on the shingled roof close to his head.

One night long after the chickens had winked to sleep, thunder rattled the dishes stacked neatly in Aunt Helga's cupboard downstairs, and Jerome heard the thud of Uncle Jacob's falling out of bed again while dreaming. Bolts of lightning crashed overhead. Uncle Jacob stuck his head up the dark stairwell and hollered, "Ja, Ruben—ja, Benjamin—ja, Jerome! The lightning at! We take now the cows from the corral!" Jerome thrust his legs through his damp overall legs and fumbled the suspenders on the metal button. From the next bunk Benjamin stomped into his heavy shoes. They awakened Ruben, took folded squares of worn header canvas from the leanto, and plunged into the gusty night to the wire corral where the cattle humped, tails to the wind, bawling, while lightning leaped and cracked across the black sky. Uncle Jacob snipped the wires and the cows crowded the opening. Their heads were down and they moaned deep in their throats. The four followed the herd to the sandbanks west one mile and fanned out to check the herd's drift. The herd quieted and bedded down in a sandy swale. They crouched behind their canvas windbreaks for almost an
hour before the thunder rumbled away and the lightning dwindled to faint flashes. Before the downpour started, Uncle Jacob had sent Ruben and Benjamin in to sleep out the night and return to haze the herd homeward at daylight.

As dawn's early light slipped over the foggy hills and ridges of the Upper Muskie, Jerome ceased pacing to and fro and squatted on his heels, the steady rainfall running off his tented canvas, and watched seeping sand and blow-dirt flow down a sandbank. At first a ball-like fingertip of wet ooze groped blindly for a steep decline in an effort to obey its own law of transfiguration. The ball of ooze rolled a ways and stopped to dilate, rolled and dilated, rolled and dilated, until gradually the moving finger separated out the rich-hued sand particles and shoved them aside. A trickle of water had threaded a miniature channel when Uncle Jacob, square-jawed, with his worn felt hat punched out to shed the rain, loomed on top the sandbank. His sinewy form stood momentarily silhouetted. He held his canvas at shoulder height like a shield to fend off the beating rain.

"Uncle Jacob," Jerome said. "You lookin' for me?"

"Ja--so," said Uncle Jacob. He skirted the steep run-off and paced down the ridge. "So!" he said, squatting beside Jerome and putting a hand on his shoulder to steady himself.
"See it come, Uncle Jacob?" said Jerome. "See it?"

He pointed to where the arrested trickle picked up heavy sand particles and formed tiny nodules that ran forward and spread out on a tiny plain, like veins, and felt their way along the surface until one hit a decline and raced onward.

Uncle Jacob splayed his hand and held it steady near the tiny plain. "Like fingers ist," he said. "So--like the Ruben unsteady, yet under own law it moves."

The trickle spread and ran flat and broad at the base of the sandbank, rolling a fan of sand over and over ahead of it. At length the velocity of the broadened stream converted the moving sand mass into banks, picked up speed down a sharp decline and gouged out a tiny bed, like the river itself that swirled seven miles west at the mouth of the Upper Muskie.

"Yah, so," said Uncle Jacob. He hunched in his wet coat and beat his arms to recall circulation, "the cows now move. To help, the Ruben and the Benjamin soon come." They crossed the sandbank and followed the harsh clang and soft tinkle of cowbells in the rain.

Jerome slept the morning through in dry blankets and emerged with Uncle Jacob from the leanto at the rear of the frame house that afternoon. From the big grainbin that set near the barn the dum--dum--dum--dum of the fanning mill blended with the steady patter of raindrops. The elongated
skull and protruding ears of Ruben bobbed in and out of view through the open doorway like a puppet jerked on and off stage in a dumb-show. He was turning the long handle of the rickety fanning mill and, as every full cycle bent him over, he each time made his brief entrance and bowed briefly out again. The visor of his denim cap was pushed far down over bushy eyebrows that met at the bridge of a beaked nose. He was the eldest and the extra years had put heavy muscles on his shoulders. Dum--dum--dum went the mill.

"Yahh, Ruben, at the handle the Jerome turns!" ordered Uncle Jacob in his ear. Jerome took his speed cue by bending and turning his arm in unison a moment with Ruben and then transferring holds and bearing down on the geared handle. The dum-dum-dum of the tilted cleaning sieves vibrated back and forth, uninterrupted. Benjamin passed his scoop shovel to Uncle Jacob and moved from the dust cloud raised by the mill. He was lithe and strong like Uncle Jacob, only stockier in the arms and shoulders. His stub of a nose seemed pressed on his broad face like a piece of clay. He hok-poohed a spittle of dust from his throat and lounged in the doorway fifteen or twenty minutes, catching the eaves' dribble in cupped palms to wash dust from his eyes and mouth, until Uncle Jacob shouted, "Yuh, yuh, Benjamin," at him and he began sorting through a
pile of old gunny sacks.

It was almost dark when Jerome stepped away from the scoop shovel and spotted the lightweight team drawing the heavy wagon off the county road that passed by the front of the paint-peeled house. Clem handled the reins from the high springseat and bear-like Lum and young Malhur hunched beside him.

"Whoa--whoap!" said Clem to his team. He nodded a "Howdy, J'rome" and dragged back on the lines and settled the brake in its notch with a boot.

"Uncle Jacob--" Jerome hollered into the dimness, "it's Clem and Malhur--hey!" wagging a thumb at the opened door. "It's Clem!"

Uncle Jacob waved Ruben's scoop shovel away and turned the handle another few minutes to clear the sieves before stopping for night. Rain still pattered on the shingled roof. The dust cloud began to settle.

"Ja--ja," Uncle Jacob said. "The Clem the rain likes, say not." The crowsfeet appeared at the corners of his eyes.

"I saw your dust cloud from the road," said Clem. "I figured it must be an old devil pushin' the last seven years' drouth back at us through the door of this yore grain'ry, judging by the dust you raise." He had deep-blue eyes and thin lips that curled up and seemed to make
whatever he said seem like it might be just the opposite.

"Ja," Uncle Jacob grinned slyly. "Old devils not every body known by ist. Some bodies known better yet to old devils."

"Gods too!" said Clem unabashed. The rain had soaked his flat-crowned hat and now trickled down his jaw. "An old devil and an old god too. Yuh see, Pa woke last night in a fever. Said he dreamed the river god was snakin' our church away off down the river. He said to take a team and tie it up or somethin'. Yuh know Pa he don't cater much to regular church, but he likes Pastor Nolafson. He . . . ."

"Yahhh--" said Uncle Jacob slowly. He cocked his head to one side as though he too were listening in the half-dark for the hidden voice of the river god. "Yahhh," he repeated.

There they sat after supper, arrayed along both sides of the long kitchen table. A gas lamp hissed and threw shadows on the walls. Clem had told them of seventeen head of cows killed the night before at Emil Kuhn's farm. He said Emil had found them in the morning, bunched in a corner of the fence. They had toppled over dead like toy cows against a toy fence. Some had died with their stiff legs stuck in the air like the tree stumps of a cottonwood grove that had been logged. They had crowded the fence.
Emil had smelled charred flesh and seen a fencepost struck into splinters by lightning. Emil had sent word over to borrow Uncle Jacob's scraper and team to scrape a gravel bank over the stiff bodies. The three brothers sat together, wearing their ill-fitting dry clothes. Benjamin's wool shirt draped in folds at Clem's slim shoulders while Lum, whose small intent eyes seldom flickered as they moved from Clem to Uncle Jacob and back, strained the seams of Ruben's extra shirt. He looked like a bear with his thick arms, his heavy body, and his small eyes and shaggy head.

Clem had pushed his plate back. He blew into the hot coffee mug. Aunt Helga poked lengths of stovewood into the bright-red coals and settled the lid in place. Clem gesticulated with his hands when he talked. "Pa had this dream," he said. "He was away off down by the river--yuh know we got that piece of bottomland down there and we gen'rally plant sweet corn and potatoes down there so we can fetch water from the river to water 'em--Pa was down by the river and he was harrowing with a team. One was a big bay horse and he was ornery. He says every time he turned the team around that big ornery horse flared his nostrils and looked off down by the old ferry. He said he just kept lookin' and lookin' and snuffin' the air as though he expected to see the water in the old channel again and some-thin' mov. . . ""
"The river god!" blurted Benjamin. "You think maybe there is a river god?" His blue eyes shone.

"There ain't no river god, Benjamin," Ruben said. "Pastor Nolafson said that was just an old story. . . ."

Aunt Helga raised in her seat at the end of the table. The lamplight glinted from her glasses. "Ach, Benjamin--Ruben," she said, "it is not rightful to talk so. God will not have His people talk so." She banged the coffeepot on the table and shook her head fiercely at them.

"Nuhhh, Benjamin--Ruben--Jerome--" Uncle Jacob said. Jerome hadn't even said anything, but Uncle Jacob wagged a warning finger at all three, just to be on the safe side, as they sat with their elbows in a row on that side of the table. "The story only. The story the Clement tells."

Clem always talked slowly, measuring with his eyes the effect each word would have even before he said it. The oversized garment draped over his shoulders made him look like a picture of one of the prophets Jerome had seen in Uncle Jacob's big family Bible. He sort of eased back now, his lean jaw tilted into the light as he talked. He shaped a foot of space between his slender hands like it was a big something he could measure and hold, "Pa had this dream, and that big bay horse kept lookin' down toward the river. It was a hot day and Pa sweated some. Coming up on the lower side of the field the edge of his harrow
snagged a rock. He said the dust hung low to the ground in clouds and the sweat made it stick to his face. So when the harrow stuck he jerked back on the lines but the big bay horse kicked the whiffletree. Pow—he kicked and lost a tug from it, Pa said."

Jerome sat across from Clem near one end of the table where Aunt Helga's spilled coffee grounds saturated the linen tablecloth. "It seems natural enough," he said. "That the horse should gawk and snuff around like that seems natural for a dream. What did he say it meant? Does he know?"

Uncle Jacob bristled. He shook his head impatiently and waved him off with a hand flung in the air. "Nuhhh, Jerome, nuhhh!" he said. "The Clement the story tells. The story we will first to hear."

Clem pursed his lips and continued, "Well, Pa said then the big horse kicked again, quick as forked lightning he was, and reared and pulled the harrow and the other horse both, with him dragging along behind through tumbleweed patches and rock patches, all the while galloping, galloping in a big circle toward the old river ferry where the pastor built his church—" his hand described an arc and he kept his eyes bent on Uncle Jacob who leaned forward, open-mouthed, and said, "Yahhh—the story, yahh."

"Well, I don't know as there's much more to tell,"
said Clem, tilting back in his chair and giving his head a perplexed scratch. "Pa said he seen where the wall was writ on and turned loose all holts in a thicket of willows sprouting on the gravel bar. And when the dust had cleared and he had collected enough gumption to get up and see if he had any broken bones the horses was gone. Plumb disappeared. He said he thought he saw the wood harrow sailin' against the red glare of the evening sun. It floated on the water and rocked and sailed out of sight around the bend near Muskagmanaga Rock. He said it just floated out of sight agin the glare of the red-and-orange sunset."

Uncle Jacob kept his moody eyes on Clem while the big clock ticked and ticked in the adjoining parlor and soon after bonged out eleven o'clock in measured beats. Then, still twisting at his shaggy brown mustache, brow furrowed and eyes cast down, he took the key down from a nail and wound the clock for the night. Malhur knelt by the open door of the oven to turn his socks, and Lum who rocked his thick barrel-chest back and forth in his chair crooned a soft lullaby to himself. Aunt Helga rose to pump air in the lamp. The kitchen felt chilly. Ruben took a kerosene lamp from a hook in the leanto and lit it. Clem and his brothers followed him upstairs to bed down for the night. Aunt Helga put another stick of wood in the stove and poured hot reservoir water into her tin dishpan. Still
Uncle Jacob said nothing. By and by Jerome felt Benjamin's elbow prod his ribs. Outside the north parlor window, where Uncle Jacob leaned in the dark against the casement, the wind spattered big wet drops. Jerome ascended the steep staircase to bed.

By morning, low spots in the yard had filled and overflowed. Seeping blowdirt had become mud and mud turned to slush. Tiny veins that laced and crisscrossed the flat spots had opened to form rivulets, and some tumbled into eroded ravines and some washed new ditches that deepened and widened to gullies. Washing out matted drifts of blowdirt and tumbleweeds, the roiling gullies linked to swollen Upper Muskie Creek a hundred yards below the barn.

Benjamin took the county road for Emil Kuhn's farm early. Jerome saw the scraper handle hanging over the tailgate of his wagon as he turned the cows loose to graze. It had disappeared in the steady rainfall the next instant. Uncle Jacob led Tophet and Jeremiah, his favored matched team, from the barn and, bridling them and snapping their lines together, he marched them over the wagon tongue. Jerome and Ruben dragged a steel drawbar into the wagon. The clevis holes evenly spaced at each end could average out the pull of a strong team against a weak one by shifting the pin one way or the other. Jerome fetched a flour sack of groceries from the kitchen, hugging it under his coat
until he had tucked it into the dry canvas bedroll in the wagon. By then Uncle Jacob had tied his heavy-boned stallion behind the wagon.

Saul stood nearly nine handspans at the shoulder and wore the oily new harness Uncle Jacob had bought for him when he had taken delivery from a farmer plumb over in the next county during the first week the rains started. He looked sleek from his daily feed of ground oats. Even Clem gaped when he swung his wagon close and compared him to his team, Hobab and Jethro. Jerome sat at the rear of the wagon on a bedroll to lead Saul. Clem followed along, driving the Draggerschoon wagon.

Jerome knew that somewhere ahead in the rain, towering four hundred and fifty feet in the air, lay the Muskagganaga Rock. As broad at its downstream base as it was tall, the promontory drew to a slender peak like a steeple. Its base roughly resembled a giant fist with a crooked thumb bent upstream; it had diverted the river twelve years before during a floodstage that Benjamin still recollected. It had channelled the river directly into the heart of the hundred-foot bluffs that angled west and circled back to form a twenty-mile horseshoe that meandered just above Newberg's Crossing eight miles below the Muskagganaga Rock as the crow flew.

Under the lees of the Rock the First Church of All-
Souls had been erected by Pastor Nolafson on the deck of his river ferry after it had been swept from its winter drydock and run aground on a sandbar during that same floodstage. The River Sprite had been left stranded by the shifted channel.

The bridge that crossed the Upper Muskie below the east sandbanks had washed out during the night. All that Jerome saw was the foundation pier of rocks buttressed by heavy planks. The Upper Muskie had left its banks. It covered the flat to a depth just under the tops of the three-foot buckbrush. The buckbrush kept a steady pull at the onward swirling waters. "Yahhh," said Uncle Jacob and swung into the first ravine to get back on the edge of hills that moved parallel to the Upper Muskie valley. Long stretches of sod provided easy wheeling in some places and in others outcroppings of gravel and rocks gave solid footing to the horses. They crept along on sod swales, lumbered over scarp outcroppings, trundled past rocky ridges, and slipped and churned through tail ends of blowdirt drifts. They stopped to blow the steaming horses every half-mile or so.

Within the living memory of Ruben, Jerome knew the ferry had hauled freight from the railhead four miles upstream at the Dan Wharf down past the Rock to Newberg's Crossing. One time during the good years Uncle Jacob,
Aunt Helga, and Ruben and Benjamin had stood with bowed heads at church services held by Pastor Nolafson on the deck of the rocking ferry, when a long line of cars trailed dust down the river road and parked in a semi-circle at the Crossing tie-up. Men and women had laughed gaily at first and then joined the worshippers on the ferry. Afterward the excursion people had made a fire and cooked catfish that the farm boys had showed them how to catch, and Ole Nolafson had ferried them three and four at a time to the west roadway until twenty-six high-wheeled Buicks, sprightly Model-Ts, and heavy Dodges had been deposited on the muddy shore. Once, too, when he was a boy, Ruben had helped Uncle Jacob load bawling cattle aboard the sixty-by one-hundred-foot deck. Some of the neighboring farmers had stayed with the other cows until the ferry got back. But Ruben had ridden upstream to Twelve Mile Landing on the west shore with Uncle Jacob and Lem and Clem Dragger-schoon. They had turned the cows loose for the summer on government graze. Then they had floated downstream again for another load, with the paddles turning lazily to hold the ferry in the current.

Soon after the slithering wagon had skirted a slick ravine, Clem's wagon bogged down. Uncle Jacob pulled up in the drizzly afternoon, and he and Ruben pulled the pin from the doubletrees, unhooked the team from the wagon, and
turned the pin tight again after passing it through a hole in the steel drawbar. Ruben held the team while Uncle Jacob rigged a three-horse hitch to put Saul alone on the right end of the drawbar. He balanced Saul evenly against the team. Jerome dragged stiff three-inch rope from coiled loops on the wagon bed and rolled the kinks out of it. He ran a loose end through the tongue holdback of Clem's wagon and tied it with a bowline to the clevis pin that held the doublétrees. The mired wagon had dropped a rear wheel in the washout when it had careened sideways, almost overturning when it had hit the bottom. Then, with the stallion hooked in, Uncle Jacob took up slack and Ruben signalled ready. Jerome stood on the brow of the hill to watch both Uncle Jacob on a gravelly ridge that branched off on a downhill pull and Clem, lines in hand, in the ravine below. Jerome motioned Uncle Jacob's hitch to one side so the rope would run easily on slick gumbo. At length Malhur and Lum had the heads of Hobab and Jethro tied loosely to the three-inch rope and Clem wrapped the driving lines around the brake handle and stood clear. When he raised his hand as a sign, Jerome crisscrossed his arms above his head and shouted, "Ready!" at Uncle Jacob. The big stallion put shoulders to collar and balanced off the drawbar against Tophet and Jeremiah at the other end. The heavy rope tightened, wringing a wet stream along its length where it swayed off
the muddy ground. The bogged wagon rocked once. Uncle Jacob's three-horse hitch grunted and hit it again; the wagon lurched out of the washout, bumping Clem's scrabbling team in the rump, and rattled straight to the top. At the summit Clem turned his unwrapped lines over to Malhur, as Lum undid the tow rope, and helped Jerome coil the rope back toward the wagon. Turning his huge head to see behind, Saul yawned and stood as gentle as a pony.

Ole Nolafson had built the River Sprite from the wreck of a steamboat that had hit a snag and blown her boilers enroute to Fort Keel with whiskey for the Indians and a consignment of rifles for the pony soldiers, Uncle Jacob had said. He had taken the wrecked hull apart plank-by-plank and beam-by-beam and lashed them together into rafts to float them downstream to the muddy inlet a mile west of Dan. From the superstructure he had built a shack to live in, and he had dragged the waterlogged beams and planks ashore with a team borrowed from Uncle Jacob. On the gravel bank that sloped at a slight angle from the edge of the lapping water, he had fashioned a skidway to support the hull of his ferry until he had had it finished. He had sawed his timbers straight with a one-man crosscut and planed and chiseled the bevels true for his framework and augured holes to bolt them in place. The hull he had shaped and divided into watertight compartments like the passenger
packets that steamed in the fiords of his native land. The dried planks he had molded to fit snug and dipped oakum into hot tar for tight seams that would not crack and leak. Atop the trim hull extending five feet over each side and twelve and eight feet, respectively, fore and aft, he had laid his plank cargo deck with wide loading ramps along the two sides. He had installed a donkey gas engine geared both to the chain-driven paddlewheel and to the cable drums that were used to raise and lower a hinged ramp on each side of the deck. Above the donkey engine housed on the stern he had erected a slender pilothouse from which he could knock his shallow-draft ferry down into reverse if it scraped on a sandbar or spin the wheel to avoid snags or raise the throttle a few notches to buck a stiff current.

The wagons bumped and slipped over the last hill, and Jerome dropped from the tailgate to warm his chilled body. He trotted alongside the wagon as it wound down past wide patches of dense buckbrush and isolated thickets of bullberry bushes into the broad river valley. His wet shoes flung up globs of clayey mud. He soon tired and clambered back over the tailgate to hear the roar and wash of the river above the roar and wash of his aroused blood. Uncle Jacob just kept following the Upper Muskie spillway where it sluiced from the hills and undulated in wide sheets across the upper bench before flowing evenly in shallow concourses.
of many swollen tributaries on the lower alluvial bench. The horses, plodding knee deep in flooded hollows and emerging again on hummocks, came at dark to a cottonwood grove raised above the surrounding lowlands on an island. Somewhere on the far side Ole Nolafson's shack still perched on the skids that brought it down from the Dan Wharf, and beyond that lay the shallow pools of the old channel and the ferry sitting flat on a half-mile sandbar under the lees of the Rock. The river boomed in Jerome's ears.

From that same spring floodtide that had swept the ferry loose from her moorings and grounded her on a sandbar Aunt Helga had counted the days until Pastor Nolafson should forsake the open deck of the ferry for his summer church services and hold them in the regular town church with a proper altar and cross to uphold the visible form of her faith. But he had never done it, at least not the way she had wanted. For, even though he had worked feverishly gathering men and horses from the Upper Muskie to drag the ferry free, Ole Nolafson had been too late. The water had abated. By ten-thirty that night the boiling river had dropped five feet on the stakes he had driven on the east shoreline opposite the ferry and by six-thirty next morning Ole Nolafson had known why. For the loose earth that had encased the base of the Rock had crumbled under pressure from the diverted cascade, slid into the foaming waters,
and opened the way for a new west-channel. At that time he had seemed instinctively to know that his carefree and irresponsible days of floating on the soothing river in his gently-rocking ferry were done. For on that same day he had taken what men, horses, and curiosity-seekers he had gathered to the Dan Wharf, unbolted the heavy timbers from his skid-way that each successive winter and spring until then had held the ferry inviolate from crunching ice and swirling currents, and had used men, horses, and curiosity-seekers and timbers to skid his shack and the dismantled Dan church through three miles of mud and brush to the island of cottonwood trees. In a direction parallel to the upstream-projecting thumb but a hundred yards astern of the Rock's downstream base, the ferry had settled firmly in soft sand. From that same floodtide day Ole Nolafson had settled to the full-time work of the Lord. At first he had erected the wall- and roof-supports on the ferry's deck and, taking whatever lumber he needed from the dismantled church, closed in the four sides. A roof he had built with two glassed-in skylights on hinges, one on each slope of the roof, that raised and lowered easily by topes and pulleys fastened near the ramps and that let warm sunlight flow upon the carver alter on sunny days and fresh breezes waft down the center aisle of the converted windowless church on warm ones. A small apartment
he had partitioned off forward of the broken paddlewheel where he sometimes lived for weeks at a time and where he often studied his books and wrote his long sermons. For, as Aunt Helga had once told Jerome shortly after he had arrived at Uncle Jacob's farm on that hot summer day, Ole Nolafson had seen in the beached ferry God's own hand and had acquiesced to the judgment thus handed down to him. Sometimes in passing, farmers and townsmen were to see him row his small boat up the stillwater in the old channel and push it up a shallow spillway to the mainstream and, reading and drifting for miles until he had looped the loop of the horseshoe curve, row tirelessly back up the stillwater to his shack.

They rolled forward in darkness now. Jerome, who was plodding ahead in stiff mud to sing out whenever the narrow trail had been cut by a new channel, thought he saw a light blink through the trees, but it vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. Uncle Jacob let his team find their own way on the dark trail that circled grandfather cottonwoods and forded swift streams. At one such stream Uncle Jacob climbed on Saul, trailing a singletree and towrope, and forged across. He never even had time to work the slack out of the towrope. The team behind snorted and tried to turn. Ruben sawed at their mouths and swung the line ends at their rumps. Uncle Jacob broke Saul into a
jog in the shallow water and, pulling the wagon straight, forced the team to breast the rushing current. Then Jerome tied one rope end to the rear axle of Ruben's wagon, and Uncle Jacob recrossed the stream to hitch the other end to Clem's wagon. Ruben's team dragged Clem's across before they even had a chance to slow down at the ford.

Then they were at the shack and Ole Nolafson, a thin wiry man, stood at the black stove. Yellow lamplight shone on his high cheeks and washed-out blue eyes and furrowed brow. The cast-iron kitchen range served as both cookstove and heating stove for the small shack. Jerome leaned against a wall near the table. His head bumped the ceiling unless he stooped slightly. Uncle Jacob and Clem occupied the two chairs. A bunk and rough bookshelves took up the shack's far end. Old Nolafson had built up the fire.

"Been uncommon foggy here, too," Old Nolafson was saying. "Never saw the ferry myself for going on two days now." He wore black twill trousers and galluses over his underwear. He sliced unpeeled potatoes in a sizzling skillet. Blue veins stood out from his gnarled hands. "Only mark you this, Jacob--the old channel was only unto the six-foot peg at evening. It held steady at nigh eight-foot before the channel changed. Mark you, and that was after the ferry had grounded."

Clem sat backwards, chair tilted and chin on
backrest, near the stove. Steam rose from his wet overalls and shirt. "Pa thought we maybe could drag it onto one of the pools nearer the shack if it floated free," he volunteered. "He was fearful that it might float away on you."

Ole Nolafson turned the hissing potatoes with a fork. Coffee bubbled in a tin pot. He pushed it farther back on the stove. "Now your pa had ought to know better than that," he said. "Your pa held the steel axle with his big brown hands while I swung on it with a maul. He steadied the axle while I drove it deep into a crack in the Rock itself. You yourself were there to help dig the hole above the shack. And your pa brought over a section of railroad track from Dan in his wagon and dropped it in the hole. You helped dig the hole for the deadman. Yes, and you were both there when we tied her off with two cables. One anchored to the Rock and the other to the deadman. She's bridled to port and starboard like an unbroke colt to the breaking stall. How can she break free? She's bridled!"

"Yahhh, Ole," said Uncle Jacob from his chair between the door and table. "Ja, the Lem long time on the river ist. Many years before him his father yet was here. And his father before him..."

"Ahhh," said Ruben opening the door. "The pastor's fireside has the warmth of welcome." Lum and Malhur followed him in and Lum pushed the door closed. Ruben and
Malhur stacked their armloads of wood behind the stove. One small window fronted the river near the head of Ole Nolafson's bunk. Jerome leaned on the sill to catch the reflection of the table and stove in the glass.

"That may be so, Jacob," said Ole Nolafson, his washed-out eyes lit up in his whiskery face, "but I have lived twenty years on the river. Twenty summers I put out from shore in the River Sprite and twenty winters slept in my shack near it. Twenty years I hauled wagons, cattle, freight, cars, and people anywhere up and down the river where I could bring the ferry ashore. I navigated every depth and shoal forty miles or more either way. Not a crossing or inlet anywhere nigh that I knew not of. I know this river as though I had created it. Twenty years I navigated it and twelve more rowed out on it, tramped its banks, slept with the water lapping at my ear—I was that close—and awoke to the wash of the early morning waves." He moved to set out tin plates from an orange crate nailed to the wall. "And mark you this, Jacob—" he waved a plate at him like it was God's word, "I studied the river—worked it faithfully all that time. I know this river as though I had created it."

The shack was getting hot. Uncle Jacob motioned Ruben to the chair and opened the door. He stood with his back to the flickering kerosene lamp, hands clasped behind
him. The roar of the river came in the shack.

"Ist so--ja!" Uncle Jacob began. "No other mans the river better knows than Ole Nolafson. No other mans the sandbars and snags so best knows."

"Pastor Nolafson knows the river best," Ruben said.

"None other mans to the Rock his boat ties," Uncle Jacob continued unabated. "Ja, twenty years the Ole Nolafson on the river lives. And twelve years--ja--twelve years more at it lives."

"Do you dispute it, Jacob?" said Ole Nolafson. "Do you dispute my word? You were there when I landed at Dan after shipping overland by train. You know me. Why, you were there."

"The poor mans below nothing knows," said Uncle Jacob wagging his head side to side. He faced around, "Nuhhh, poor mans below--him nothing knows."

Ole Nolafson turned his fork over to Ruben who put potatoes and slices of sidepork on each plate. Ole Nolafson pushed back to the rear of the shack. His eyes never left Uncle Jacob's face. "You saw me tear the steamboat wreck apart. Helped me even sometimes when I began to lay my hull west of Dan. Loaned me horses and wagons to salvage heavy gear from the wreck. Once worked two days with me to fashion levers and rods on your forge for my ramp winches. You know me. I have lived in peace with you and
"Ja," Uncle Jacob's weather-toughened face and neck were red above the top of his tight-buttoned shirt collar. His dark hair lay flat on his head, his angular jaw thrust out. "No other mans I so much know yet like Ole Nolafson. No other I so best like still."

"All right, Jacob," Ole Nolafson said quietly, swaying back and forth on his toes and heels. He stretched his arms out, as though he were pleading a case with the bishop. "So, let's clear the channel here. So, big spaces for big ideas." He formed a boat prow with elbows spread wide and fingertips touching and pushed back an armspread of air on each side and quickly formed a new prow to do it again. "Dredge up what you really have on your mind! Now can you hook onto it and heave it into sight?"

"Twenty years the Ole Nolafson on the river lives. Twelve years the Ole Nolafson at the river lives. But fifty years at--" Uncle Jacob fought hard for the words, "on--from--to--in----the river in Lem lives." He dropped his voice and slowed the words to a simple talk now that he had the right ones, "Fifty years the river in the Lem lives. Fifty years the river in the Lem lives."

"Now, Jacob," the other reasoned, "that old story is like bilge water sluicing around below decks. Cast off."
Cast off, I say, and set a new course. It's a myth, I tell you. It's like bilge water that leaks in somehow no matter how secure the hull, how tight the caulking."

"Bilge vater, vas?" pointing his finger now at Jerome who kept his face averted to see into the mirrored window glass. "Bilge vater when the tall one to my house comed? Ja, the dream said it not so vas? One son more by me vas? Said the dream not so as I say? Said it not so?"

"All right, Jacob. All right," said Ole Nolafson. He scratched his short-cut topknot. "Tomorrow we will measure the water and pull out to the ferry in a boat if the rain lets up. Tomorrow early we will look. We will see what is to be seen. We will see." He motioned Uncle Jacob to supper and poured hot coffee in his mug.

At almost noon the next day the beating rain storms eased off. Thick mist lingered over the river. No longer a stillwater, the old channel lapped at its alluvial bank and flowed smoothly. Ole Nolafson had thrown a chunk of driftwood into the old channel and, jotting notations in the log he carried, paced it downstream. Jerome, Clem, and Ruben squatted on a hummock in loose sand at the edge of a dense grove of tender willows. Uncle Jacob, flat-brimmed hat still punched out, stood in soft mud near a small eddy where several stakes had been driven on a submerged sandbar. A rowboat rocked nearby. Ole Nolafson trudged into sight and
shucked his shoes in the willows. He rolled his trouser-legs up, wading as far as his knobby white knees on the submerged sandbar to read his marked stakes. The dim outlines of the ferry became visible across the old channel. Ole Nolafson made notes in his log.

"Only six-and-a-half feet by the deep, Jacob," he said, raising his voice past the roar of the river, "and it hit nigh unto eight feet the day the ferry grounded a twelve-year back. Too low to float her off and too tight in sand to drag her off."

"Ja--" said Uncle Jacob, "see, see! It yet shows more!" He pointed at the ferry.

The Rock began to bulk through wisps of gray mist. The ferry emerged drunkenly and disappeared in another gray vapor. The wisp wreathed by; and Rock and ferry appeared together as if from nowhere. The ferry seemed to buckle on end like a giant shingle raised in a windstorm. The bow seemed pointed toward the sky. Then a shroud of mist closed in. When they reappeared the ferry lay keel-down again, even. Ole Nolafson shouted and flailed his arms at trailing vapors. Then he calmed down and scrabbled up the greasy bank near Ruben and waited for a break.

When it came he said, "By Yeesus!" involuntarily and then, "No! By Yeesus, no!" in a belligerent shout.

The booming waters washed and dug at the sandbar that
had extended high above the waterline for a half-mile and that had grounded the ferry at a southeast tangent from the Rock. At the Rock's upstream thumb the dashing current split. The west channel still flowed, but a narrow chute had opened near the east facing of the Rock and ran broadside under the skewed ferry to hoist its bow and right side. Now the ferry heeled at the stern, and the number two cable fastened to a deadman on the upstream shore rose dripping from the water and tightened to hold the bow and right side from keeling over while the current held it aloft. Then after five or six minutes the bow dropped again and the cable sank. Number one cable secured to the Rock itself anchored the ferry steady only until another underwash caught at its bow and bottom again.

Jerome felt the figure rush by even as Uncle Jacob hollered, "Ruben! Benjamin! Jerome!" Jerome dived and skidded down the muddy slope as Ole Nolafson, tearing loose from Uncle Jacob at the water's edge, lunged toward his ferry and into deep water. Then Ruben got an arm around his neck, and Jerome and Clem each took an arm and leg. Up to their waists they floundered through muddy water and to the sandbar carried him. They dunked him once accidentally and then sat him in ice-cold water up to his chin and held him. His leather cap floated away. His face muscles relaxed after a few moments and he shivered. His jutting
chin trembled and his big ears seemed to droop. He looked like he wanted to cry. Just his bristly topknot and whiskery chin poked above the muddy water.

"Jac'b, awrigh', Jac'b." Ole Nolafson presently grunted through clenched teeth to Uncle Jacob on the shore. "Rube'! J'rob! Cleb! Awrigh'!" He shook himself. Jerome let go his other arm, and he struggled ashore. The mist had cleared past the bluffs now, and Jerome could see the ferry raise again. His feet and hips felt death-cold.

"Bull 'er to stillw'r!" said Ole Nolafson, turned sideways to see his ferry again. He humped in the breeze and water dribbled off his coat skirts and sleeves. His white feet were bare. He looked like a muskrat come ashore to get willow ends for his burrow. His teeth chattered when he unclamped them. He nodded toward the path through the willows. "God do vigure oud to bull 'er to stillw'r!"

Lum had dinner set back at the shack, and they wrung out their overalls and underwear outside and hung them on wires stretched along the walls behind the stove. Ole Nolafson dragged a duffel bag from under his bunk and passed dry socks, trousers, and sweaters around. They ate in silence, then stacked their plates on the stove reservoir.

Ole Nolafson tore a leaf from his log and started to sketch with a lead pencil. "It looks like the channel has
split here," indicating the thumb, "and runs a narrow swift-water channel east of the Rock." He drew wavy lines. "While the main flow still splits off to the west of it. That means the stillwater will remain mostly stable until that whole channel switches east again." He looked from one to the other in the dim shack, eyes fresh again. "So," he continued, "if it remains stable long enough to drag her off, we have more than six-foot of water to float her in. She drew less than three-foot at the stern empty when I operated her. So you can figure. Even with the extra weight of the church built on, we can move her easy if the hull compartments are still tight—if she has no leaks—we can float her in stillwater and anchor her afloat near the shack." He hit the table with a fist and rose to his feet. "Just how you fixin' to ease her off the cable hitched to the Rock?" Clem asked bluntly. "Ain't no horse in the country—no, nor no team nor two or three teams neither that can snap that cable. And she might not clear the east sandbar even if she was loose an' sassy."

Uncle Jacob picked up the pencil, "Ja, below the deadmans the teams hitch. Ist at here to current pull forward und here to shore pull again."

"Yes," said Ole Nolafson, sitting down, "we can do that, Clem. We can pull her directly into the current and let it warp her straight fore and aft. Then we can drag
her bow-first over the edge of the sandbar. Jacob is right-let me see the pencil-if we board her and slack off the port cable here, we can straighten her into the current and pull her through about here..." He sketched more lines to illustrate probable positions of the ferry. Jerome followed along as they talked and could see that they had figured it out to make a kind of sense, even if Ole Nolaf-son's small notations on "tangent to angle x" and "velocity of current projected at point B" did not. "Now if you and Clem will hook in here, Jacob," he continued, "with a five-horse hitch to a running block-you can get traction for the horses at this sandy ridge-it's loose but sandy. Hook in and as soon as we unbolt the cable clamps and let the cable surge on the bit, Malhur signals from the high side. Jerome unbolts and stands by to help Ruben and me surge if need be, so she don't get away on us."

"Ja, then the Clem first easy pulls mit der horses," said Uncle Jacob, showing how he wanted to hitch-up in two separate stages to get a running start after Clem had pulled the slack out of the tow cable. "Steady he pulls. Ja, then comes der Saul und Tophet und Jeremiah." His eyes lit up as he gazed at the black squiggles on the yellow leaf. "Yahhh, yahhh. Here der Saul und me ist!" he said holding a finger on one of the squiggles. Jerome could see his point though. He wanted to space the horses for better
footing on loose sand and for easier handling in a tandem hitch.

"So if a horse slips and goes down, the other hitch still pulls, is that, Jacob?" Old Nolafson eyed him with puckered mouth and jutting jaw and then plunged on again.

"As soon as young Malhur signals from the bow, you drag the ferry directly into the current. Front it and keep pulling on her until the bow and keel slides across the bar. If you slack off in that current for any reason, we lost her. We got to keep her going." He bumped the edge of his hand in rapid succession on the table as he peered first at Uncle Jacob and then Clem. "We got to keep her going once we start with her. There can be no stopping then. Once we get out of the white water and across that bar we can work her. We can shift our cables and let the easier current in the stillwater hold her braced against the shifted bridle. We got to keep going while crossing the sandbar though. There can be no turning back." He reached a knit sweater from his bunk and shrugged it over his shoulders.

From under his shack Ole Nolafson dragged a pair of tackles rigged with a slender long cable. They split into pairs to carry the gear to the deadman a hundred yards upstream. The singletrees bumped at the pasterns of the teams driven by Uncle Jacob and Clem.

Ole Nolafson worked the kinks from the tackle cable,
shackled the single block to a giant cottonwood nearby, and lashed the doubleblock to the gunwale at the boat's bow. The bitter-end he clamped to a center-bight in Uncle Jacob's towrope stretched from the lapping water up to the sandy clearing.

Then, with Jerome and Ruben each pulling an oar, young Malhur at the tiller, and Ole Nolafson seated by the double-tackle lashed to the bow to keep the cable running free, they struck out from the muddy shore. Big Lum made small whiny noises and kept his eyes fixed on Malhur from the bank. He trotted back and forth like a captured she-bear with her cubs taken away.

They rowed at an angle downstream, parallel to the ferry's number two bridle-cable, the towed tackle-cables dangling overboard on the upstream side to keep the boat running at an oblique angle as they dragged the rigging farther and farther from shore. The midstream current bucked hard now and they pulled together, with Ruben on the upstream side, setting his powerful shoulders into the deeper strokes. About ninety yards out when the tackle-drag seemed to set them back by as much as they gained each stroke, Ole Nolafson ordered the boat squared off, bow into the current, and held steady. The river boomed. Whirlpools sucked along the sides. The trunk of a tree with mangled and twisted limbs sticking from the roily water rolled over and over and
floated on by. Soon the ferry's bow began to rise and, in a sudden flurry of brown water, up shot number two cable, dead ahead.

"Now pull, men! Now pull!" shouted Ole Nolafson above the bellow of the river. Jerome and Ruben put him right underneath the dripping cable that swayed overhead, and he threw a short bow line over it and snubbed it with two turns around the forward kingpost. "Slack off! Slack off easy!" The boat slid back a few feet, pulling the captured cable level with the bow. "Bear a hand on the bow line!" Ruben surrendered his oar to Jerome to help Ole Nolafson pull the boat, bow raising slightly and stern down by six inches, until it slid just under the cable. "Hold her steady on the bow line!" Ruben took another turn and braced a knee against the thwart. "Stand ready to surge if number two cable drops!" Ruben only nodded and kept his eyes on the reared ferry under the lees of the Rock. "Now the messenger! Bear a hand on the messenger line!" Jerome shipped oars, scrambling forward and working a knee under the forward bulwark, and held a double handspan of the two-inch messenger line tight against the bobbing cable. Both ends dangled loose. Ole Nolafson wrapped a strong Manila rope around both messenger and cable, binding them tightly together and tying his selvage off every twelve inches or so. They worked on up the cable,
with Jerome slanting the rough-textured messenger against the close splice of the cable. Ole Nolafson tied off his rope at one end, "Stand by! Stand by the oars!" Jerome dodged back to his thwart. Ole Nolafson seized the bow line from Ruben, who again took the upstream oar. "Pull! Pull together, men!" The straining cable began to rise as soon as the bow line was surged and the cable jumped loose. "Fall back! Ease her off!" Jerome and Ruben raised oars. The boat drifted. "Hold her steady now! Steady!" They lined-up the boat with Lum, who kept a hand shaded over his eyes, watching every move, as motionless as the giant cottonwood behind him. Soon the ferry's bow dropped and the cable slapped into the river.

Jerome and Ruben rowed evenly another three minutes, pacing the current. "Bring her around!" Malhur swung the tiller. "Pull now! Pull!" The boat faltered, yawed, then Ruben bent into a deep stroke, and it swung obliquely upstream into the current. They rowed hard to drag the tackle-cable out again and squared on orders. Number two cable show spray in the air ahead. The messenger's loose end whipped. "Pull into it again, men! Pull!" The bow swung under the straining cable, and Ole Nolafson quickly tied the loose messenger-end fast to the tackle ring and cut the lashings that secured the tackle to the gunwale. The tackle splashed into the water. Lightened of its load,
the boat slid away, and they fell back and rowed ashore.

When the ferry rose again a quarter of a mile across the old channel, Clem gee-rapped his team into their collars and drew in the slack. Then Uncle Jacob flicked the reins across the rumps of his three-horse hitch and together they could pull the ferry's bow down. They backed off twice and hit the tandem towline simultaneously with a hard jerk and swift scramble of hooves to test the messenger's grip. The messenger held. The horses stamped and snorted, quivering, excited.

Low-flying clouds of fleece spanked along on a westerly wind. Bleak sunbeams diffused through the clouds like a hot July sun seen through four feet of clear water. A sudden-appearing shadow cast by Uncle Jacob drew a jump of surprise and a snort from one of Clem's horses. Scattered cottonwoods and groves of birch cast somber shades that quickly melted whenever the sky darkened a moment later. Big Lum hugged his body with his elbows and rocked his torso when Malhur climbed back into the boat. His small eyes rolled in his head, and he wrung small animal-like whimpers from his thick lips like a she-bear caught in a steel trap while licensed trappers carry her cub off in a crate.

Ole Nolafson took the tiller, and they rowed athwart the moody current, bow aimed upstream from the stranded
ferry to an imaginary point on the east face of the Rock. Lum crouched alone near the edge of brownish water. His feet scuffed and danced a little in the soft mud. His eyes pleaded to go with Malhur. The water dimpled for an instant, in smooth vortices that seemed significant, as though just beneath that dark surface something alive lurked to snatch boatmen quickly out of sight if they drifted into light daydreams. Soiled gouts of thick foam began to appear. They neared the newly opened chute that bucked and tore at the ferry’s keel. The Rock bulked massively over Jerome’s left shoulder. Number two cable flung water as cold as death on him as it shot it up in swift water. Knuk--knuk--knuk--knuk went the oarlocks.

The strident voice of Olé Nolafson sounds strangely hollow against the turbulent dash of the river as though it floats up from the depth of a deep cistern during a windstorm. "Frothy water ahead! Pull hard at the chute, men! We got to land on the stern! And Malhur, boy--jump aboard with the bow line as soon as she touches! Take wraps on the starboard bit! Hold fast! Your job to secure!" The boat slithers and he shifts the tiller and cups his mouth, "Secure the bow line! Secure fast! Before she shoots by!"

Then the boat makes a sudden dip, and they dive into the chute. The boat agitates and twists around and once runs crosswise and almost turns stern-to before Ole Nolafson
shouts, "Row! Row!" and they bend their backs to the oars. They slip down an undulate ripple like soapy water sliding over the brass corrugations of an upended washboard and pass a column of white water that buckets straight in the air. Then the boat bumps and scrapes against the projecting deck planks of the ferry, and Malhur leaps to the gangway deck in a flash and they shoot by him and now he scampers beside them again with the bow line still clutched in his fist. The boat warps, spins, and ducks, nearly capsizing, and then jerks straight by the taut bow line that Malhur had somehow managed to secure. So the boat rises into the force of the dashing current with a new buoyancy like a kite swiftly tied to a heavy log in a gale. "Heave 'er in! Heave to!" They seize the wet bow line and brace against the gunwales. The boat lunges, heaving forward slowly, slithering, bobs and then slips into an eddy sucking by the ferry's stern. They figure-eight the bow line to a cleat and scramble aboard.

Ole Nolafson cups both hands to shout through, "Move forward! Get forward and tie on!" Jerome gingerfoots across the slippery deck, grabs at the handrail bolted to the church bulkhead, and claws his way forward. The gangway is three-foot wide and has no guardrail. The river slaps at the underside of the deck planks as it thunders by. Malhur has tied his safety rope to a heavy timber on the forward
boat skid. He faces aft, his woolen cap pulled over his ears. He tries to appear nonchalant, but the thundering river breaks over the bow and wets him down. He looks like a beaver forced from his protective dam and collected dripping and quivering into the fine-mesh net of the warden. His face is ashy-grey.

Ole Nolafson reaches the boat skid and holds one arm up. The horses across the distance look small like so many brown muskrats dragging one slithery tail; they move simultaneously away from the black mudbank. Number two cable leaps from the water and vibrates in midair. Rough planks grind against rough sand somewhere aft. The brown muskrats stop toward the swaying trees when the tail pulls taut.

The Rock looms sheer and impassive through cold spray. Ole Nolafson has his gunny sack untied from his waist and hands Jerome a monkey wrench. Ruben snakes unused lengths of number one cable out on deck and starts to put a turn on the port bit. The cable springs back, so he holds it down with one foot. Tying his safety rope to a cleat near the port bit, Jerome adjusts the thumbscrew on the monkey wrench, snugs it, and applies leverage to unscrew the nut on the first U-clamp that loops number one cable around the anchor bit. The monkey wrench slips. He tries again, carefully this time, but the corners strip
The rusted nut is frozen. Ole Nolafson pulls a pipe wrench and ballpeen hammer from the gunny sack. He delivers measured blows on the handle of the gripping pipe wrench Jerome holds for him. The nut twists off. Ole Nolafson hammers at the U-clamp. It clatters on the deck.

The ferry bounces gently up and down now, spanking melodically, as though eager to be unloosened. The *whump*--*whump*--*whump*--*whump* seems more pervasive and inexorable than even the boom of the crowding river chute. It is as though the ferry has a hidden life of its own and feels duress at the tight bridle that restrains it under the lees of the up-rearing Rock steeple and now strains to feel the freedom offered by the timeless waters. *Whump*--*whump*--*whump*--*whump* goes the ferry.

Jerome loosens the second clamp now and tosses it across the deck. Ruben has put four turns of cable on the bit and stands, feet apart, with the sharp rusted wires of the cable loosely held in his leather-mittened hands. Jerome untightens both nuts on the last U-clamp as Ole Nolafson takes up a position in front of Ruben, standing ready to surge number one cable around the bit. Malhur still holds with clenched hands to the boat skid and waits, eyes turned to Ole Nolafson.

Jerome works fast now and unscrews both nuts. He hits at the clamp with the hammer. The clamp sticks to the
rusty cable a moment longer, then breaks free. "Now Malhur! Now!" shouts Ole Nolafson. Malhur turns his back to the Rock, face turned up and both arms upraised as a signal. He keeps the palms open in that gracefully peculiar manner he had about him. Ole Nolafson and Ruben let the cable surge. The ferry lurches to starboard and starts to move. The bow writhes and twists like a pinioned Canadian goose. The crack of snapping planks comes from astern. The ferry lunges forward and a solid sheet of white water breaks over the bow. Jerome feels his legs wash out from under him. He hauls himself erect against the bulkhead with his safety line. The boat skid seems to move crazily. A second wall of water, curled, crested, with sponges of dirty foam, cascades over the bow of the pounded ferry. He watches the boat skid begin to rise on the crest until it over-turns, rising still, rolling twice over the deck with Malhur, its tied and hapless inmate flopping under its weight, dragged along like a mudhen stricken with vertigo, and then floating gently over the side, vanishing from view.

Jerome hears himself shout above the turbulent wash of the current, "Go back, Lum! G-O B-A-C-K!" His words sound like the small voice of a slightly troubled conscience that often seems to speak from another world, an alien world somewhere far removed from that spoken to. He stands so in the dashing spray, one hand trumpeted to mouth to say no and
the other upflung in secret conspiracy to wave yes. More white water knocks him down. The ferry shudders. He gets to his hands and knees, the spray beating him low again. When he rises the third time, Lum's thrashing arms have disappeared beneath the brown soapy water. Now the ferry strikes the sandbar, cants to starboard, scraping harshly on the gritty bottom, almost stopping, poised on the verge before crossing the bar, and slides then easily into the flowing sweep of the stillwater channel.

The red sun blazed through light cloud scatterings. Frothing waters dashed and charged against sheer western bluffs that shone blood-red against the violets and reds and golds and yellows of the evening sun. Only a brief puff of dust showed where a chunk of dirt had slid into the river. Two men knelt on the wet bow of the quietly rocking ferry, heads bared to slanting rays of sun that shimmered and flashed off smooth-rolling waters. The third stood upright, hand shading his eyes, and squinted downriver against the bright sunset. In the middle distance, bobbing and dipping in the main channel, floated a black speck that sailed bravely around the bend and faded from sight. The gangly upright man raised his right hand as high as the heart, flat. He moved it in a horizontal circle making the sign of unity with the Great Spirit. It was the day the rains stopped. It was May. For years afterward the farm people on the Upper Muskie
would remember the day the rains stopped.

Violets from the sinking sun began to blend into reds, golds merged into yellows, and no hint of visible breaks existed in the many-hued sunburst. Then the colors united into a splendid glitter of irridescence that waxed into brilliant evening glow, waxing brighter and brighter, bursting like a flambeau, and then slowly fading to a distant softly-tinted splendor.

On muted dress parade came the Upper Muskie folk to their salvaged church bridled afloat on the slow-moving backwater the Sunday following the next. Light teams hooked to smooth-rolling springwagons slipped over the east hills and along the upper and lower benches to converge at the trail leading through budding cottonwoods. A few single-horse sulkies, one sporting the banker from Newberg Crossing and another a merchant from Dan, engaged in short races on the lower bench, letting out their trotting horses on the alkali bare spots and clipping past brush patches. Two automobiles chugged along the upper bench from Dan. The lead automobile, a big open-air model, got as far as the first coulee mouth and dropped its front wheels over the bank. The second dodged a clump of brush and rattled up inclines almost to the converging trail, then stopped. Blue smoke rolled from under it, and the passengers got out. Entire families came together in high-wheeled grain
wagons that bumped over rutted roads and detoured by washouts to emerge at last from one of the side coulees that led onto the upper bench. Sometimes a rider or two mounted on saddlehorses flanked the wagons. An occasional lone rider topped the east hills and drifted down to join the throng. Once a large party with four springwagons and almost a dozen riders came from the direction of Dan, stopping to pick up stranded motorists along the way. A woman swung up behind one rider and the horse bogged his head, dumping them and galloping off.

Arousing their families in the dewy predawn, Uncle Jacob and Emil Kuhn had reined in before Pastor Nolafson's shack just as the red sun rolled up the hilltops. The men had winched the River Sprite ashore and dropped the starboard ramp in gentle ripples; then the women had advanced with brooms and dustcloths. Uncle Jacob and Jerome had scooped fresno-loads of dry sand to cover the mudholes and filled and smoothed a path to the ramp while Emil Kuhn and Benjamin nailed planks to trees for hitchracks and dragged downtimber from the large clearing. Ruben had helped Pastor Nolafson raise the skylights and secure the ferry. The men changed clothes in the shack as the first rigs appeared from the deep-shaded cottonwoods.

A light dust haze hung above the clearing. Iron-tired wagons crunched small rocks to powder and churned dry
siltbeds. Fast springwagons and sulkies rolled through soft sand, lifting a slow purr of sand over the spokes that poured back in a continuous stream. Trailing plumes of dust over the benches and winding past underbrush and trees came they on muted dress parade, the men dressed in dark suits and suitcoats-and-clean-overalls and joshing and calling out greetings as the rigs converged on the River Sprite. Bonneted womenfolk climbed from the rigs. A few wore black. Some wore plain brown, others dark blue, and a few others greens and yellows and oranges. Bright ribbons appeared here and there. The men unhooked, tying their horses to the hitching rails and to wagon wheels. Youngsters romped with glee in the warm sunlight. Older children trooped by in groups, laughing, and some raced in circles around the rigs, shouting. Women carried lunch baskets covered with bright tablecloths and staked out favored spots under shade trees close to favored friends. They would form dinner groups after church services before the long trek homeward in the afternoon.

It was a time for festivity; it was a time for mourning. The drouth appeared at end. Spring planting was started. New hopes arose where hope had long lain dormant. Like a dim red spark slowly turned to grey crumbling ash and then suddenly fanned to open yellow flame, their joy in spontaneous release from the burden of years
of drouth flared high. It was a festive occasion.

As though by predetermined plan the Draggerschoon wagon was almost the last to arrive; rolling among the thick-barked trees they saw it; now speckled with shadow under the budding-limbed cottonwoods and now dropping from sight in a channel, with only the knok, knok--knok, knok--knok, knok of the wheels jarring against axles to remind them that it rolled forward. Lem sat rigid on the spring-seat, high cheekbones shaded by his brown felt hat, and Petra clutched at his arm and stared straight ahead. Loomis and Em, the two girls, rode a second springseat; Clem swung casually from the saddle on his bay horse. Gaiety subsided to a murmur. Women huddled young children closer. A few skulls were rapped. Older children scuffled their feet and tried to appear casual. One stringy-haired boy who had fallen in the river sat alone, wrapped in a blanket, on a black springwagon at the clearing's edge. The men worked into small clusters, some offering a "Howdy, Lem!" or simply "Lem!" in gruff tones or maybe a short nod or raised hand. In the old old sign of friendship Lem raised his hand—the left one because it was nearest the heart and because it had shed no man's blood in battle—palm out, greeting the Upper Muskie folk.

Then, singly, in small groups, and two by two, the quieted folk drifted toward the River Sprite and up the
ramp, lowering their voices, their mood shifting a second time as soon as they crossed the threshold of the opened double doors. Petticoats rustled. Children were shushed. Benches scraped. The men, lagging behind till last, now solemnly entered to sit on wooden benches beside their sons. Women and girls on one side of the aisle and men and boys on the other was the custom. The Widow Holly sat at a small organ. The peddles squeaked as she pumped. She wrung sadness from a dirge.

Pastor Nolafson, wearing a surplice, appeared at a door that opened from his small room at the stern. Carrying his Bible, he crossed in front of the men's section. He took a position behind the uncarved lectern and ran doleful eyes, a row at a time, over his congregation. The ferry rocked gently. Warm sunrays streamed through the skylight and bathed the black-velveted altar and crude wooden cross in a flood of bright light. After a few moments the wheezing organ came to a close, and Pastor Nolafson turned to the altar, arms uplifted to the cross, and began:

"Our Father! Our Father, Thee we implore to show us Thy mysterious ways that we might shape ourselves to Thy will. Thee we implore for a sign of Thy wisdom as we search our souls to find Thy hidden way.

"O Lord, why did Thou scoop young Malhur from our
midst? For what great mission did Thou call his dear brother Lum, O Father, he whom Thou had raised on a high moral order as his brother's keeper?

"Yea, O Father, young Malhur was belayed to Thy work when swept overboard from the deck of Thy ark. His work was for Thy servant, O Lord, whom Thou taught in the ways of boat navigation to better serve Thee. Why did Thou drag young Malhur under the cold brown waters, O Father? Did Thou not see Thy skinny old servant, hardened with the voice of authority, standing forth in the arrogance of pretended knowledge of Thine inscrutable ways? Why reck Thee not with this hardened old navigator, O Father?

"Yea, O Lord, young Malhur's work was Thy work. Thine was the design that set him with cold chattering teeth on a bumping wagon to bring him to the river's edge. Thine was the plan, mine the instrument, that set in motion the creaking oarlocks to the white waters. Thine was the will that secretly guided the youthful hand to belay at the rotted boat skid. Thine, Thine was the hand, O Lord, that jerked overboard that predestinated boat skid. How was it, O Father, that Thou needed young Malhur more than Thy skinny old navigator?

"And gentle Lum, O Father, he was ever gentle. He learned the calls of wild coyotes, he found the burrows of secret mink, his were the ways of a sheep dog guarding the
lamb from the wolves. He knew the screams of the soaring hawk, creeping and burrowing animals trusted him, furry and feathered creatures played with him in the meadows, his were the ways of a guardian over Thy creatures, O Lord. Why did Thou call Thy faithful guardian, O Father? Yea, O Father, how was it that Thou stood in more dire need of gentle Lum than Thy skinny old navigator?"

Pastor Nolafson arose slowly and turned from the altar, his pale cheeks suffused in sun's rays, and stood a moment with hands clasped at his bosom while the congregation knelt in silent prayer. Then, "Thy will be done," he said simply and those at prayer echoed "Amen!" and rose again to sit on their wooden benches. Speaking from the lectern now, Pastor Nolafson turned the leaf of his Bible and said:

"Dearly beloved of our Father, I invoke thee to incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will speak in metaphor, uttering the old sayings from the things we have heard and read, and giving meaning to those things set down in the Great Chronicles of Time.

"Dearly beloved, we have gathered here today beneath the opened skylights of God's ark to contend among ourselves as to the propriety of His everlasting claim upon our immortal souls.

"Leased out! For seven years have the broad plateaus
and rich bottoms lain fallow. The first year was yielded to adverse possession by grasshoppers. Jumping with noisy buzzing of wings, they came in clacking hordes and stripped the ripened wheat and laid bare the green gardens and grassy pastures. Leased out! One year more empty clouds sailed dismally above the parched soil. Sprouting winter wheat shriveled and died while clear springs in the pasture ceased flowing. Leased out! Five years more did driving winds and choking dust storms hold men fast in their cheerless houses while unsprouted seeds blew with the dust and were eaten by birds and creatures in the field, yea, while lowing cattle grew hungry in pastures and weak calves sickened and died. Is it that God had called down a deadly scourge on the land as a punishment for deeds of wickedness? What if men say that Satan held the land under lease like a cloud on a covenanted deed? What then?"

Pastor Nolafson's booming voice subsided, and Jerome watched his bony jaw incline on his chest as he let the weight of his words sink down. Sitting on the inner aisle near her mama, Lilah scraped a shoe on the floor and turned her willowy body toward Benjamin, who slouched ill at ease at the end of the bench. She mouthed the words silently, pointing back at the double doors where Lem Draggerschoon, dark eyes squinted as though puzzled, had leaned against the wall alone. H-e i-s g-o-n-e. Her red lips formed each
word with careful exaggeration, \textit{W-h-e-r-e d-i-d h-e g-o?} Lilah, big-eyed in mock concern, was making wry faces at Benjamin whose auburn brown hair, usually curly at the ears and nape of neck, was neatly trimmed and whose laughing devil-may-care temperament invited flirtation. Jerome squirmed and jabbed Benjamin in the ribs. Lilah's mama's attention was diverted by the soft grunt and she gave Lilah a mean look. Lilah faced ahead with a toss of her black hair, turning only once to stick her tongue out at Jerome.

"In answer thereof I will speak through the fables of beasts, uttering the dark sayings from the things we have heard or read, and giving voice to those things our fathers have told.

"There is a fable of beasts that concerns the bullfrog of the swift-flowing river and the scorpion of the muddy shore. Now the bullfrog was leaping along, searching for bugs near the river, when the scorpion spoke from a rock, saying, 'Why search you so hard for bugs, Mr. Frog? Know you not that many bugs lie sleepily in the sun on the far shore?'

"'Say you so,' said the frog, flicking out his long tongue.

"'Truly it is as I say,' said the scorpion, 'and if you will carry me across on your broad back, I will show you where bugs lie thick as the grains of a sandbar.'
"'Grump,' said the long-legged frog, 'that I can never do; for you would surely sting me with your poison tail and so I would die.'

"'But I cannot swim,' said the scorpion, 'and if I stung you with my poison tail, I too would surely die.'

"Now the frog was sorely perplexed, leaping back and forth at the water's edge. Then he struck up an agreement to carry the scorpion across, provided that the scorpion would show him where bugs lay sleepily in the sun and, furthermore, as hereinafter shown, provided that the scorpion would not sting him.

"So the frog paddled powerfully through foamy water when, midway to the far shore, he felt a terrible numbing sensation. 'Oh, grump, grump, you are a fool,' said the frog, bulging his big green eyes. 'You have stung me, and though I will die of poison, you too will surely drown.'

"Now, water rising swiftly to his chin, the scorpion wailed in stoical despair, 'Ah, I know, I know. It is as you say. But, you see, I could not help it; for it is my nature.'

"Time! Time is the great arbiter. Time is the grower of tender shoots. Time is the thresher of full-headed grain. Troubled, troubled is he whose stoical lot is short-sightedness in Time. He whose eyes remain rooted in temporal substance thinks not of the far shore. Time
stands forth under the guise of days and nights tucked into months and months mellowed into seasons and seasons folded unto a larger history of years and generations into centuries. What seems certain on familiar banks fades to poisonous doubt when the sands of Time run thin. Kick not the goad! God but held the land in mortmain to serve His invisible ends. Keep thou an eye on the far shore! Think not that Almighty God sows the grain in the springtime to test His strength in the autumn."

The congregation liked the story. They hung on his words and nodded as he paused, all except Jerome who seemed to feel the washed-out blue eyes hover over him like a peacock's tail hanging over a worm hidden under manure in the barnyard. Jerome scrotched to the left to put Lilah's papa's massive head in the line of vision. He thought about young Malhur slipping over the side so easy, like sliding over the edge of new slippery straw. He tried to say a little prayer but never got beyond the "Father" part, and when he looked up again the washed-out eyes had come to rest on the other side of the aisle. Sam, sitting ahead of Jerome beside Lilah's papa, twisted around on the bench when Pastor Nolafson's voice rang out again:

"Contract breached! For seven years there have been men who have refused the labor of the fields, thinking the Lord would put all aright. No work-callused hands guided the
plow among rocks in the field. What then? No sure strokes turned the fanning mill to clean the seed wheat of weeds. What then? No harrow broke the big clods to prepare the soil for seeding. What then? Think thou that God grants shares to idle hands clasped in barren supplication? What if men say that God breached the contract by holding the word of promise to the ear but breaking it to the hope? What then?"

Sam swayed his shaggy head rhythmically to the rise and fall of Pastor Nolafson's words, and when the words stopped, Sam's head stopped. The boom of swift water thrown back by the far bluffs wafted on the breeze through the opened skylight. On a lower plane came the stretching, comfortable purr of a cat. The hair at the back of Sam's neck prickled like porcupine quills. He sat stiff, his head swinging toward the soft purring, secret eyes burning with secret desire. Lilah's papa caught Sam's dark-blue suitcoat at the rising shoulder, pushing him firm to the bench as Pastor Nolafson picked up his tempo:

"In answer thereof I will speak through the fables of beasts, uttering the things we have heard or read.

"There is a fable that tells of the grandfather frog of the calm backwater and the bright-green grasshopper of the windy fields. Now the grandfather frog was leaping along, searching for grasshoppers in harvested fields, when
the grasshopper spoke from atop the fencepost, saying, 'Why search you so diligently for grasshoppers in barley stubble, Mr. Frog? Know you not that hordes of green-and-red, orange-and-blue, and red-and-yellow grasshoppers abound in billowy wheat fields on yonder far shore, and many other colors besides?'

"'Say you so,' said the frog, crouching at ease in the shade.

"'Truly it is so,' said the flighty grasshopper, and he kicked thrice at a sliver of wood.

"'Ah, transcendent joy will be mine,' said the dreamy-eyed frog, 'if you will hop on my firm back so I may carry you across the deep-swelling river, where the milk is yet in the wheat kernels, and we will dance and frolic with joy in the land of milk and honey.'

"'No,' said the sprightly grasshopper, aiming a spittle of brown at the frog's eye, 'no, I cannot do that; for you are an eater of grasshoppers and choice insects of the airy field, and you would surely eat me.'

"'I?' said the frog in surprise, leaping a cartwheel in ecstasy. 'I eat an underfed, whopper-eyed, lean-jawed crittur like you when fat transcendent fellows frisk and frolic with delight in the land of milk and honey? Why, pshaw, I see your bony rib-cage pushing by your fast-whirring wings even now.'
"Now the grasshopper rolled another cud of brown tobacco in his bulging cheek and kicked up in the air a time or two to test his jump. So they made a bargain between them, whereby for a ride over the wide-rolling river the grasshopper would point the way to where his transcendent brethren leapt and soared, provided that the frog would in no way, manner, or fashion, chew on, chomp up, or taste, or otherwise eat, molest, harass, injure, or in any other way bring to grief the party of the first part.

"So the frog swam lazily through silty-brown backwater, and there at the edge of white swiftwater giddily leaped up the green grasshopper. 'Ah, pshaw, pshaw, you are a fool,' said the frog, 'to jump from my back in the river, and you will surely drown.'

"'I know now,' said the spinning grasshopper, 'that it is as you say. But, you see, I am farsighted and anything that is close I cannot see clearly, while everything far appears close. I jumped for delight toward the far shore when a halo of bright colors appeared near me.' And so saying, he whirred his gold-gleaming wings and, kicking his silver-slipperred feet, sank beneath the brown muddy water.

"Time! Time is the true arbiter. Time is the grower of tender shoots, and the thresher of full-headed grain. Becalmed, becalmed appear they whose transcendent lot is farsightedness in Time. They whose eyes continuously flash
at ethereal distance reck not with the near shore. Yea, though they seem knowledgeable of things at one remove or more, such men of undiscerning eye see not the hazards of muddy water. What seems certain beyond the bright-colored rainbow supports no tenant when the sluices of Time run full. Keep thou both feet on the near shore! Think not that Almighty God covenants the land in the springtime to refuse the landlord's share in the autumn."

The congregation gave each other covert glances as his story spun itself out, as though each was shrewdly calculating which of those animals fit his neighbor best. Jerome itched and got set to skulk from view again, but Pastor Nolafson fixed his eye on Uncle Jacob who, palm on Jerome's knee, steadying himself, twisted in his seat and put his head almost to the floor, squinting sideways over Lilah's papa's shoulders to see blue sky through the opened skylight. He seemed to see something else too, because he muttered to himself. Only the seat of his striped overalls showed, only the striped posterior. Someone behind snickered. A coarse guffaw followed. Uncle Jacob raised, startled, and peered with solemn intensity past a nearby post that supported the roofbeam to see what they chuckled about. A wave of tittering arose; Uncle Jacob stiffened, the red creeping up his neck. Pastor Nolafson opened again:

"It was written in the Great Chronicle of Time:
'Know thyself!' Know thyself! Know what self is thine. For a man is composed of as many selves as kernels in the husk, yea, a man is like unto a head of wheat and each copper kernel has the potential to sprout. Husband that kernel that thou deems suited to God's work in Time. Just as the many copper kernels lie hidden away in the wheat husks just so are many selves hidden away in thy dark fleshy clod. It was written so in the Chronicle of Time.

"Midway between vague wavering of clayey substance that hoes and digs at profit and loss and unwarranted certainty of ethereal spirit that ties bundles of rainbow with imaginary ribbons and harrows the upper firmament does man bob and drift in Time, not one indubitable self, not merely one brazen voice shouting, 'It is I!' but many selves, a poor thing man, torn between conflicting sproutings of self, and each self vies with the others for sunshine. Man is fleshy clod and many selves clamor for fruition."

Sam grunted and made a dive for the aisle, but Lilah's papa stuck a knee in Sam's midriff and delivered a timed blow with his flatted palm between Sam's shoulder blades, throwing him hard to the wooden floor. Uncle Jacob leaned over the bench to grab Sam's belt and Lilah's papa hoisted Sam's shoulders, and they sat him upright again. The yellowish-orange cat that had been tromping down the aisle, tail waving, shrank back at the commotion. Lilah scooted
from her seat, clutched the arched cat in both hands, and fled through the double doors. Benjamin chuckled to himself. Lilah's papa held Sam pressed to his bench. He had thick knuckles, all hairy between the joints. Pastor Nolafson thumped the lectern, booming out his words.

"How, then, can man know which self to open his ear to? Who are you? What man of discerning asks not of himself, 'Who am I?' Yea, 'who are you?' that is the mystery of self! How then can thou know thyself?

"Given unto the hands of man is their work, yea, their work! Know what thou canst do! Let men, therefore, purge themselves of the many contentious selves, each clamoring for special attention, and bring forth that self that serves them as they, in turn, live in God's ways. Yea, seek not to know thy puling self, but know what thou canst do! Through work is thy self revealed. For even as thou shapest work to thy Godly purpose so also does work mold thy spirit into the ways of His divine pleasure. Know what thou canst do! As man does, so he becomes. Waver not as empty husks buffeted by despairing winds! Yea! Nor bow as green stalks weighted by kernels in milk! Yea! Stand hard in the kernel! Man becomes what he does! Know what thou can do! It was written so . . . !"

"Smoke?" said Lilah's papa absently. Then, "Smoke?" Then loudly, "Smoke!" He pointed up at the opened skylight.
"... in the great Chronicles ...!" hollered the pastor. Sam's hackles raised again and he lunged up like a bull teased by flapping red clothes. "Hah!" he bellowed, charging the opening between Jerome and Uncle Jacob. The bench clattered backwards. Jerome felt Sam's foot kick his ear. A woman screamed. Someone yelled, "Smoke! Fire!" Five benches crashed to the floor. "... of Time!" shouted the preacher. Rows of men and boys hit the hard floor together in a scramble like strings of decoys heaved to the hard ground when the ducks startle from a hidden cove and clap wings for distance above the lake. The yellowish-orange cat bounded out the doorway. "Hah!" roared Sam in hot pursuit. His coiled bullwhip leaped from the armpit of his faded-blue suitcoat. "Hah!" he bellowed. The bullwhip cracked.

Caught in the rush thundered the folk. Five men burst out and sprawled in a heap on the ramp. A woman with a nose like a clothespin followed, carrying a blanket-wrapped baby, galloping over three of the astonished men. A group of boys milled by. Two tumbled with a splash in the shallow water. A thin man dressed in a suit, broken glasses carried in his hand, shot out the door. He was stepping high. He skidded down the ramp, his lean shanks pumping like drivers on a steam engine. An old dragon herded and pulled a draggle of children. She breathed fire
as they moved along.

They began to gather in milling knots by the ferry and along the shoreline like cattle do when, running because afraid, they become afraid because they run and then, seeming to feel their incongruous foolishness, stop to see what spooked them. The River Sprite rocked gently near the shore.

"Teethin' Jesus!" said old man Doigtweiller. "Lookit that smoke on the ledge of the Rock!"

"Who crawled up there!"

"What does it mean?"

"Bet it's Lem! He's part injun."

"Aw, Lem ain't no injun. He's white like you or me."

"Heathenish rites," sniffed a woman.

"You ain't so pure, honey," said the fire-dragon.

"I saw you that day in the juneberry patch. Long time before you even got married."

"Well, we'll just see about that!"

"Indians buried their heroes on high precipices, facing the sun. . . ." said Lean Shanks.

"But thar warn't no bodies!"

"The boat's gone!" shouted a boy. "He took the boat!"

Jerome saw the portly man dressed in a creased suit and smelling like fresh lilacs draw on his cigar. "The bodies don't make no difference," he said, coolly blowing a
smoke ring. "Indians believe in a Great Spirit. The Rock is sacred to their Great Spirit. He will bury whatever equipment the dead will need in a faraway land."

"Politickin' Pilate! Injun or not—that Lem is a good man. Good as the pastor himself."

"Here he comes now!"

Ole Nolafson disembarked from the ferry and strode to the edge of the clearing with Ruben beside him. He wore black twill trousers and a dark blue turtleneck sweatshirt. The river boomed against the far bluffs.

"... and what we want to know, Pastor Nolafson," Juneberries was saying, "is whether you intend to allow that family of savage heathens back in our church."

A vociferous minority crowded around her. "She's right, Pastor," said Skinny Shanks. "Civilized people have a right to some privileges without including savages in their group."

"Yeah, that's so, all right!" chimed another.

"Drownin' Moses! Why don't he wear his preachin' clothes?"

"Count me in with what she said," said someone fiercely.

Uncle Jacob and Aunt Helga marched up with several other grim farmers who, accompanied by their wives, and their children and a few town families, now flanked Ole
Nolafson. Two big-fisted youths joined Benjamin and pushed through Juneberries' deputation to stand alongside Uncle Jacob. Clem, with Jerome hipshot beside him, lounged a little ahead of Ole Nolafson, his upper lip curled and legs planted wide. His bold stare never left Skinny Shanks' face. A few others drifted toward Juneberries' side, but most of the Upper Muskie folk stayed by their rigs clustered and scattered in the clearing. Horses shot air jets through loose-puckered muzzles to blow that half-impatient and half-derisive snort peculiar to horses. They pawed soft sand and rattled harness.

"Because if you do..." continued Juneberries.

Ole Nolafson ignored her. He had thrown his mind up to the stone ledge. He was unperturbed. "He has purified himself in smoke," he said gravely. "Now he will sit up there alone for a day, maybe two. Maybe four or five. Whatever it takes to find new unity. He will fast. He will shiver at night. He will seek guidance. He will seek a closer harmony with nature."

Juneberries changed her tack, "What for heaven's sake do you think of his burning sacrifices up there while we hold religious services?"

"Mrs. Schmutbaum--I would have rowed him across and set the fire if he had asked me," said Ole Nolafson. He withdrew and ambled the shoreline alone, kicking a knot of
wood along where ripples flowed wetly through smooth sand and ebbed away again. Across the way a slender spire of grey smoke curled from an east ledge of the Rock and gradually disintegrated to thin wisps of haze. The white haze blended with the balmy sky.

For weeks after the day the rains stopped, loosely tied bundles of fleecy clouds daily scudded across blue skies during the afternoon heat and pelted big wet drops that soaked close-set wheat stalks and washed light dust from small red berries that clustered on buckbrush stems. Yellow-breasted larks tink-a-linked in the meadow below the barn. Towns of buck-toothed prairie dogs, poochy cheeks and limp paws showing above mounds of dirt by their holes, stood erect as Jerome passed by and dove from sight if he stopped, like little old men in the doorways of lonely shacks who wanted to be friendly with a passing stranger but were scared by past experience. Dark purple juneberries weighted green bushes down along the banks of the creek. Yellow sweet clover bloomed at the edges of buckbrush patches that choked ravines and spread over the flats on the creek. Gophers scampered in their holes with a chit-chit--chit-chit and a quick flick of brushy tail. Sometimes the afternoon freshets knocked down thick stands of ripening barley in late July and pale yellow oats that had sprung tall near loamy swales and on rich bottoms. Nearly every day the freshets brought
the big wet drops that fell on the ground with plops like toads.

Early in the summer before the grain had even headed out, Uncle Jacob put Ruben, Benjamin, and Jerome to work on mending harness and rebuilding grain wagons, on repairing the thresher and overhauling the tractor, and on preparing the grain bins to contain the bumper crop. Leather thongs, catgut thread, and new britching straps and tugs were bought to mend dried leather harnesses that had been stored in the barn loft for years. Bundle racks mounted on lumbering wagons had new boards fitted to their floors and new front and rear skeleton frameworks braced solidly to the floor. Frisky horses pulled high wagon bolsters into clear deep pools on the creek and were unhooked to leave the dowelled wheel spokes soaking, expanding and tightening the tough oak. Uncle Jacob and Ruben climbed around on the ponderous iron-grey threshing machine, adjusting drive chains, fitting new belts, digging mouse nests out of the air fan, and packing grease cups. They fitted new piston rings in the rusted tractor and unbolted the worn lugs from the huge iron wheels and bolted on new shiny ones. Jerome and Benjamin nailed tin and old header canvas to the leaky roofs of dilapidated grain bins. They hammered tin over mouse holes, chinked corner cracks with wedges of wood, scooped out piles of sand, and fitted braces to prop up sagging walls and roofs. They even
cleaned out the harness room, storing saddles, extra ropes, horseshoes, and other truck in the loft above, and nailed boards across the lower door to store the grain overflow.

A kind of excitement generated from the threshing of grain at harvest seasons. Though Jerome could only dimly recall a harvest season in his short life, he had heard Clem, who was two years older yet than Rudolph, tell about it during the summers they had herded cows on the high plateaus to the southwest. The banding together of farmers from miles around, with Uncle Jacob's threshing machine pulled from farm to farm by the big tractor, and each farmer furnishing a fixed quota of light bundle teams to haul shocks of tied grain, spikepitchers to help teamsters stack bundles of grain as high on a load as arm and fork handle could reach, and thick-armed wagoners to haul and scoop loads of deep yellow barley, pale yellow oats, and dark copper wheat into bins. A kind of excitement arose in travelling sometimes clear into another county. The talk in the quiet evenings and on rainy days would be centered around crops, weather, and horses worked and cows raised and around politics and granger ideas. Sometimes on Sundays, if the threshing had gone well the week before, the tractor would be throttled down at noon. The boys and young men would be wrestling and drumming their fast horses neck-and-neck across a staked-out flat, and the older men would be pitching horseshoes at steel pegs and arguing
heatedly about how the Government should run the country. Like a carnival it would be.

It was in late August on a clear morning before harvest began when talk was finally broached that one hand had to stay at the farm to handle choring, care for livestock, and haul hay to the barn loft. They sat at the table in the wallpapered kitchen after choring. Aunt Helga, who was short and stocky and who always wore ragged-looking curlers in her plain brown hair before she would go to town, fried plate-sized hotcakes on a cast iron griddle.

"Who's the heavy-set man tramping through the grain fields Sundays with a shotgun?" Jerome asked Benjamin. "A skinny boy goes with him."

"In town yesterday," Uncle Jacob said, "the Clem I met. In McNair's General Store he came at. One saddle he ordered away for by mail."

"Fellow with the crooked nose?" said Benjamin to Jerome. "That's Godfrey Schnid. He hunts pheasants. The young boy is his nephew. Godfrey works in town. He likes to hunt pheasants."

Aunt Helga, her face red from leaning over the hot stove, carried a steaming stack on her spatula. She flopped them over on the platter set at the center of the table, "Ach, Papa, is Em gone away yet for Norsky's already?"

"About Jerome he asked," Uncle Jacob said, spreading
butter on the hotcake. He stuck a spoon in the sugar bowl and sprinkled sugar over the butter. "That Jerome would harvest this year Clem asked."

"Papa--a saddle?" said Benjamin. "What'll he do with a new saddle? He's got a good saddle. Draggerschoons don't have that many cows."

"Who'll stay if not Jerome, Papa?" Ruben said. "He works by himself most always anyways. Even if you put him with somebody, pretty soon he's off by himself."

"Ya, Mama," Uncle Jacob said, "Em still by Norsky's stays. Clem says soon she comes to home. He says at the river she walks by day and she no more the bad dreams by night."

Ignoring Ruben, Jerome started to pour juneberry syrup on his hotcake, then changed his mind and settled for butter and sugar. "Why would anyone want to stay behind?" he said.

Aunt Helga watched Jerome put the juneberry syrup down and sniffed it for mold. "The syrup you no more like, Jerome?" She held it out to him, but he said, "No'm!" and shook his head. "No! Well--poor Em," she said. "She liked Lum so. He was good!" she said, her hazel eyes softening behind the glasses. "Yahhh, when Em was a little girl by Petra's side and Petra shocked yet the grain bundles, Lum came with soft rabbits for her to pet. Her eyes would get
so big with wonder," tapping a saucer. "Soft furry rabbits
that big hulk of mans carried for the little girl like eggs
to pet and play by. When he was a boy yet, Petra cried
that he knew never how to work the spelling and make the
'arithmetric numbers add and subtract, but she never cried
no more after Clem was born. Lum walked by the hand little
Clem in the pastures. Like a papa he was. Never no Drag-
gerschoons could take hurt with Lum by."

"Well, what did you tell Clem, Uncle Jacob?" said
Jerome. "Bet ya told him you need all the hands you could
dig up to work the thresher. Betcha even said I could haul
more loads of bundles than he could." He sipped muddy black
coffee and watched Uncle Jacob over the upper lip of the
mug.

Uncle Jacob kept his eyes on his hotcake. He dunked
it in his creamy coffee and munched it like a doughnut.
"Nuh," he said, "to the Clem I told one man would by the
farm stay. Who I not know already still."

Ruben leveled a finger at Jerome and said, "Jerome
is the youngest. The youngest stays."

"Nuh, Ruben! Ist mine to still say," said Uncle
Jacob. "Not for the Ruben ist job of mine. Who stays I
say, not the Ruben!"

"Ruben hadn't oughter mind staying himself if Em's
coming home," said Benjamin. "He always liked her best."
He used to favor her brown eyes and dimples. Once he almost asked her to a birthday dance in our granary."

"Not me," said Ruben, forking a hotcake from the platter. His brown eyes glittered. "Huh, sounds more like you. You patted your cowlicks down for her last winter. You said she was pretty like a painted green-and-yellow grainwagon."

Aunt Helga caught Benjamin by an ear, "You, Benjamin! Have you made eyes of sheeps at Em?" She shook him by the ear so that he spewed out a mouthful of hotcake. "You, Benjamin, answer, you!"

"Ouch, Ma--let go my ear! I ain't gonna--ouch, leggo!"

"Nuhhh, Mama, nuhh!" Uncle Jacob said.

But Aunt Helga shook him again anyway. "Benjamin stays far from Em. A good girl is Em," Aunt Helga said firmly. "No plaything for Benjamin! Ach, yah, and who the orange cat to church brought if not Benjamin." She rattled his teeth once more to keep in practice and then left him in peace.

Uncle Jacob pointed a fork at him, "Ja, Benjamin, the words of your mama you hear?"

"I heard, Papa!" Benjamin said. He scraped the chewed hotcake together with a fork and piled it near his plate. His ear was red. "I never figured to trouble her any. I just said she was pretty. Can't a fellow say she's pretty? Besides, it was Malhur told me Ruben smiled at her whenever
he got a chance. Jerome said Ruben figured on asking her for Ma's birthday dance, didn't you Jerome?"

"Yah!" Jerome said, and nodded.

"Boys will the boys be, Mama," said Uncle Jacob.

"No, not Benjamin. In many ways Benjamin is good boy, and a good son is too. But to Em--no! Benjamin likes girls too many. Em is a wonderful girl--like Petra. Em a house needs of her own. Not for Benjamin to play by," said Aunt Helga.

Ruben ran his fingers through his oily hair and stuck out his jaw, "I'm almost a man now. I got a right to girls' company like any man. It's different with someone like Benjamin who likes girls 'cause they like him. And Jerome too. He's too young to keep company with girls." He poked a thumb in his chest. "But with me it's different. I'm almost a man."

"Ja, the Ruben," Uncle Jacob said, "big as mans ist. His ways like mans ist. For the Ruben to be the preacher only I wanted." He held his eyes on his plate. "Yahhh--" he said regretfully. "Yahhh--in old country was different. first-born always the church training takes."

"Papa--" said Aunt Helga, alarmed. "Ruben now. Pastor Nolafson don't want him, ain't? Ruben don't go to be preacher really?"

"Yahhh--Pastor Nolafson say the Ruben go to city
ought," Uncle Jacob said. He sucked noisily at a saucer of coffee.

"Ach--Papa, poor Papa," Aunt Helga said.

"Yahhh--the Ruben to the packing house works at. The Ruben the bacon, the ham, the baloney sells," Uncle Jacob said. "Yahhh--old country is different--there first-born at the church learns--here first-born at meat packer learns--Pastor Nolafson says ist better so for the Ruben. Pastor Nolafson to friend writes soon the letter." He dunked his sugar-rolled hotcake in his coffee and shifted his gaze from Ruben to Benjamin to Jerome and said, "Nuhh, nuhhh--here ist different," as he wagged his head from side to side, sorting out his methodical thoughts. "Yahhh--well . . . ." he said after a while, and scraped his chair back. He jammed his hat down as he plodded out the door.

Soon afterward Jerome wandered out, carrying two buckets to the windmill for water. Then Ruben let the screen door slam, a scuttle of ashes in his gloved hands, and Benjamin fetched armloads of wood to the woodbox. They dallied around the yard for a long time, splitting wood, scooping green moss from the water tank, and greasing wagon hubs, and when they finally did go to the barn, Uncle Jacob was fussing with a pair of harnesses hung from a peg near the door.

The rank odor of horse manure and sweaty horses seeped through the gloomy barn. In a stall at the far end
was a three-year-old saddler, a stocking-legged sorrel gelding brought home by Uncle Jacob behind the wagon the night before, as they three well knew, after a trade with Clem. The sorrel stood hipshot, rear hoof cocked. He turned his nose against the pull of the halter rope. His ears walked like the legs of a puppet in a dumb-show. He was blaze-faced. He snorted softly. Laying a gentle hand on his rump, Uncle Jacob said, "So. So now. So, so . . .," in a tired way and slid in beside him.

Jerome noticed how his hindquarters bunched, taut and eager, as he shifted in the stall and the way his ears worked, alert and sensitive, when he knew somebody was taking his measure. "What you aimin' to do with him, Uncle Jacob?" he asked without special interest.

Benjamin calculated the length of the legs and the size of the neat hoofs against the power in the shoulder and the drive in the hindquarters while Uncle Jacob undid the tether from the wide stall. "Bet he's a runner," he said half to himself. "Maybe better even than Clem's bay--maybe--maybe . . . ."

"Ah," said Ruben contemptuously. "No one wants an old saddlehorse anyhow." He dropped to his haunches and squinted under the visor of his denim cap at the sorrel outlined against the open door. "Might be broke to a set of harness shafts 'thout too much trouble though. He'd make a
high stepping buggy horse."

Uncle Jacob led the sorrel toward the bright sun's rays streaming in the door. "To the choreman the sorrel goes. His only to use," he said over his shoulder. He tugged at the hemp rope once and stepped back a few paces. The sorrel stopped, and the three formed a little circle around him.

"He sure looks good," opined Jerome. "Like he had lots of spirit for most anything." He stroked the smooth muzzle, feeling the velvety lushness of it. He ran the palm of the other hand down across the shoulder and patted a fetlock and picked up a front foot, all the while gently chiding him as the sorrel snorted warily at first and then heaved a deep sigh and calmed down.

"Huh!" shot Ruben. "Must think he's a horse shoer. Or a horseman."

"His to herd cows in from Box Elder," said Uncle Jacob. "His only to use. For the choreman."

Benjamin stood alongside the withers, "Gimme a hand, J'rome." He laid his shin against Jerome's cupped hands and would have sprung on, but the sorrel swung and bolted to one side. A black horse tied with his teammate in the double stall lashed out and smacked a hard hoof against the sorrel's shoulder. The sorrel spun, ears flattened, and bit a hunk of fur from the black's rump. The black squealed and lunged
back on his halter rope.

"You watch it!" hollered Ruben. "You watch that he don't hurt my team. Keep him away, see. Just you keep him clear of my team, see."

"Nuhhh, Benjamin," Uncle Jacob said. "Nuhhh, Ruben." The sorrel, nostrils flaring, responded easily to the pull on the rope. "So now, So. So, so . . . ." He carefully stroked the burnished neck. After a short while he handed the rope to Jerome to lead back and forth outside in the warm sunlight.

Uncle Jacob was like that. He refused to assign a job that seemed to penalize one of his crew. He preferred to offer an inducement for a volunteer to step forward. He wanted one of them to ask for the job in the certain knowledge that any real or imagined shortcoming would be offset by so much clear gain. Yet as Jerome stole guarded glances at the other two where they leaned on their heels against the barn, neither one made a move to step out and claim exclusive use of the high-strung sorrel. Such was the excitement that sparked the imagination of young men during threshing season on the high plains.

It was with a queer exhilaration in his chest that Jerome sat high above the balky team on a wagonload of bundles and urged them near the rackety threshing maching. Thum, thum, thum, thum came the rhythm. Another teamster ahead of
him had pitched down to the floor boards of his bundle rack. The head of the iron-grey threshing machine was in line with the revved-up tractor, facing it. The feeder mouth gaped open to admit the uninterrupted flow of barley bundles. The projecting feeder chute was thrust out past the short iron tongue. The governor of the roaring tractor speeded up whenever a flurry of bundles jammed the rotating feeder knives. A blower belched flayed straw on a small heap nearby. The machine smoked dust that settled in thick layers around the thresher. From the haze ahead the helper scrambled down. The other rack lurched forward. For a moment of waiting the cylinder ran free of straw and its whine grew high and thin, as though it grew petulant to knock more live kernels loose from the dead husks. The blower impeller whirred as it picked up speed. Then Jerome had the team's heads past the feeder chute and turned them with rumps toward the machine as he had seen the other teamster do. Pulleys and belts thummed, drive chains clacked, screening sieves clattered. Working fast, Jerome pitched the first bundle into the rotating teeth. As soon as the straw-colored binder twine hit, the stalks spread and twisted as if alive and disappeared in the groaning maw. The helper was beside him now. An unbroken column of yellow bundles were forked to the feeder chain. Thum, thum, thum, thum. The thresher vibrated. The tractor governor awoke the plunging pistons. The sagging
drive belt rode to a low hum. The first flurry of stalks whipped through the snarling cylinder. On top the machine, Uncle Jacob tossed an empty grease bucket toward Jerome and flashed white teeth from his dusty-grey face when Jerome, startled, looked up. Jerome grinned back. The tines of his fork sailed into the bundles. A trickle of yellow barley kernels fell from the grain augur on a tumbling pile in the hitched wagon underneath. Sweat popped between Jerome's shoulder blades.

The first two days Uncle Jacob stayed at the barn to chore. The wagons rattled out in early daylight to the threshing machine. Lem and Ruben pumped gas in the tractor, adjusted the sieves, and greased the machine. Jerome knew that once the machine had threshed the barley at the home place someone would have to remain behind while Uncle Jacob moved on with his machine.

Before evening the second night Uncle Jacob put Ruben in charge of the machine and loped in early on the sorrel to chore. At dusk Ruben shinned up the crosstree of the bundle wagon where Jerome and Benjamin fed sheaves of bearded barley. The big iron machine threw noise and chaff and dust into the evening gloom. Ruben's fork struck a tied bundle and the binder twine broke. The heavy bundle spilled apart. "Hod damn!" he said.

"Last load!" Benjamin had to raise his voice a couple
Ruben scrooched his neck in the tight-buttoned shirt collar to ease the irritation of barley beards, "Hot--hard work. Easier to chore."

"Yeh!" said Benjamin. "Yeh, say it is at that."

Jerome steadied the reins figure-eight on the cross-tree as the machine shuddered and pulled down. It had taken on too big a load for the flailing cylinders to accommodate. The near-horse, an iron-grey, danced restlessly at the heavy groan but settled at pressure on his line. "Slow it down. Feeding too fast!" Jerome said.

"Notice how he's an authority on threshing now too!" said Ruben. "First he knows about saddle horses and now about threshing. Not much that boy don't know about." Benjamin grunted unintelligibly.

The rotating knives slashed at the tied bundles that entered the maw of the machine in unbroken orderly sequence. Jerome worked his three-tined fork like a skilled machinist turning down a high-torque gear. He took care neither to overload nor to slack off.

"Saddlehorses, though," Ruben was saying, "good saddlehorses can come only if a man knows how to work them when they're unbroke."

Benjamin relaxed a little in his pitching too.
"Heard that Jippers Kelso put up a good ride at the rodeo
they had at Bluerock." He leaned on his bundle fork and sleeved sweat from his brow. "He lost a stirrup and bucked off right after the signal, but he took first in saddle broncs."

"Huh!" said Ruben. "Rodeo riding is the same as unbroken horses. A fellow needs to know how. He needs to study his horse like he would a man and learn his style."

"Naw!" Benjamin said. "Mostly it takes a lot of nerve. Like Clem the day he rode the outlaw horse Forgive Me. In July it was too. A hot day in July. He'd tried him four times before in that little round corral he had near the river. He got Malhur to tie him on. Tied both legs underneath and tied hard to his belt with saddle strings. Then he had Lum open the gate and turn him out onto that big sandbar. Tied plumb tight to Forgive Me and turned loose. That takes nerve! Lots of it!"

Ruben jammed a big forkful of broken bundles onto the feeder chain. "Yuh, but they carried him home in a wagon afterward too, didn't they! His neck snapping the way it was and his eyes bloodshot. He was bleeding from both ears too. Carried him home on a quilt in a wagon, didn't they!"

"But he rode him!" the other persisted. "He rode him because he had nerve."

"Call that riding?" said Ruben. "That's not riding--
huh! If that's all it took, even he would be a bronc rider."
He hooked a thumb in Jerome's direction. "He'll get on any-
th ing. But most of the time he gets bucked off."

"He rode him all right!" Benjamin said. "When that
old Forgive Me horse bucked himself out—all foamy. And
sweat dripped from his belly in a steady stream. He rode
him all right. Jerome could do it too, except he just does
it for fun. Not because he had to like Clem Draggerschoon."

"For fun?" demanded Ruben. "How could it be for fun
when he's scared of them?"

"Who said he's scared? Why he'll get on anything!"

Jerome stood apart at first, knowing well enough where
that kind of talk led to. Besides, he already knew the
story by rote. He knew too that Clem had later bought the
outlaw horse for a high price and had never again to this
day mounted him. But several years later when Jerome was
to watch Clem's temples swell and throb, his eyes burn with
feverish joy, his tight grin curl into a sensual leer, and
his trembling hand clutch at the edges of a rough plank as
he eased his lithe body from the top of a buck chute and
onto the hot quivery beast he had drawn lots for, when Jer­
ome was to observe how these outward signs showed a deeper
emotion than just excitement, he was to know why Benjamin
had said Clem "had to" and he was to know, too, why Clem
had renamed the outlaw horse Bloomers. He was to understand
then the need for the clean and honest thrust of direct actions and sometimes even seemingly unreasonable ones in response to the passions that dominated Clem's life.

The bellowing engine of the tractor throttled down. The steady growl of the twisted drive belt that linked it to the threshing machine dropped to a steady whir, slowly slipped to a harsh rasp as it lost momentum, slapped, and then whispered together a moment near the sagging center before stopping.

"Huh, that's just it!" Ruben said contemptuously. "He'll get on anything but won't try to work it. Doesn't know how because he's scared, that's what," he ended in a final heat. His words came unnaturally loud now in the slowly settling chaff that hung over men and horses in the thickening darkness.

Benjamin moved nearer Ruben on the wooden floor. "He'll get on anything. Even the grey." He wagged a stiff finger in Rudolph's face, "He'll ride it too, you'll see! Jerome will do it!" A teamster moved his rack a little ahead of Jerome's. Two spike pitchers who had started climbing around on the quiet threshing machine with grease buckets and oil cans set their gear down and stood above them on top of the machine. Other racks lined up to go in now, pulled out of line and drew nearer.

The hot blood crept up the back of Jerome's neck.
He began to see, within his purview, the shape of things to come—amiable Benjamin rooked into helping Ruben pull a whizzer on him, Uncle Jacob assuming the choreman duties himself, which was a kindness, and the sorrel offered as happenstance as though to forestall the natural shift in the affairs of men. All these things indicating a change that precipitated into a pattern. As these natural forces of life reckoned themselves up and shaped themselves to his mind, the feral blood boiled up and Jerome flung his bundle fork to the floor and vaulted to the soft dirt in the gloom below.

Swiftly dropping the tugs and unlatching the neck-yoke, Jerome tied the grey's calm teammate behind Clem Draggerschoon's wagon where it sat hitched up and empty nearby, waiting for the last load of the day to be threshed out. "You held out longer than I figured you would," Clem's voice came quietly from the front of the wagon. His shadowy form was perched high on the rack, next to the crosstree. "After harvest," he added thoughtfully, "I'll be at Hawkes's. Taking the rough off of the winter sled teams and breaking a string of three- and four-year-olds to ride. I'll need a tophand to help out. Someone I can put a trust in," he paused a moment and his hand came up to cuff at his hat, "an' I figure you'll do."

"Yah!" Jerome said, and turned his attention to the
The iron-grey was a half-broke crowbait used occasionally only after the regular big teams had been assigned because he was loco and could never be trusted. He loomed like a ghost now with whites of eyes still visible in gathering dusk. "Now put him against the other horse until you get on," Clem said. "Push him right up against his teammate. Let him feel the other horse beside him. Let him get his attention on the other horse. He'll feel safe as long as one of his kind is beside him, even if they go off a cliff somewheres together. Then while he's got his mind undecided, you slip on him before he decides what's what."

Jerome shoved hard with his shoulder against the grey and grasped the hames. Then quickly with one long-legged motion he swung aboard. The grey snorted at the unfamiliar weight and sucked in his belly, legs spraddled and muscles taut like a new fence. Jerome pulled his head tight to his left knee and worked him out from the wagons. From the dusky stillness came voices of wagoners and spike pitchers as they sensed what was happening.

"Aw, he won't ride him, anyway!"

"God a'mighty! What we got--a cowboy roundup or a threshing crew?"

"What does it mean?"
"Tarnation kid," grumbled a neighbor. "Old Jacob won't be easy to live with now for a few days."

"What's his reason?"

"Ease him along now," Clem's words sounded sure, "and if he gets mean, try to talk him out of it."

The grey jumped stiffly in a little circle, as though testing his strength, and skittered sideways. Jerome clinched his knees behind the hames and sawed back on the wide leather lines. When the grey bellowed in rage and lunged stiff-legged at the short stubble, Jerome threw all his weight on one line and pulled his head into his left knee again. A couple of times the grey got his head and broke into high leaps, front feet pawing dirt as he came down, but Jerome lashed him into a run with his straw hat and jerked his head sideways each time. Finally the grey settled to a high-kneed trot, head high and powerful muscles tensed for a spring, and Jerome sitting right on top and working him slowly back and forth in a tight figure-eight, weaving past halted wagons.

The crew gathered ghostlike in the dark, their teams skittish at the apparition moving to and fro dozens of paces away, flung sage advice at the young rider:

"Give him more rein!"

"Slap that cussedness out'n him!"

"Watch that he don't bog his head!"
Jerome did not see the javelined fork scoot swiftly through the dry barley stubble in a straight line. He sensed rather than saw the tines strike the grey's forelegs. Then the wooden handle reared and leaped in the air and rapped him across the leg as though to draw attention to its complicity. Whites of eyes rolled wildly behind leather harness blinders. The grey emptied his breath in an outraged bawl and bolted to the left. He caromed against the corner of a bundle wagon, losing his rider and the britching of his harness, and suddenly jerking back, stampeeded away through the night.

One team started up, running scared now because they had run, and spooked a second team as they scattered the rack sideways and over, jerking boards and braces apart as they fled. The second team swerved toward the machine and was caught short as a hub hit the grain wagon. A full load of barley dumped in the dusk when the grain box caught its edge over the turning front wheel and tipped off the bolsters.

Next morning the sun burned amber in the east. Jerome clung to the heavy Mauser rifle and stepped silently behind Uncle Jacob. Returning from the tangled fenceline, he felt empty and washed away like a crumbling river bluff during the spring floodstage. The great mischief he had wrought undercut the meaning he had found. The grey,
running loocoed through the dark with pieces of harness still hanging on him, had hit the fenceline and jerked staples and barbed wire from the wooden posts for a hundred yards. Broken posts had lain scattered where he had hit. Busted strands of wire had curled in loops. An easy trail of dried blood had spurted over the cured buffalo grass and dewy earth. They had found the grey a short distance away in a little gully. The grass had been uprooted and pulverized to dust by the flailing head and struggling hooves. The left foreleg had been sawed half-way through. Blue flies had buzzed around the red flesh. The Mauser had been a useless burden.

Jerome spoke, "I dunno--" fumbling for the right words, "I dunno how he hit that fork. I was up on top--until he hit that fork and 'thunk'--it knocked me on the knee. I was up on top and I held him in and he was working good." His words trailed off, "He work . . . ."

"Ja--" said Uncle Jacob. He neither looked back nor slowed his brisk pace. "And the grey a workhorse. A loco yet. Not for to ride. Give to the sorrel ride. Cows to ride for."

Jerome jumped alongside of him and pulled at his arm. "I'm not talking about that Uncle Jacob," he said in a sudden rush of words, his eyes on a level with Uncle Jacob's. "I'm not talking about that at all. I mean about the busted
wagons and dead horse. I knew you would give me the choring job for even getting on the grey. I did it on purpose even. I dunno what made me do it. Maybe I just had to, that's all. Maybe I just had to." He took off his floppy straw hat and mussed shaggy hair over his furrowed brow as though trying to blot out the memory. "But those busted wagons and the broken fence and dead horse—-I dunno—-I dunno how the fork got there at all."

Uncle Jacob fixed his troubled blue eyes on the tall gangly boy. His brown mustache quivered as he struggled for words, "Wheat I raise—-not the wild mans. Ist hard not the wild mans be. Ist hard!" His words softened and sounded graver. "Sometimes for reasons strange things happen. Gives nein answer." He spread his arms wide, palms outward and stood so for a moment, and then clenched his fists tightly against his sides. "Nein answer to us poor mans below. Sometimes maybe ist nein answer for poor mans below."

A faint memory stirred in Jerome. His third year of grasshoppers and drouth and sandstorms and drifting land. A hushed night. The lamps snuffed out early to save on kerosene. Ruben and Benjamin tossing fitfully in the hot attic. Jerome slipping down the dark stairwell and pulling the screen door tight behind him so it would not slam. He had roamed through the buckbrush below the barn and sat on the creekbank alone until the wind began to rise. Coming back,
the heavy workteams in the barn kicked at stalls and pawed heavy plank mangers. For a long time he trembled silently, mystified, in the dark with the horses. Then, not knowing what else to do, he pulled himself up the rungs of the wooden ladder to the square opening in the floor of the hayloft. A man uttered words in the corner of the loft, and though Jerome could not make out what he said clearly, he felt that the man was asking for help. He wondered what it meant. It sounded like the man was crying. Jerome had never heard a man cry before. Afraid of what was going to happen, he slipped back down the ladder and hid in a manger. The uneasy horses stomped and fidgeted in their stalls for a while and the wind moaned through the cracks in the walls, and then he heard a noisy quarrel. He heard the wild yell and the banging of the fork thrown hard up against the high rafters. Three times the fierce yell, three times the clatter against the rafters. Then the sad voice begging again. He wondered what it meant. Later he heard the man grope down the ladder. The opened door let in a rush of wind and sand and then the bolt dropped in the hasp from the outside. Jerome decided to stay hidden until the other man came down. He waited and waited, afraid to move, but no other man was there. Nobody was there. Finally, scared and cold, he crept into the black harness room and fell asleep behind the bolted door under a pile of old gunny sacks.
It suddenly occurred to Jerome in this bright sunny meadow that he didn't have to explain at all. That all men must be wild men at times. That all men yearned passionately to know the meaning of outward things. That all men who were men hurled pitchforks, rode bad horses, turned their hand against their neighbor, against their God even, at the times when meaning was lost to their senses. That all men who were men rebelled when meaning was lost. That Uncle Jacob knew it. He understood about dim visions and blurred realities and how it was sometimes hard to tell which was which. He already knew. So as they strode on through honeysuckle and sweet clover across the coulee and up the other side toward the barn, the warm sun shone on their backs and their feet were wet with morning dew.

That was in September. In October the nights turned nippy. Frost appeared regularly on the roofs and wagon beds and numbed the soles of Jerome's bare feet and sent him scurrying for his shoes in the early mornings. The threshing machine was back at the home place for a few days to beat out the wheat bundles that had been left to ripen in shocks.

Jerome rode bareback on the shaggy-haired pony behind the herd of cows strung out in the clear moonlight. Uncle Jacob's black, copper-footed German shepherd padded silently alongside the sorrel, pausing with front paw uplifted now
and then to sniff the still air. Thnuk-thnuk—thnuk-thnuk—thnuk-thnuk was the sound of cow hocks, like two fingernails snapped together. The cows filed singly along the dark path that wound past clumps of bare buckbrush, across the shallow creek, and up the steep hill to the barn. Frost crystals sparkled on brown grass, shimmering from buckbrush stems as refracted moonbeams caught them at the right angle. The crystals glinted and lost their little mirror a split-second later. It seemed to Jerome as though that night astride the wild-eyed iron-grey had never happened to him. It seemed like it had happened to someone else and he just knew about it. He felt as though he alone had been choring on the farm for a long time. Ahead the cows sucked cold water as they crossed the creek and butted each other at the foot of the hill. Their shadows flitted and dodged like playful phantoms as they bumped and bucked in little circles.

The circling players threw Jerome's mind back to Lilah and her goose, Lilah who was still a little girl then, three years before. Lilah, who had been tall for a girl and leggy like a wobble-kneed calf, almost as tall as Jerome was then, and one year older. Lilah who now pulled her raven-black hair back with a bright ribbon and kept the ends trimmed and curled to flare outward at the nape of her neck, so that her sleek hair, soft as mink fur, bounced a little as she walked. Lilah whose lilting voice rose and fell with
the ease of soft-pattering rain and grew slightly husky with strain when she was stirred. Lilah, who at fifteen had been a little girl, now at eighteen had budded into a willowy woman, and with a woman's yearnings in her smokey-grey eyes.

It had been a hot Sunday afternoon when Uncle Jacob's creaky springwagon had swung from the packed dirt road. Down the fenced lane, past the mossy watering tank and lazily spinning windmill, and into Lilah's papa's farmyard had swayed the springwagon. There Lilah had stood in the sun-baked yard near the chicken coop, scattering handfuls of barley from a gallon syrup bucket.

"Here, chicky, chicky, chick," she said, and flung a handful of kernels. A dozen scrawny chickens dashed headlong from the manure pile at the barn where they had been scratching for worms. A couple dozen others, necks stretched and clucking frantically, came swooping in from the grain bins. "Come on chickies," she said. A big goose honked from the muddy pond on the nearby creek where the box elders grew and, wings flapping, bore down on the little gathering of chuck-chuck-chucking hens. The chickens squawked and long-legged their way beyond reach of the orange-billed tyrant.

The goose settled down to the feast. His looping neck turned his shoe-button eye now on Lilah, who simply stared in outraged astonishment, and now on the old guard that cluck-cluck-clucked aimlessly at the outer fringe and
undermined his usurped authority by pecking a few stray kernels. When the bolder chickens marched to where yellow barley lay thick like pebbles protruding from a gravel bar, the goose hissed and charged them with a flapping of white wings.

"You naughty goose," Lilah cried. "You have the pond and field for bugs and worms. Now shoo. Go away! Shoo! Leave the chickens be to themselves. Shoo!" And she gathered her short skirts and, stamping her feet, shook them at the proud-stepping goose.

The goose startled and danced away a few steps and then evidently thought better of it and stood his ground, gimlet eye turned on the cowering chickens. Lilah's head dipped, the brim of her mama's straw hat flopping, and she raised up with a stick, chasing the hissing flapping goose in a circle. The red-combed chickens hurried into where barley kernels lay plump and golden on the hard ground. Around and around the rapidly gobbling chickens dashed straw-hatted Lilah and the orange-billed goose. Once the goose veered and bowled a few grey chickens over when he raced through the flock. Finally, in despair, Lilah threw the stick at him.

Then the orange-webbed feet turned and, beating his wings at her bare legs, the goose chased Lilah around and around the eagerly pecking chickens, until Lilah gained distance by leaping over a few chickens and scrambling for
the back door stoop where her pretty mama, hand shading her
grey eyes, laughed and joked with Uncle Jacob and Aunt Helga,
who still sat in the springwagon.

At first Jerome had crowed and slapped a knee along
with Ruben and Benjamin, but when he saw Lilah looking so
forlorn sitting on the stoop, her face flushed with heat
and trembling lower lip caught between her teeth in embar-
rassment, his hackles rose and he bristled toward the
feathered despot. But Lilah's mama called Sam from the
house, the screen door banged, the heavy bullwhip cracked
twice from the stoop. With a few loud honks of protest the
goose loftily retreated to the sanctuary of his small pond.
That was before Sam had picked up his cat zoo.

Uncle Jacob and Lilah's papa had exchanged visits
every month or two during those years. Usually on a Sunday
afternoon when Uncle Jacob's brown mares clip-clop--clip-
clopped into Lilah's papa's yard, Lilah's papa and mama
would be there somewhere close to meet them. Uncle Jacob
would rein in the light-wheeled rig with a flourish, elbows
sticking out to raise the leather driving lines even with
his dusty felt hat, and say, "Whop! Whoa-up!" at the team.
"Ja--ja," he would say in his good-humored way. "So--to see
aunty and uncle here we ist."

A bearlike man, Lilah's papa would lumber forward to
drape the driving lines across the stump of his right arm
and pump both of Uncle Jacob's hands in a huge left paw. Lilah's mama, whose lithe step and easy talk made her seem more like Lilah's sister despite the tired droop that sometimes appeared at the corners of her mouth, would offer Uncle Jacob a slender hand, which he would hold in one hand and pat with the other for a moment while Lilah's papa joshed him in a loud tone. Then Lilah's mama would give Aunt Helga her hand and a tight little squeeze, and Aunt Helga's hazel eyes would crinkle at the corners from pleasure as they chatted, moving toward the big yellow house. Sometimes Lilah's two little half-brothers, freckled and barefooted, would spurt around the corner of the barn with a yell and drag Jerome and Benjamin and Ruben by the hand to show them their rabbits, a new calf, or maybe a tame gopher.

Lilah's papa wasn't really Uncle Jacob's uncle. He was no relative at all. Many years before he and Uncle Jacob's papa had steamed across the ocean together on a boat from the old country. Uncle Jacob's papa had helped him buy the farm and later, through the years, they had exchanged labor in sod busting, spring planting, house raising, and other neighborly projects that were helpful to both. Uncle Jacob's papa and Uncle Jacob had planted and harvested both farms while Lilah's papa had volunteered and fought in the war, where he had got his arm shot off by cannon fire. Fifteen years older than Uncle Jacob, Lilah's papa had fathered
the last two boys when past fifty.

Sam, Lilah's papa's son by his first wife, had strange ways. He was eight years older than Lilah, who wasn't really his sister at all but her mother's daughter. Sam had shapeless shoulders and a thick powerful body like Lilah's papa. He could outshovel and outpitch and outwrestle any man on the Upper Muskie. Like an ox his dull eyes were spaced wide. His broad forehead, stiff kinky hair, and lumpish jaw made him look odd. He licked his lips with his big pink tongue when talking, as though to let the words slide out easier, but he never said much worth knowing. In the late fall during the same year Jerome had taken his woolly lamb to the county fair Sam had collected cats from Dan.

"Hey, J'rome," had yelled Durnell, as the sagging springwagon had passed the pumping windmill. "Wanna see our cats? We got cats! Lots of 'em!" Uncle Jacob had climbed down the wheel spokes. Durnell had caught Jerome's hand in both of his and tugged him to the ground. "Come on, J'rome." Durnell was seven. His straight brown hair fell across squinty eyes and hid some of the freckles pasted around his snubby nose.

Sam and Doobey fiddled with a wooden chicken cage on the rocky flat near the pond. The gate of the cage was turned toward six evenly spaced grain bins close by. Inside the cage more than a dozen cats yowled and clawed at
the wooden slats. There were three white cats, two black cats, four or five yellow cats, and another six or seven grey cats. A big grey cat squashed a little white cat in a corner. The white cat yowled. Two yellow cats spit and clawed at each other. Their tails were tied together. Doobey, who was eight, prodded a snarling yellow cat against a grey one with a stick poked through the top slats. Sam ran half-hitches around their tails with a piece of straw-colored binder twine.

"Hah, Jerome!" roared Sam. "Wanna wrassle today?"

He put a dry stick on his extended arm and flexed it. The stick snapped. His black eyes glistened. "I'll wrassle you and Benjamin together as soon as we get done here. Ya wanna?"

Jerome rubbed a lean jaw and grinned. "No," he said, "but we'll fight you with pitchfork handles--on the straw stack. Won't we, Benjamin?"

"Yah," said Benjamin wolfishly. "And we'll let you on top first, and no jabbing."

Sam licked his thick lips, "Nunk! I don' like that game so well." His eyes got crafty, "How about you, Ruben? You an' Benjamin? Yer 'most as big as me an' so's Benjamin." Then he added slyly, "Yer strong an' Benjamin wrassles real good."

"No," said Ruben, "No, it's too cold and the ground
is hard."

"We'll go to the haymow," Sam said. He took Ruben by the arm. "We c'n go right now. Come 'n!"

Ruben backed off. "No, I don't want to," he said. He squeezed a pimple and wiped a smirch of blood on his overalls. "What you got those cats for?" he added nonchalantly.

"Hah!" said Sam. "Gonna keep 'em skinny so they catch mice. Gonna run 'em to keep 'em skinny--hyahh, Doobey, you ready?" He picked up his coiled bullwhip. It was a twenty-footer loaded with buckshot. It had a buckskin snapper at the end. It flicked from his hand in a blur and cracked. "Hah!" he said. A tomato can lying near the rock foundation of the first wooden bin spun and leaped in the air. "Hah!" The can leaped again. "Hah! Hah!" The can leaped once and then spun sideways at the second jolt to sail under a grain bin before it hit the ground.

Sam took a position on bent knee equidistant between the caged cats and the grain bins. The muddy pond lay before him. His whip hung loosely coiled on his extended palm. He licked his lips. "Now!" he said. His black eyes glistened.

Durnell raised the starting gate and Doobey prodded a yellow cat to the opening. It lunged and dragged the other spitting cat with it. The gate slid into place. The

The cats scuttled sideways, their whiskers pointing at the two poles, aiming toward a box elder. Whap! Meowurr! Tsstt! They bounded forward together and then, scrambling and plunging in a yellow ball, rolled in soft mud at the pond's edge. Whap! The cats scuttled sideways again. Whap! Meowurr! Mud flew. The twine pulled loose. A yellowish mudball streaked up the tree. Whap! Meowurr! His mate shot by him, still dragging the loose twine.

The following spring Jerome and Lilah had unrolled a piece of canvas on a pile of springy tough-stemmed tumbleweed fodder and sat in Uncle Jacob's darkened haymow. Lilah had been wearing her green polka dot blouse, light green anklets, suede leather skirt and brushed brown shoes. She had sat with her knees turned to one side. A small shaft of light came up the nearby ladder opening. Her firm chin caught the light. She twirled a bracelet in her hand.

"Well, why did your papa let him have them, then?" Jerome said. He hunched one shoulder against a sloping rafter, facing her.
"Papa just doesn't pay much attention to what he does," she explained. "Mama tells him and tells him and tells him that Sam gets mean sometimes. But Papa tells her all young boys have some wickedness in them. He says boys should hurt things first and then they feel so bad they want to protect the very same things they hurt before. He says if it wasn't for hurting, people wouldn't learn anything."

"Yah," said Jerome, "but Sam is full-growned. He ain't no boy no more."

"Not to Papa. Papa still sees him as a little boy who needs to grow up some more. He says hurting things lets Sam see that other things have feelings too."

"Yah," Jerome said. "He hurt me lots of times but it didn't do no good that way. He always seemed to want to hurt me some more instead. When he flung me on those rocks by the pond--me and Benjamin right on top of me, he didn't try to protect me any that I could see. He just danced around and wanted to take Ruben on too."

"Girls are different," Lilah said. "When a girl is still at school in town and helping her mama at home, she likes some of the boy things like a horse of her own to ride and herding cows in dry summers and playing on the straw pile and some things like that. Mama says it has something to do with age and that real real young boys and girls and real real old men and ladies you can hardly tell one from
"Did your papa hide him with a willow withe after he set the grain bin afire?" Jerome said.

"No, Papa said Sam didn't know the cat would run under the grain bin after he set him afire. Sam didn't really set the grain bin afire himself Papa said," Lilah answered slowly. "But girls like things nicer after they get out of school. They don't like old threshing machines and things like that. They don't like to stay home anymore either, because it's not their house. Someday I want a nice big house near town, and I want to live nearer the river so I can use lots of water to grow a big garden and some flowers. Do you like gardens, Jerome?"

"It don't seem natural, somehow," said Jerome glowering, "that a man should want to whip at cats—even if he ain't very smart. Look at Lum. He ain't very smart and he don't whip no cats neither. Lum he don't whip no animals at all. I don't like cats very good, but I'd lay into Sam again tomorrow if he whipped some more cats. And if old Ruben would've helped, we'd have got him down and smacked him around to learn him something. A feller don't learn nothing if all the hurting is on the other side. Darn old Ruben. You can't ever tell what he'll do. One time he does one thing and another time he does something else. He just don't seem to be steady in his think tank." He brushed his
fingers through his rumpled hair.

"No--don't do that. I like it that way."

"Huh?"

"Your hair. Don't tangle your hair up like that. I like it sort of curly and rumpled when you talk so."

Jerome looked at her oddly. He blushed a fiery red when Lilah lay her warm hand on his. He quivered and started to jerk it back, then let it lay in hers. "Jerome," she said. "Oh, Jerome." She pulled him nearer and brushed his trembling lips with her firm ones. They were soft and damp. She smelled like dewy honeysuckle in early morning. He leaned toward her, burying his face in her soft hair. He nuzzled her soft cheek. She tugged at him and pulled his arm around her.

"Hey, hey!"

"Hoka, hoka!"

A thatch of brown hair and a white grinning face reappeared like a jack-in-the-box through the open trapdoor, "Hey, hey!"

Down had gone the grinning face. Up had come its white mate, "Hoka, hoka!" Jerome had made a grab at the skinny gnomes perched side by side on the ladder, but Dur-nell and Doobey had jumped and scampered out the door. "Hoka, hey!" had flung back one over his shoulder. "Heyoka!" had echoed the other. The moaning wind had been rising and
Lilah's papa had sent them out looking for her. They had had to get on the road and reach home before the sifting dust blew too hard to see where the road lay.

Jerome had never got to see Lilah much after that. He had begun to notice before that that Uncle Jacob's patting of Lilah's mama's hand had gone on for a little longer time at each visit. Sometimes Uncle Jacob had sort of flung an arm across her shoulders and given her a little hug as he joked and talked with Lilah's papa. Lilah's mama hadn't seemed to mind though, and Aunt Helga hadn't said anything about it. But she had made small excuses for not visiting from time to time, and her back had stiffened whenever Lilah's mama's name came up. They hadn't chatted together so easy like before either, and sometimes Lilah's papa had thumped Uncle Jacob so boisterously between the shoulder blades that his coat had smoked dust and his brown hat had jiggled askew over his eyes. Then pretty soon Uncle Jacob and Lilah's papa hadn't visited at all anymore, and Jerome had only seen Lilah in town sometimes for a little while or at church. Uncle Jacob and Lilah's papa had still acted friendly, but they hadn't had much to say to each other when they met.

Thnuk-thnuk--thnuk-thnuk rattled the cow hocks as the herd mounted the steep hill from the creek. Jerome dangled head and arms alongside the sorrel's sweaty shoulder at the
corral gate, overall-clad legs dangling over the steaming back. The shepherd lay by the gatepost, chin stretched out on big copper paws. Jerome balanced across the sorrel’s back a full two minutes before he let himself slide with a contented sigh to the frozen earth. The shaggy sorrel nibbled at his pants pocket and whickered softly. Then paying close attention to the job again, Jerome took his station beside the shepherd to count them in. The shadowy file of cows shuffled eerily in bright moonlight, up the steep hillside and into the wire corral. One dark form stopped calmly in the opening, dreamily chewing her cud, as others bumped around her and surged between the gate posts.

From the stubble field past the house the rattle and jerk of an empty bundle wagon echoed. Outlined against the open skyline was a cross. The center crosstree and front rib-skeleton of the rack loomed nearer. Soon hard hooves struck hard ground in the yard. The rattling bundle rack swung by the leanto and slowed to a thud and creak as the wagon drew into position near the barn.

"Hey, Jerome—bring the lantern!" Ruben's shout floated through the night and lifted across the corral. He wrapped his driving lines around the arms of the crosstree and climbed down.

Two boys Uncle Jacob had, both older than Jerome. Sanguine Benjamin, who had traded a sturdy lamb for initiation
into manhood two years before at seventeen, had been born two years later than Ruben and a year before Lilah. Like Uncle Jacob, only stockier across the chest and in the arms, Benjamin's lithe body held the strength of a tensed steel wagon-spring. Thick auburn hair usually curled in ringlets at his shirt collar and around his ears unless Aunt Helga had caught him unawares shortly before and clipped him with her shears. His lively ways made him a favorite with local girls and his patent good will, though often affecting a perverse turn by the attention heaped on him, could lift even morose Ruben from his spiteful moods. He had a stubby nose like a piece of clay pressed on by a casual thumb, and his frank blue eyes laughed with devilment at the hard days and lit up joyfully at the better ones. He had a streak of obstinacy in him that, even before he had turned fifteen, had more than once found him hid out somewhere on the creek below the barn while Uncle Jacob leaned against the yellow wheel of the springwagon, reins in hand, and hallooed and hallooed to fetch him to church. Then, after he had glared at Aunt Helga a moment as though to tell her how much he favored her ways, Uncle Jacob would climb the high seat and spank the team toward the county road, with only the legs of Jerome and Ruben dangling from the tailgate.

The bartered lamb, a gift from Uncle Jacob, had been owned by Benjamin and Jerome together. Uncle Jacob had said
that growing boys ought properly to have different kinds of experiences to test their growth and that Benjamin and Jerome could more easily forget the hostility that occasionally erupted between them if they shared their experiences as often as possible. But Jerome, who knew Benjamin's way of wanting things for himself and his fierce drive to get them when all his thoughts began hitting the collar together, had been skeptical about such fond brotherhood tottering along so close to the heels of a single skinny lamb.

The lamb had been a starving bummer picked up by Uncle Jacob at Doigtweiller's. "For the Benjamin and Jerome the lamb ist," Uncle Jacob had said, as he had hoisted the droop-eared little fellow from a gunnysack. Dream they had called him, because the glassy unwinking stare in his half-lidded eyes had suggested a dreamy faraway world would soon be his unless he got something in his empty belly and because Uncle Jacob had dreamed of thundershowers settling the blowing gritty sand and sprouting tender shoots of grass, and this newly lush pasture, in turn, had prompted him to think of pink-nosed lambs bucking and playing. So they called the lamb Dream, and when Uncle Jacob had tickled his pink nose with a finger, Dream had given a weak bleat and, humped with hunger, had butted at it, sniffing for milk, and then had gotten a little excited and wetted down Uncle Jacob's shirtsleeve.
Benjamin and Jerome fed Dream and cared for him. They would take milk fresh from the cow when an island of foam swelled and bubbled at the center of the bucket and pour it in an empty vinegar bottle. The foam would hiss and settle inside the glass, and before they could get the cap screwed on, Dream would be there standing on their toes, butting his muley head against their shins. Twice a day they would feed the lamb as much warm milk as he could drink, first with the vinegar bottle that had the hole punched in the cap and later, after he had gotten old enough to drink, from an open coffee can. Gradually Dream's wrinkles of loose skin at his neck and flanks began to stretch and his sides to bulge out. Later, toward fall before the county fair opened, Dream hung around the granary and tagged Aunt Helga's skirts to lick up plump barley kernels when she fed chickens. Sometimes from the dwindling oat bin Jerome sneaked a handful of ground oats for him, which Dream munched contentedly from his open palm.

Benjamin and Jerome penned him in the barn when they herded cows on the ridges to the south, for the lamb never had enough sense to amble along with the cows as they grazed at the sparse buffalo grass and to rest in the shade with them when the sun blazed like a firebrand at noon. Instead, he dashed and gamboled on the steep hills in the cool early morning and plodded, tongue out and eyes glazed, through
clouds of low-hanging dust behind Benjamin and Jerome as they scouted ahead for grass at noon heat. A dozen times they tried to get him to stay shaded-up with the cows beneath the leafy box elder trees that grew up and down the canyon near the spring, but Dream felt no ties of kinship with cows. He seemed to think he was a man, simply because he had spent most of his waking hours with men, and lowered his head in blind determination to go their way if it killed him, which it very nearly did a couple of times. So after taking turns lugging Dream in from away over on Box Elder Creek several times, they decided to leave him behind to sleep at the barn henceforth, though after returning in the evenings there he would be haunting one or the other's footsteps like a primordial gnome. With all that eating and sleeping Dream grew as fat and slouchy as a sloe-eyed merchant with a heavy thumb on the scales, and since he was the only fat thing on the place, except for Ruben's lip when a dust storm showed up, they decided to take him in the county fair.

The county fair was held each year after harvest at Newberg's Crossing. Benjamin said that in the years before the country had dried up to a big dust bin the farmers brought in golden wheat bundles as tall as a man's shoulders with kernels as large and bright as shiny copper pennies, potatoes about the size of muskmelons, and without eyes, porkers so fat they had to be trundled in one at a time on
wheelbarrows to keep folded layers of fat from flopping on the ground, and draft horses that pulled so hard at the pulling contest that they drewed their shoulders down to a nub and wrung shoulders, forelegs, and haunches right through tight-buckled collars like a pair of coveralls squeezed through a washing machine wringer. By making some allowance for Benjamin's willingness to stand on his head to prop up a hard lie even if the easy truth lolled comfortably near in a rocking chair, Jerome naturally concluded that the country had always been skinny and shrivelled like an old man's gnarled hand and that probably those porkers had to be wheeled in because they couldn't get enough fire in their boilers from tumbleweed roots and mouse droppings to make it under their own steam.

Sometimes there was a circus, Benjamin said, though usually not during these past years because the horny-handed farmers had looked so clownish in their efforts to wring a living from the country that the circus folk had got to paying them to step out of the audience and recite testimonials on their success in raising a cash crop.

Not that it put any strain on the farmers. They already had it by heart from reciting it to anyone foolish enough to bow his neck to the yoke and buckle in to listen while they practiced. But the circus folk soon saw they were outclassed by such strenuous practice sessions and
their hearts were no longer in their work. They just naturally quit coming, though some who wanted to undertake further training had stayed on and worked around the country, Benjamin said.

Then there were homburg-hatted drummers with striped yellow vests and big red neckties making their pitches from wooden soapboxes to crowds of glum-faced farmers needing a laugh, and usually a dusty farmer shuffled forward to buy some little gimcrack now and then just to keep the fellow from pulling out, and then like as not leaving the gimcrack lay in his wagon afterward, they were that hard up for live amusement, Benjamin said.

The Indians gypsied in across the river for the county fair too. They camped among the giant cottonwoods in ratty-looking canvas tipis and wickiups made from bent willows and pieced together with tatters of ragged canvas, Benjamin said. They raced horses as lank and wild as the picture of John the Baptist in Uncle Jacob's Old Testament. They set up bartering tipis in the woods at night, Benjamin said, and traded on even footing with the white man now that the country had gaunted down to the same frugality the Indians had learned to enjoy under the white man's wise administration.

The Indians got so thievish from watching the white man in his land dealings, Benjamin said, that the farmers
who lived close thereabouts to their camp had got to stapling the feet of their chickens to a plank and then nailing the plank to the floor of their granaries to safe-keep them. It had worked too, until the grandsons of those who had come in with their ponies' tails cut off had learned to mow the chickens' legs off with sheep shears and burn the granaries to destroy the evidence. After that the white men had let the chickens run loose and even shooed a few of the scruffier ones toward the Indian camp to promote better relations with their red brothers, Benjamin said. Not to be outdone, the Indians had staked out some of their young maidens in the bushes to capture the shooed chickens and offer strings of beads in exchange, but the white men had never learned their language and had no way of knowing what it was the young maidens were offering, Benjamin said. So gradually a regular barter system sprang up and thrived openly at fair time, and each side got what its own way of life failed to provide, Benjamin said, and then he asked Jerome if that was not what was taught in school books about free enterprise. Benjamin was uncommonly smart in many things, Jerome decided.

Calm sunshiny days when only a breath of haze lingered over the Upper Muskie were followed by quiet nights when soft moonbeams put a sharp edge on every building, every fencepost, every object tall enough to cast a discernible shadow. The morning before the county fair, while Ruben
hooked the team and Aunt Helga packed extra clothes in a box, Benjamin and Jerome combed cockleburrs and tumbleweeds from Dream's wool and brushed his kinky fleece to ripply smoothness.

Toward evening they rattled along the upper bench in the high-boxed grainwagon and then turned down at the crossroads. The rutted right lane led to Doigtweiller's sheep farm on the river. A mile farther south sprawled Newberg's Crossing on the lower bench. The town had shrunk since few boats used the river anymore. Retired farmers moved to Dan at the railhead now. Many older houses stood empty, their broken windows like eyeless sockets and their fences hanging askew. A wharf stuck out, like an empty store window on a main street, on the wide gravel bar that rose far above the sluggish brown water. Farmers, townsmen, and Indians forded here with teams and wagons at low water, and the water was almost always low now. Willowy islands stuck up in a cluster here and a chain there, like mossy stones that had been at first thrown down casually and then flung out with an eye for pattern by children at play. North of the Crossing the Indian camp appeared under the cottonwoods, hedged in between a willow thicket and Doigtweiller's sheep pasture. Tipis staked in a large circle half-hidden by trees and bushes looked like big pussy willows, wagons like cockleburrs, and busy people like a red ant colony gathering
and carting off dropped bread crumbs. Smoke curled lazily from a half-dozen fires. Up and down the near side of the river grew the hundred-foot cottonwoods that towered above the tangled underbrush and felled timber and boggy sloughs, sometimes cutting back away from the river more than a mile where a creekbed came down a side coulee or where the river sometimes overflowed into low spots. Downstream on the far side a road had been notched through high bluffs and gravelled. The road from the Crossing moved west to skirt a series of knolls and climbed out of sight across the hogback.

Roota Doigtweiller strode up with long steps from the sheep shed as Uncle Jacob reined his team in. "Prayin' Paul!" he said, catching the team by the bits, "Climb down, Jacob! Climb down, Helga! Ah Ruben, can you hold their heads?" Then raising his voice at the sprawling house partly hidden by red leaf maples and lattices of creepers, "Hie, the house! Hie, Jacob's here and Helga! Hie!" Roota and Longweit, who was his wife, had tacked extra rooms on the new house for company, though without any outwardly apparent plan, after they had moved out of their snug homestead cabin. As a result, one room seemed to stumble over the next and another jutted out like a large wart on a woman's nose. Uncle Jacob and Aunt Helga stayed overnight with them whenever they came to Newberg's Crossing.
Longweit barged out the door. She wore pants and was tall like a grown boy and with a boy's easy ways. She buttoned a denim jacket as she came. Sometimes she puffed on handrolled cigarettes. Longweit and Roota had moved east from the sheep-and-cattle wars with a flock of woolies, a team and sheep wagon, a boney saddlehorse, and a .30-.30 Winchester that laid a slug the size of a dime right where it was aimed. Longweit said men liked to be by themselves sometimes and let Ruben, Benjamin, and Jerome sleep alone at the cabin, which set in a cottonwood grove behind the sheepshed, and come up for meals at the new house. It was a neat cabin and peaceful.

"I said to Roota you would come rolling down that rutted lane at fair time this year to bring that lamb in," Longweit said. "My but ain't he a big fat one though! Roota, you seen this lamb yet? Look at him! You done gave to Jacob the best bummer of the lot, you old sheep-stealer." She chuckled to herself and pushed a hand through Dream's wool to plump the brisket and then the flank.

Aunt Helga raised on her tiptoes to peer over the endgate where the lamb was partitioned off. "The Benjamin and Jerome him raised," she said. "Each day two times they feed him milk. More than a calf every day he eats--till his big belly bulge out," she puffed her red cheeks and collapsed them again as she pantomimed the tale, "and out and out."
She poised her splayed hands away from her hips, the purse swinging by the strap on her wrist as her hands rose higher.

"Nuhhh, Mama, nuh," Uncle Jacob said mildly. "Not so big lamb ist." He tugged at the lamb's ears and Dream nibbled his fingers. "Ja, Roota, the lamb what you say he weigh, ninety pounds?"

"He's a fat one, all right," Roota said. He hefted him from the floorboards. "Between ninety and ninety-five I'd say."

"Ach, Longweit, you should see my ticks of feathers," said Aunt Helga. "Only the lamb and my ticks of feathers sewn by hand we brought. Orange pumpkins, big, we have yet by the farm. Wheat? No! No wheat!" Her puckered mouth turned down then pulled up again at the corners, "But pumpkins? Yes! And squash and rutabagas and potatoes we got so many of." Aunt Helga traded with neighbor ladies for goose down and stitched fluffy feather ticks that squashed down like deep soft snow before the wind packed it solid. They never bunched up or stuck together in a mass but stayed fluffy. She sewed by lamplight sometimes late into the night. Benjamin said once that she always won blue ribbons on the feather ticks she entered at the fair.

"Well, we don't raise no wheat," said Longweit. Her silky yellow hair spread like corn tassles over her shoulders and fell in bangs on her forehead. Her upper lip skinned
back to show buck teeth when she talked. "We raise sheep, and a good big garden. My we had a good garden this year. Just yesterday I went out to get in the pumpkins before they froze—we had a light frost on the river the night before, you know—and I baked pumpkin pies and sugar cookies. I knew you would come, Helga. And corn! My you never seen such corn. Roota plowed a ditch around the garden and run the overflow pipe from the tank to the garden and let the windmill pump all summer. Is that your feather tick in that box, Helga? Here, let me. I'll carry it while you take the other—my but it's light—and, Roota, you take the boys to the cabin and put up the wagon, will you?"

"Slitherin' Satan! Throw a hobble on that tongue a minute, woman," said Roota. "You're goin' to have them so consarned wore out with all that talk they won't come back agin." His long face and wild green eyes gave him a look that many years of tending sheep had warped almost to what he worked with. He looked so much like a sheep with his pointed nose and suspicious eyes and muley head that Jerome always felt a stunning moment of surprise when he talked right at the heart of a matter instead of blatting around it in circles.

He was a good man though, and when many a hardluck farmer hereabouts was adding tumbleweed sprouts to their soup for flavor and feeding skim milk to their rickety
kids and selling the cream just to buy salt for their meat and shoes for winter, Roota and Longweit headed a flock of woolies out ahead of their sheep wagon for weeks at a time, grazing the sheep miles from home up and down the grassy river banks, and bought coffee, sugar, tins of tomatoes and peaches, and they paid their taxes every year.

"Now if you'll just slide in and make yourself to home. Benjamin, you come with me," said Roota. "I'll show you where the ground feed is for your lamb while Ruben un-hooks. Jerome, there's wood piled over there by the sheep-wagon. See it? Gets chilly as soon as the sun goes down."

They settled their gear and washed at the tin basin before Longweit jangled a cowbell mounted on a post. After supper at the new house they returned to the warm cabin to bed down for the night. The cabin was built of thick cottonwood logs fitted at the corners. It had a canted roof that had been boxed to contain loose black soil, and then the transplanted buffalo grass had intertwined at the roots and thatched a waterproof roof of living sod tightly together. Jerome snugged beneath woolen blankets, head cupped in palms, on an upper bunk built against a wall of the single room. The wood stove had been dampered for the night. Shafts of light still glared from the loose-fitting lids, jiggling and rippling on the canted boards overhead. Jerome watched the flickering firelights tiptoe, a crack at a
time, up the ceiling, like going up a staircase, and then stumble and almost fade as they crept over a log roof-support. Another flicker danced up the boards. Jerome dozed.

The first time he heard the stir outside. It came from the wagon pulled alongside the cabin. Jerome turned in the warm blankets and slept. The next time, there it was, fleetingly, like a hunter in the hills spots matted grass in a ravine and instinctively knows that the deer slept there the night before but has moved down on the bottoms, not heard but felt, a hunch. Not a spectre, a hunch. Awake now, Jerome slid his bare feet to the cold floor. He slipped into his overalls. The fire had died. He strung his shoe-laces on the hooks and decided to awaken Benjamin. Benjamin's bunk was empty and cold. Ruben slept on, snoring lightly. Outside a full moon cast short shadows. The tailgate rod was bolted in place. The lamb was gone. Jerome struck out through the cottonwoods, laying an imaginary line for the Indian camp. The river boomed ahead. He shivered and broke into a dogtrot. A few scattered clouds sailed past the moon.

The Indian camp was only a mile off and easy to find. Jerome heard shrill laughter and a few yells before he ever saw the grayish-white faded canvas tipis and wickiups. The main camp lay asleep beneath dense cottonwoods. A dog barked. Leaves rustled underfoot. Jerome skirted the wagons,
harnesses laid on tongues overnight, and staked-out horses and came to a second camp farther on, a smaller one, pitched in a swale at the edge of a sandy clearing. Jagged blades of fire leaped from the center of the clearing. Four tipis were pegged down in a semicircle at the edge. A fifth was pitched a little apart. A wagon trail opened on the far side toward Newberg's Crossing. At a hitchrail strung between two trees the team of a springwagon was tied. Two saddlehorses stood hipshot, half asleep. Four men hunkered cross-legged nearby. The flat crowns of their black hats were tipped forward. They had bright-colored blankets pulled over their shoulders. Three men squatting on the far side of the fire passed a bottle around. One held the bottle high, rising to his feet, and whooped. It seemed to make him feel better. He did it again, louder this time like a bloodhound on a hot trail. Then he tipped the bottle, sleeved his mouth, and squatted again. He had a familiar look.

A high-cheeked girl wearing a white bodice and a silver amulet that dangled from a string of thumbnail-size beads around her neck spotted Jerome huddled in the shadow of a tree and came forward. The amulet swung and flashed in the moonlight. An old woman sat behind the opened flap of the solitary tipi and watched her. "You wanting somet'ing," she said. Her black hair wore a middle-part and
hung loose from the temples and over the shoulders. She car-
ried a red-and-black-striped blanket loosely draped over one
shoulder. The white bodice had slipped over the right shoul-
der. She swayed in front of him, arm on hip. Fire glittered
from the brass studs of a wide leather belt that girdled the
lower half of the blanket around her broad hips like a skirt.
"You got monnee, boy? Come weeth me." She talked like Pi-
erre La Farge, who lived alone over on Towner Creek and
raised trotting horses to single-up in harness for the fast
sulkies at the Dan summertime races. She caught at his hand
and led him toward the tipis where the old lady sat with un-
winking eyes. Jerome dragged along with feet like water-
soaked logs. The old woman unfolded a wrinkled palm. "Give
monnee to grandmama." A shower of sparks erupted as someone
threw a log on the fire. The bodice was open to lay one
breast partially bare. White Bodice swayed her hips. "Give
monnee first," she pouted. "Then we have fonn." She pinched
Jerome's cheek.

"I ain't got no money but I got Dream," mumbled Jer-
ome.

The white bodiced girl said something in gutteral
singsong to the gray crone who cackled and waggled the fin-
gers of her outstretched hand. Then White Bodice lay her
head on Jerome's shoulder, leaning against him, and said,
"The dream we all got." She smelled like stale sweat, wood
smoke, and lilac water. Her fingers were exploring his pockets. "In thees place you need more than dream--aiee, what ees thees?"

Jerome reached for it weakly. "My cookie," he said, feeling a slow itch creep up the back of his neck and burn there. "Keep it in my coat pocket so it won't get crushed."

"Aiee, cookee, aiee!" she flipped it to the crone. "Dream--aiee! Cookee, aiee! No monnee! No godamn monnee! In thees place you need monnee!" She gave her loose hair a toss and shoved against him hard until his feet hit a rotted log. "Heyoka!" she flung the Indian word for contrary over her shoulder as she swaggered off.

Jerome fell back and lay a moment in the crisp leaves, blinking his eyes in astonishment. A shadow fell close. A pair of man's boots crunched nearby, and Jerome rolled fast and came up facing the still figure.

"'S all right, J'rome, 's all right," said Clem. His straight hair hung across an eye. He teetered on his toes. His upper lip curled. "You want that girl? I'll get 'er if'n you want her."

I don't know what she got so mad for," Jerome said. "I come to find Dream and she met me out there," waving a hand, "and I thought she liked me. She--," he gazed toward the fire where she twirled, a bare arm flung out, and stopped to joke with the two men.
"Ya, well, we all got dreams, kid," Clem said.

"Dreams?" Jerome stared at him. "Dreams? Naw, Dream is my lamb, Clem. Benjamin and me. We raised Dream! Got him from Doigtweiller's! Dream is mine and Benjamin's. A lamb."

"Oh, th' hell! 'S that lamb half yers, kid?"

Jerome peered at his face, "You seen it then! Benjamin's here, isn't he? Dream is here too then? By hokey, I'm going to get him!" He smacked a fist in his palm. "I'm going to get him!"

"Now wait a minute. Jus' a minute," Clem took him by the shoulder and turned him to where the springwagon team and saddlehorses were tethered. "Y' see those four blankets an' hats? Ya, well, each of 'em has a big Indian inside. Bigger 'n you, an' almost as big as me, when'm shober. Four of 'em! Count 'em, kid!" He wagged his fingers in Jerome's face.

"Now, you shtart a ruckus here an' they'll dump you in the river. Yah, an' me too!" He gave Jerome's shoulder a little shake, punching him lightly on the arm muscle. "You savvy."

"Yeh, me savvy," Jerome stabbed a finger at the four shrouded blankets and black hats. "I savvy that those four buys are bigger than us two. So whatever they think is right is right. I savvy plenty!" He spoke with hot eyes at
Clem. "By hokey, I ought to get him anyhow! Big Indians or no!"

"Those Indians are the bigges' ones an' plenty tough," Clem said solemnly. "'S fact." Black Bear Sassiey. They're the camp police when big doin's are afoot." He rubbed his eyes, teetering, and raised his head. "Now, le's you an' me talk to old Walkin' Buffalo about yer lamb."

They squatted to face the tipi flap. Moonlight filtered through the boughs. The hag crooned softly, sunken eyes on the moon. Behind, the fire crackled and sputtered. Clem lay open his palm, placing on it two fingertips of the other hand, upright, taking steps with them, and he brought both closed hands up, one to each side of the head and tilted forward a little, like curved horns, all in a continuous motion. The old crone poke a skinny hand from the blanket pulled tight to cover head and shoulders and flexed a finger at herself, saying, "Unngh, me!" Then Clem made the sign of peace, the left hand extended palm up and outward, at the level of his heart, and followed that with a jab of his finger at Jerome. The toothless crone nodded.

"What you shay to her, J'rome?" Clem asked. The jagged firelight caught his expressionless face as he turned.

Jerome bent forward, elbows on knees, for several moments and then chose the words for care, "Say to her Boy-Who-Laugh comes this night with fat lamb. Tell her fat lamb
was traded. And that it was half mine."

Clem spoke a kind of pidgin talk that ran white man's words into what red man's words he knew. He fashioned objects with his hands as the words tumbled out, inventing ways to make shapes. By and by the old crone began to interrupt and say many words, in a slow guttural, also making signs. She ended that parley on a touch of sadness, eyes averted.

Clem said, "Walking Buffalo shay, to the Lakota tribe, nothing can be owned if'n made smaller by owning. A lamb is made smaller by two boys ownin' it. So she shay lamb no can be owned by two boys." He sat with shoulders hunched against the wind that came up and explained patiently, "She means a man has t' own all the crittur. It makes sense in a way 'cause the only way to show what is owned is to sort it out an' you can't do that with a lamb unless you butcher it. An' if you butcher it an' cut it up, it becomes less than it was. Do you see?"

"Is he dead then?" said Jerome.

"Yah!"

"Do I own half then?"

"Nope!"

"Why?"

"She say the teeth of her people are long from hunger. Small boys sleep with empty bellies tonight. She say
Boy-Who-Laughs gave lamb to her people. Do you see?"

"No!" said Jerome. "No. What difference does it make if it becomes less or more. I own half and Benjamin half. I know it and he knows it. So what difference does it make whether the lamb makes less or more or just as much?"

"Well, the Indians got a sign—the flat right hand held as high as the heart palm down an' moved in a horizontal circle—the perfect chircle means the All. To them, the Great Powers include all whole things like a rock, a tipi, a cloud, a wagon, a coyote, a boat, or a lamb. An' if you try to split a tipi or a cloud you lose the unity, the idea that built it. Y' loshe your sense of the All. All things are a part of nature an' nature makes 'em so. A man can't own nothin' that he has to make less by splitting up because he goes agin nature, do y' see? The important thing is the unity, the All, do y' see?"

"And if me and Benjamin owned two lambs, then we could each have one?"

"Yah!"

"And if them four big Indians weren't there, then we could still own one lamb together?"

"Yah!"

"I see!"

"Yah!"

The other four tipis looked like a village of gregarious
cocoons spaced off to one side by themselves in a semicircle. The flap of one of them was thrown back. A young Indian girl with hair bobbed at the forehead led a white man out, and they walked toward the fire together, talking quietly. He kept his arm around her waist. Far overhead black boughs swayed, giving out a muted roar. The jagged black branches against the bright moon looked like gummy cracks in a porcelain plate. The wash of the river, like a separate roaring apart from the rustling of boughs, came from beyond the four spun cocoons, from beyond the bushes and cottonwoods, from the west. Two of the men at the popping fire argued good-naturedly.

"It weren't fair. Tell her big pains here," patting his chest, "because Boy-Who-Laughsthe skunk--traded the lamb," Jerome said. "Tell her it's unfair. Say in the ways of the white man I owned half that lamb and that it ain't fair."

Clem started making signs again, leveling a slender hand off against the other, and letting one fall while the other arose like a balance scale. His thin lips moved tonelessly, forming words whenever Walking Buffalo, who sat back to watch his band perform, leaned momentarily forward to study his face and eyes, and making her talk when he slacked off. It was a big idea and it took time. Clem interpreted in swatches as she spun out for Jerome a pattern of her
people's vision.

"Walking Buffalo say even good things come forth in pain. It is sho with the strainin' cow givin' birth to red-an'-white calf, the earth mother burstin' as the new grass springs out, an' grey clouds splittin' for rainfall an' even trees bleedin' when the bow is cut. She say Boy-Who-Frowns should learn that all things come forth in pain."

Then Walking Buffalo loosened her grip on the blanket, letting it fall away from her calicoed shoulders, and pushed a wrinkled palm at the moon, glowing eyes following the back of her hand. She motioned a slow semicircle, forward and then backward. The canvas flap of the tipi rattled in the wind.

"Walkin' Buffalo say all nature has two faces. She shay storms scatter teepees like tumbleweeds, angry rivers wash away gardens an' drown people, icy blizzards freeze old buffalo an' cows an' starve hungry deer an' elk. She shay also the same storms that scatter teepees bring rains for fresh grass, the angry rivers that destroy gardens an' people also bring water to grow the gardens an' supply the people, the blizzards that kill animals also keep their numbers down an' stop many, many more animals from dyin' if the grass is eaten down to the roots. Walkin' Buffalo say the same lightnin' that kills a whole huntin' party on a high ridge could also show the main camp where the enemy lies
hidden under the blanket of dark night. She shay boy with furrows in forehead should learn that nature wears two faces."

Walking Buffalo searched Jerome's face with sharp eyes, the sagging pockets on her neck and stringy gray braid bared to the moonlight. Her talk was more forceful now, and she leaned to one side to peer out as she grunted and raised her arms at the end of each passage. Clem interrupted her several times, and then she spoke haltingly again, calm, her gutteral chant unruffled.

"Walkin' Buffalo shay to Boy-Who-Frowns that luck ish like a butterfly. She shay sometimes bad luck hide under a tree in shadow an' sometimes good luck flutter into sunshine. She say sometimes Butterfly-Flutterin'-In-Sunlight flits on shoulder of bad man an' sometimes of good man. She shay sometimes Butterfly-Hiding-In-Shade flutter above head of good man an' sometimes of bad man. Nature is unfair. Walkin' Buffalo shay Boy-Who-Frowns should learn to accept unfairness of nature."

Walking Buffalo's shoulders were hunched far forward, her shrunk-parchment skull bobbing slightly. The thin shoulders rose and fell. She snored gently, shrivelled hands lying limp in her lap. Clem raised to a toe and a knee, reaching in to drape the worn blanket over her bowed head and bent shoulders.
instinct to clutch at the frayed edges. Her deep breathing never faltered. Clem beckoned Jerome back to the shadowy cottonwood at the edge of the clearing. They sat, backs propped against the rough tongues of bluish-red as it flared again, flaming out on green wood. White smoke hazed out in billowy spirals that floated upward, dispersing slowly.

"Y' see what she was drivin' at?" Clem's voice was less tottery now. "The Indians got this idea of the All, y' see, and then this here other idea of the two faces of nature runs smack against it. So every boy goes alone up on a hilltop for a hunger campout. He just sits in the cold alone an' starves hisself until he has a vision, y' see."

"Yah!"

"Then this vision that he has as he lays sprawled out at the hands of nature tells him how he can reconcile hisself to the Great Powers, y' see."

"Yah!"

"Once his vision reconciles him, he chooses a name for hisself, one that fits what he aims t' be, an' then he tries to live up to it, y' see."

"Do you believe like that, Clem?" said Jerome. "I been worried around by the two faces of nature long enough to see that part of it without any trouble, but the other part—well, I had lots of visions but I never found one to get reconciled with yet. Mostly I broke out in a sweat and
woke up."

"Yah! Well, dreams an' visions is different things. The Indians chase their vision afterwards. They don't let it sneak up behind them. In a dream there's more chasin' comin' in than there is goin' out." Clem yawned and stretched, scratching his lean belly.

From the darkness of the roadway a mournful song lifted above the dying wind. Soon a team of brown horses snorted and shied toward the hitchrack, and sitting in the high springseat mounted on the wagon, arms flung about each other's shoulders and feet braced on the dash, were two young farmers in suit coats and overalls. There was a milling of shadows among the tipis. A sleepy woman with long braids and bare feet shuffled through the sand to the fire. She wore a loose dress. Someone threw an armload of twigs and branches on the fire. Sparks shot up. Yellow flames nibbled at the twigs. One man lay stretched out, knees slack and hat over face, near the blaze. He had a bottle at his armpit. The sleepy woman drew the cork with her teeth and spat it out, lifting the bottom. One of the young farmers slid a crate from his wagon and set it to one side, still singing. A small boy emerged behind Walking Buffalo, who snored on, slipped out the opening, and scurried to tie up the horses. He shot harried glances at the sleepy woman with the bottle, like a half-grown rabbit
lost from the warren. A commotion stirred in one of the
Tipis. A big-eyed girl got her dark face out the flap and
was yanked in again. Two black hats appeared. There was a
short dispute, a few sharp slaps, and a loud lament. The
two black hats collared a man with white knees outside and
hoisted him, arm and leg grabbed on each side like a chair,
to a leafy spot away from the fire and sat him down. He
carried his overalls and shoes in his hand. He blinked
owlishly. One black hat stayed to squat near the tipis,
brim tipped over eyes and shrouded in his blanket. There
was a lull in the wind, a hush of small sounds of night,
and Jerome thought he could hear the intimate murmuring in
tipis, the murmuring of blanketed couples at play. Only
the roar of the river sounded afar. Beyond ragged edges of
white clouds, the moon sailed bright and polished like a
glint of a silver amulet through an opened white bodice.

Later in the sod-roofed cabin Jerome tossed in his
blankets till dawn; he dreamed of the singing farm boys and
bare feet shuffling in the sand, the carefree laughter be-
side a glowing fire and a knobby-kneed man with owlish eyes
sitting alone in the leaves, the intimate murmuring and the
scurrying Indian boy, a silver amulet and a butterfly that
flitted, silently, silently, with red-and-black-striped
wings, never resting, settling now on this shoulder and now
on that, haphazardly, without any preference for soft
shoulders, flabby shoulders, skinny shoulders, muscled shoulders, fat shoulders, straight shoulders, hunched shoulders—all looked alike. Before the morning cast tinges of pink and yellow over the low hills, Jerome half-awoke as the door opened, feigning sleep, and Benjamin slid inside and eased into his bunk. After waiting until Benjamin's breathing sounded heavy, Jerome crept out shivering in the predawn cold, barefooted, to quietly unbolt the tailgate and lay it against a wagon wheel, upset like it had been dropped there hurriedly.

When the first pink and yellow tinges came, Ruben on his way to the barn to feed and harness the horses discovered Dream gone and fetched Uncle Jacob and Roota Doigtweiller. By the time the brassy sun had arisen in the crisp autumn sky, Jerome and Benjamin were in the sheep corral with them. The acrid stench of sheep stung their eyes and dust hung heavy as the restless sheep blatted in circles. Jerome and Benjamin worked through them together, eyes alert and knees prying the jammed woolly bodies apart, but Dream was not to be found. Roota whistled his sheep dog over the low wooden panels that enclosed the flock, and Jerome and Benjamin were given the job of holding them bunched at the gate while Roota, a handful of pebbles transferred from his left hand to his right to keep an accurate tally, counted them out. Uncle Jacob and Ruben knelt by the counting gate to watch
for him, but after the last long-nosed sheep had blatted and leaped through the opening, Roota reported a full tally and Dream was nowhere to be found. Roota eyed the three of them suspiciously and they fell to conjecturing what could have happened to the missing lamb.

"I saw the tracks come this way," Ruben insisted for the fourth time. "Near the wagon are tracks of shoes and a barefooted man. The sheep tracks were Dream's though. He never walked much where the ground was hard and his hooves had got sharp. They never had no chance to wear smooth. The tracks circled the sheep shed and disappeared at the corner, in the manure. And that wooden panel," pointing at the corner of the sheep pen, "was crowded forward just like it is now. It looked like a sheep had pushed his way in."

"Ahhhh," said Uncle Jacob, half to himself. He kept shifting his eyes from one to the other, bristling his brown mustache with a forefinger and then rubbing it smooth again.

"Maybe a wild Indian got him," Jerome suggested. "Maybe they had a mean one break loose from the rest of the tribe and he went on a sheep-stealing rampage. Clem said one time that every so often an Indian breaks loose from the tribe and he don't know where he's at and he just throws things around and don't know what he's doing."

"Yahhh," said Uncle Jacob. He watched him carefully for several moments, and chewed at his mustache, until
Jerome began to think he really was the sheep-stealer and that the rest of what had happened was part of the dream.

"Aw!" Benjamin broke in. "An Indian wouldn't bust open the tailgate when he could easy lift him over the top. I think somebody from town tried to steal him and he got away. Maybe he tried to squeeze through the panels and couldn't make it and was chased down toward the river. We should search the brush along the river bank before we go accusing the Indians of stealing him. We might not even find him at all if he fell in the river and drowned."

Uncle Jacob was beginning to look more and more skeptical as the stories were told. Finally he went back to the wagon himself, studied the welter of tracks in the soft dirt, and retraced the lamb's sharp hooftracks, and searched for tufts of wool at the slivered panel that had been sprung. Ruben was getting nervous. Then Uncle Jacob pointedly asked Roota how far away the Indian camp was located and whether they had ever bothered his flock before, and when Roota said the camp was pitched a moonlight jaunt away by foot and, in fact, he and Longweit sometimes took them a mutton and extra garden stuff to keep them friendly, Uncle Jacob just sat on his heels and let handfuls of dirt dribble through his callused fingers, not looking at any of them any more. Jerome thought then that Uncle Jacob must have had a powerful vision when he was a young man, because he
had kept himself reconciled with the All throughout the years; and even though Jerome had not stolen the lamb, he felt kind of thievish from trying to help Benjamin find a good story to stall Uncle Jacob off. So after Ruben finally said that Jerome had sneaked in after being gone a long time and that early in the morning, sometime before daylight, here had come Benjamin gliding in the door, shoes in hand, Jerome and Benjamin didn't say it was so, but they didn't say it wasn't either. Then when Uncle Jacob said that Benjamin and Jerome would herd Roota's sheep during those two county-fair days and that they would count them out at mornings and in at night to curb the bartering spirit, Jerome felt so low and miserable that he was secretly glad he wouldn't get to see the Indian horseraces or talk with authority on the finer points of raising fat lambs that he had thought out before they had come to town. He wasn't mad at Benjamin any more either, even if he was a low-down polecat.

"The lantern!" Ruben shouted again. His visored cap disappeared behind the rump of the near-horse. He was unhooking the tug chains from the singletree. His white face appeared again in the moonlight. "Jerome! Bring the lantern!" The off-horse, a gangly colt that Uncle Jacob had broken to the harness the summer before, spooked at the yell and started up. "Whoa! Whoa, now!"

The cow that had stalled in the open gate coiled back
upon her hindquarters to clean the hair with her tongue. A wet slobber curled around Jerome's overall leg. "Hyahhh!" he reached a manure chip and bounced it off her wet nose. "Hyahhh! Move on! Move on!" The cow humped, tail stiff, and pushed forward; pungent-smelling manure scattered at the gate and in the corral. Jerome picked up his count again. Behind came a rhythmic clicking of cow hocks like a piece of two-by-four methodically rapped against the furred skulls of live gophers—thnuk, thnuk—thnuk—thnuk— and shadowy cows kept climbing the dark pathway; they paused for a brief rest now and again and then, jostled by others behind, moved between the gateposts by twos and threes.

"J'rome—bring th' lan'ern!" Ruben shrilled over the cow's backs. Jerome threw another cowchip, harder this time, and rounded up the last few stragglers and pushed them into the corral. He couldn't see Ruben, but he heard the rattle of chain as Ruben reached across the tongue to drop the off-horse's tugs. Ruben knew better than to get behind those quick hooves when the colt was excited. Other bundle racks rattled over the frozen stubble field now, coming in for the night.

"It's in the leanto!" Jerome hollered back. He dropped the shaggy sorrel's reins to pick up the heavy wire-gate.
Sallow Ruben was Uncle Jacob's oldest. His lank hair that hung black and oily was kept draped behind his small ears to prevent it from falling across his eyes. He seemed entirely to lack that feel of balance among his senses that most men have in varying proportions and usually take for granted. His brown eyes glittered whenever his unpredictable will was thwarted. He seemed uncoordinated with physical reality, as though the parallel tracks of his senses were switched from the mainline to a spur track whenever his mind grasped an idea. He was like the chuffing engine at Dan that, while sidetracked to dump clinkers from the firebox, rolled up an easy grade to three creosote ties lashed with heavy chains at the deadend where the clinkers were piled.

Ruben's oily forehead easily festered blackheads, and so he wore his striped denim cap pushed as far down as the hairy eyebrows that met at the bridge of his nose. He rode no horse faster than a trot and sang a weak contralto in the church choir as often as he could. Because his heavy biceps and thick torso responded easily to the hard work of the farm and because he was also the oldest, Uncle Jacob often called him out to help lister deep parallel ditches to hold the soil from drifting whenever the blowing land began to move during the high velocity windstorms of the depression years.

The soil, finely pulverized on the high plains from
too much working over by plows during the wet years and followed by years of more plowing and moisture and then, suddenly, by years of no moisture but wind, wild and uncontrolled wind, began to drift in even a light breeze. If the wind continued to rise, shrieking through windmill struts and lifting roofs off barns and chicken coops, the dust became thicker and thicker, often obscuring the landscape and mounting in density, until vision was reduced to ten or twenty yards, smothering cows and sheep where they humped sheltered behind cutbanks or in gullies. Many farmers died from the dust storms because they did not know what silicosis was and probably would not have tried very hard to stay alive even if they had known. They were hopeless years, tired years that shrivelled a man's spirit and dried his innards up like a peeled apple left in the sun, and for a long time the farmers despaired that the good years would ever return.

So when the winds first began to rise, Uncle Jacob and Ruben would knot handkerchiefs over their mouths and nose and hook four-horse spans to the hard-pulling listers. They would turn up big chunks of moist subsoil that lay deep underneath the pulverized blowdirt and ditch it into twin banks for windbreaks to prevent the earth from moving, and if the swooping winds lasted only a day or two, the banked chunks would protect the topsoil against the wind--
the drying, chiseling, swooping wind.

With leather lines laid across overall straps and tied behind his neck, Ruben would catch a landmark for a sighting and march behind his deep-ditching lister. He seemed to resent it though; his sullen mind failed to grasp the grownup trust and responsibility that such a man's work carried with it, even though the trust sprang not from arbitrary willingness to delegate work simply because Uncle Jacob thought work was good for the soul (which he did) but from sheer necessity. The gaunt years imposed a serious charge on the farmers to glean whatever bare living the meagre moisture might provide for their hungry families, but Ruben believed he was abused. He chaffed, he itched, he fumed, he resorted to many small malices to work off his frustration.

The first time Jerome had gone to trap gophers during the fourth year. Uncle Jacob and Ruben had hooked up at daybreak and gone out to lister. Sand had pelted the windows and swooped along near the ground in stinging furies until almost noon. Then Jerome and Benjamin unfastened the windmill latch to pump water in the livestock tank, hunted a long piece of unrotted binder twine and a short two-by-four, and took the brown path that led down to the gopher flat away over in the third bend of the creek near the waterhole. On the hillside the wind, pushed upward
by the steep slope, whipped in gusts hard enough to knock them down if they had not set themselves for it before a sudden gust hit them. Along the dry creekbed bare gooseberry and chokecherry bushes provided a windbreak until they hiked up on the flat at the gopher town. To the east a few hundred yards a long ridge began to slope upwards to a high mesa, steep and shaley on the north, that had big granite rocks at the summit and that arose almost at the center of the valley like a natural lookout site for primitive warrior tribes; under the north face, protected from the brunt of blizzards and windstorms, the grey-and-yellow gophers chit-chatted gaily from their burrows, as though in convivial acknowledgement of an imminent calm spell. They scampered in quick dashes across the bare ground, bushy tails suddenly flitting when they caught a new smell or heard a strange sound.

"You take it like this," said Benjamin, "and tie a slip-knot in the twine. Then when a gopher pokes his head high enough from his hole, you jerk it. You got to drag him right to you though, before he can get away."

He laid the twine noose over the edge of the gopher hole and smoothed dirt over it to keep it in place and to hide it.

"What we going to do when we catch one?" Jerome said. "Maybe we could put him in a cage and feed him."
He sat on the ground twenty feet away from the hole and pulled a sticker from his bare foot. Big green tumbleweeds, with rust-red and purplish streaks, grew thick like clusters of giant wild grapes spreading in wild, untended profusion at a deserted vineyard.

"Get down!" hissed Benjamin. He lay flat on his belly behind a tumbleweed. "You think any old gopher is going to wander out with you setting there scratching your dirty toe?"

Jerome flopped on his belly and hugged the ground beside Benjamin. "Wasn't scratching it!" he hissed back. "Had a sticker."

"Shhh!"

They lay so for a long time. Suffused sunbeams were soaked up by high-flying clouds of dust like feeble rays of a lighted kerosene wick through a smoked-up lantern globe. Overhead the wind moved in a swift rush that spun the tin flutters of the windmill that was anchored behind the cow corral on the faraway hill. The wheel spun and blurred and shifted direction and blurred again. Then a patch of coppery-red fur and a black nose stuck up at the edge of the hole. Jerome held his breath and watched. The short ears, barely seen as tufts of fur, turned this way and that like the orange vane on the windmill when the wind shifted. A few black whiskers popped up and the gray neck with a little
spot of white at the throat. The gopher waited, small eyes like black beads cocked and slanted to see what the nose and ears missed, and then stood upright with his small yellow paws folded at his yellow chest as though praying for the return of good years in gopherdom.

The twine wrapped around Benjamin’s hand gave a sudden jerk. "Gotcha!" he said. The gopher chattered furiously, rolling over and over in a dusty ball as Benjamin pulled him in hand over hand. Dangling from the loop of twine, the gopher swung in an arc.

"Youch!" Jerome said, dropping him again.

"They got sharp teeth," said Benjamin. "They dig with their paws, but they use their teeth for chewing through roots and prying rocks loose." He kept one arm upraised and crouched for the two-by-four. He knocked the gopher over the head. The gopher hung limp from the twine.

"What did ya do that for?" said Jerome. "Ya didn't have to hit him!" He turned the soft furry body over with his foot. Dark blood oozed from his nose.

"Varmint money," Benjamin explained matter-of-factly. "Papa said they eat so much seeded wheat that a bounty has been put on them. You just bring the tails into the county courthouse in town so they can count 'em and they pay you a penny apiece. They dig up so many wheat seeds the county pays to get rid of 'em."
Jerome wooled the little body over once more. Only a smirch of blood at the nose and that was all. Just a sharp rap with a two-by-four and a smirch of dark blood. "Well, maybe it don't make no difference if they eat wheat or not. Nothing grows anyhow any more. So what difference does it make?"

"I guess that's so," said Benjamin. He pressed the blade of his knife at the tail joint, holding the tail between a thumb and a finger. The furry tail parted neatly. "But anyhow they pay a cent apiece for 'em in town and Papa says we got to control 'em somehow if we ever do get any more rain," glancing at the yellowish dust clouds where rain clouds grey and heavy as lead needed to be, "though it don't seem no ways likely."

"They sure are purty little fellers," Jerome said. "It's too bad there ain't enough wheat for them and us too. Then we wouldn't have to kill them."

They had eight gopher tails laid lengthwise side by side and a growing pile of furry bodies when Ruben came from the waterhole around the bend behind them. Jerome heard the champ of teeth on bits and blink of buckles against pins before he saw them, tied halter to collar ring in a double span. Ruben led the gentle Tophet with the three other big draft horses alongside. The wind had died. The sun scorched the earth, raising heat waves. Flies buzzed the gopher bodies.
Ruben stopped the restless horses. His cap was pulled up. Beads of sweat stood out on his greyish forehead. "Papa says Jerome is t' unharness," he said to Benjamin, "and you are to clean the stalls and put Tophet on the stoneboat to haul manure to the corn field." He gestured at the row of gopher tails. "What you doing this for?"

"Mine and Benjamin's," said Jerome. "We're gonna sell them in town for a penny apiece."

"Yours and Benjamin's, huh?" said Ruben. "Whoa--!"

He snapped the rope end at the middle horse's velvety nose. The horse threw his head in the air and batted his eyes, his lower lip pinkish. "Who caught them?"

"Jerome caught five. He's fast--faster 'an me," Benjamin said.

"Jerome caught five, huh? I'll bet he didn't kill any!" said Ruben.

Benjamin shook his head. He was beginning to look worried, "No--Jerome doesn't hit 'em hard enough. They fight back at him. I knock 'em over the head and whack off their tails."

"Hmphhh, I thought so!"

"What do you mean, 'Hmphhh, you thought so?'" demanded Benjamin.

"Hmphhh, you're so scared of him you can't see he
lets you do all the work—whoa! Whoa now!" the knotted rope end flicked. The iron-blue horse jerked his head up and backwards.

"I ain't neither scared of him!" said Benjamin hotly. "We caught 'em together—only Jerome don't hit 'em hard enough to kill them."

"You're scared, scared. An old yellow-guts, that's what you are," Ruben said. "Is Jerome going to cut the tails off? Is Jerome going to clean out the horse stalls? Is Jerome going to manure the corn patch in the hot sun? Did Jerome kill the gophers? Did he cut the tails off? Hmphhh—old yellow-guts!"

Then changing his angle, "Look, Jerome doesn't live here. He just stays here, that's all. Papa lets him stay here because he has nowhere else to go. No one else wants him. This is Papa's farm and someday it will be ours—yours and mine. These are our gophers, not Jerome's. You owe it to yourself to keep those gopher tails. Here, now take them. Enjoy yourself with the money. What do y' say? Take them—go ahead!"

He was like a big-time national advertiser pitched to the low animal instincts, assuming the proposition (indeed, seeing no alternative) and bothering, irritating, prodding, pounding, a hedonistic mind first thrown off-balance by the cunning rhetoric of the onslaught and then
seduced by the subtle irrationality of the plea. Ruben kept working on him, countering his moves and deploying his strategy, until from want of the will to resist Benjamin saw it his way. It was easier for him that way. A new religion, a new rhetorical liturgy and new irrational priesthood was craving dominance. Many years later Jerome was to recognize how completely the new religion, first sub-consciously employed by glandular Ruben as a means to self-serving, would dominate the two older religions. Ruben's articles of faith were visceral. Christian faith in man, like the simple Indian belief in nature, could not survive the systematized attacks of words and men used as tools by the will to dominate—the will to power.

So Jerome had had to fight Benjamin, not because he wanted to but because he had to, since Ruben had dominated Benjamin with such profligate arrogance and in so shrewd a manner that to refuse would have been to undertake the onus of cowardice. So they fought, the two barefoot boys in ragged overalls, under a hot July sun until both were snorting and choking dust in short gasps of smothered rage and unwrought vindictiveness, as they pummelled and jabbed and thumped each other in a patch of green-and-purplish tumbleweeds at the foot of Lookout Mesa, and all the while Ruben looked on and jeered as one or the other got in an especially good lick and spattered fresh blood.
Then Uncle Jacob, returning across a plateau above the waterhole, heard the mingled cries of pain and fury and saw the dust rise near the gopher town. He tied three horses to a stout bush and rode his harnessed mare into the coulee. "Nuhhh-nuhhh! What ist? What ist?" he said. He shook his head in disapproval and urged the mare closer with heels in ribs.

The two contenders stopped their battle and backed off. Uncle Jacob fixed keen eyes on Ruben first, "Yahhh, Ruben? So, how gets the work done, huh?"

Ruben looked unconcerned, as though he were just happening by and noticed the two boys were squared off against each other. "They're fighting," he said. "I saw 'um myself. I was bringing in the horses after the wind died and saw them here by the gopher town." He shifted his weight and stood firm on both feet. He peered slyly out the corner of his eyes to where Jerome and Benjamin paused under the hot sun, sweat and dust and blood mingled on their faces and shirts. The glitter in his eyes wavered when he shrewdly calculated the bristled mustache and beetled brows; Uncle Jacob's chilled blue eyes under the brim of his straw hat fended his words aside without a moment's consideration. Uncle Jacob nodded curtly at Ruben once, dismissing him, and he anxiously tugged on his lead rope and scurried off.
"Yahhh, now," Uncle Jacob said. Muscles bunching tightly along his jaw, he hooked elbow over left hame and slid down to confront the unruly ones. "Yahhh, now--say how it was."

"Says they're easy," Benjamin choked back frustrated sobs. "The easy jobs--he gets them. Ruben said so." He poked an accusing finger at where Jerome snuffled and rubbed dust and tears from his face with a sweaty forearm.

"Nuhhh, nuhhh," said Uncle Jacob. He wagged his head in a perplexed way and turned to Jerome. "Ja--aber two it takes. The fight takes two. Not?"

"Said I didn't belong," Jerome said, on quivering shanks, "He said go home. He said I di'nt belong here." He dug his toes into the dust in sheepish humiliation. "Never said uh wanted to come here nohow. Never said nothin'."

"Nuhhh . . .," was all Uncle Jacob said. He sized up first one and then the other in his imperturbable way and rubbed two fingers across his weather-hued cheek and stood motionless long and long, as though figuring out what had to be done. Then, beckoning silently, he swung himself aboard, Jerome grabbing his elbow to climb behind, and clucked his tongue at the mare. Across the dry creek-bed along the sloping ridge to the high mesa above the gopher town climbed the mare.
Midway to the top, on a rocky hogback where buffalo grass grew sparsely, Uncle Jacob extended his elbow to Jerome and then dismounted from the blowing mare. "So, he said. "So--now the talk only comes."

Fists clenched at sides and back rigid, Jerome fixed his gaze at a spot just beyond Uncle Jacob's right ear. "He had no call to say it," he said, trying to control the quaver. "I never asked for nuthin'."

"What?" Uncle Jacob's voice made no judgement, only inquired. "He said what?"

"I never asked . . . ."

"The Ruben sometimes . . . ."

". . . never asked fur . . . ."

"Not a mean boy ist, the Ruben," said Uncle Jacob. "Di'nt never want nuthin' nohow." His big toe worked on a thimble of a hole in the clay.

Uncle Jacob shook his head vigorously, "Not mean, the Ruben. Only the training he wants." His hands measured out a length of stovewood. "To know what the right ist he wants. He follow the right will. The oldest follows the right."

"A mav'rick he called me," Jerome blurted in sudden animosity. "He said it mean. Like it was a mean thing. Cause my pa lives somewheres else now. Ruben said it first, then Benjamin." His voice broke and he mumbled to himself, "Said it was like a bastard--like a bastard." His lip
curled at the recollection and he wheeled swiftly, "Damn him. Oh, but damn him anyhow." Shoulders hunched and eyes fixed on the ground, he held himself tightly controlled.

"Nuhhh - huhhh," said Uncle Jacob in surprise. Then lightly he laid his hand on Jerome's shoulder and slowly added, "Mine to do for . . ." and when Jerome shrugged the hand off " . . . to the top." He pointed a finger. "Up there I wait. Up there after while." He tugged the mare's reins to follow and climbed at an angle toward the jutting scarp.

Atop the monument-like mesa, loose clay lay bare where the buffalo grass thinned and where yellow and deep-brown shale protruded from the thin mantle. On the far side Uncle Jacob knelt, hat in hand and wind blowing wisps of hair, and rubbed loose, clayey earth between fingers and palm and let it crumble out for another handful. The wind-burned neck and face looked red against the white skin of his bared head. Jerome moved patiently to just behind him and inclined his head to catch a glimpse of what Uncle Jacob saw.

Just seven miles down the dirt road, now far below as it wound around the low outlying foothills of the Upper Muskie, Muskaganganaga Rock reared its massive stone steeple toward the sky. Under the lees of the Rock, built skillfully on the deck of the stranded ferry, was the First
Church for All-Souls that Jerome had come to know so well. It seemed visibly silhouetted against the crumbling brown cutbanks of the sluggish river, now seen as a sharp impression and then dissolved behind shimmering waves of heat.

Without turning Uncle Jacob began slowly, stopping often to frame his words or let what seemed unclear make itself clear with marked silence. "So . . . is not the same. Maverick ist--ist--calf lost. Is by herd lost." His hands moved, trying to shape the thing he felt but could not bring into words. "Is not a nice thing--bast--what he said. Nuhhh, aber not the same ist."

Jerome remained impassive. The hot sun burned against the dusty thatch of brown hair that fell across his forehead and ears.

"Mine to provide for," Uncle Jacob said oddly. "Mine to do for." He glanced quickly at Jerome, troubled frown ashen above deep mournful eyes, and turned his head again. "For the Ruben is the church. For the first-born always the church training ist--to know right. To learn the right he wants. Then the Ruben become the preacher. Ja, like Pastor Nolafson yet." He raised a little and pulled his shoulders straighter. "Many years has it been so. In the old country one brother before me yet in the church. Three boys my father had. His before him four. For the first-born always the church ist . . ." So he
talked along, gripping his knuckles in despair when the words failed and, at times, almost shouting to bring passionate force to his utterances.

Many years later Jerome would know how his strong religion was at work in all that he had ever done and said. Not the simple outer form of religion found in communal group associations whose highest pitch was to be found singing a shakey contralto in the church choir, nor in the fraternal brotherhood lumped together to reaffirm each other's passive acceptance of a sterile, and often incoherent, dogmatism, but in his essentially humble acquiescence to the mighty force of God and the great forces of Nature, working together, through the winds and the rains and the crops, to chisel a spiritual kinship among the farmers and tradesmen who knew him well and who respected him because he stood for something that they sensed to be of a higher moral order than their own, and often enough (as Jerome already knew) in his fierce zeal that could no longer be contained within his lithe frame and demanded the kinship of like spirits scattered sparingly the breadth of the hard wooden pews just seven miles down the dirt road on a Sunday morning. And Jerome knew that this man's vision was a big thing, far bigger than the man himself, and he caught the passion of the fever that burned within and was never to be laid to rest until the body itself was laid to rest.
Some of what Uncle Jacob said did not make sense until a fellow had a chance to think it over for a while. And some of it was not to make sense until many many years later, when Jerome had forgotten who had put the idea into his head until, suddenly emergent, it had floated out of the periphery of his thoughts and become a part of his life as the need for it had arisen.

Jerome patted the shaggy sorrel neck, the wire corral gate forgotten at his feet. Hopefully he hollered again, "In the leanto! The lantern's in the leanto, Ruben!"

Ruben's bulk loomed at the front of his blowing team; he unstrapped the neckyoke from the off-horse's collar. He fumbled the strap through the ring and the heavy yoke slipped from his raised knee before he could grab it. The yoke fell on his toe. "H-o-d d-d-a-m-n-n-n!" he gritted. He caught his toe in his hand and hopped up and down in a little circle. The off-horse snorted and jumped sideways. Ruben lurched at the bit. Tightening, the leather lines snapped the left arm of the crosstree. The other arm held. The shying horse was jerked short by the stout rope that secured him to the collar of his calmer teammate. Ruben swore and jerked at his bit. "Get it then! Get that lantern!" His tone sounded shovey like it always did when things didn't go his way. "Get it purty fas' too!"

Jerome heaved a sigh, the hotness creeping up behind
his neck and ears, and fought back a desire to mount and ride off. Change, constant and steady change was, he knew, near at hand. Inexorable change brought to all things their time and their place, like the red-and-white calf he had brought in from Box Elder Creek one time. He felt dejected. His mind shut out the distant rattle of wagons bouncing across the stubble field, the metallic clank of buckles and chains against harness leather near the barn, and the closer heavings and bumpings of shadowy cows inside the corral. He heard only the harsh edge of Ruben's words—get it! "No," he said in a low voice, shaking his head sadly, "No, I'll not do that." Then putting a crust on his thought he said it out, "No, by hokey! No! I'll not do that!" Things happened sometimes over which men had no control as though it was a part of the natural order of things. Jerome thought of the calf again—the red-and-white calf that had never hurt anybody.

It had been five years before. To Jerome and Benjamin the task of herding cows had fallen in that hot summer. Early in the mornings before the red sun had kindled the mirror, they would turn the cows loose from the patched wire corral. The cows would amble along county right-of-way to gnaw hungrily on green tumbleweeds while Aunt Helga tucked pork sandwiches into the bib pockets of their overalls. The three Draggerschoon boys always came from the scoria hills
with their herd and met Jerome and Benjamin at the crossroad. They threw together the milling, bawling herds of reds, blacks, some whitefaces, and assorted brocklefaces and brindles, a few spindly little calves mournfully bawling in the scramble, and racing along in the powdery dust, pushed the hundred-odd cows to newly discovered pasture.

When the sun reached its zenith, the Draggerschoons hazed the herd to the scant shade provided by a low overhang of outcropping shale and a few scraggly box elder, there to hold them near the fetid spring against the fierce attacks by the big green heel flies until the sun blazed-out for the day. Jerome and Benjamin left the herd to range the hills in silent companionship, shirts plastered to backs, clambering along rocky ravines and ranging across wide plateaus farther ahead to pick out patches of the tough, curley buffalo grass from wet years long passed. In a brushy swale at the head of a deep ravine was where they first saw it. They were leaning back against their heels, knees and toes carrying the weight; they had stopped to catch the faint breeze that had sprung up. They had their shirts slung around their waists by the sleeves.

"Down there. Look at that," said Jerome. He sighted along his outstretched arm at the red patch of hair in the tall buckbrush.

"Huh, look at what?" Benjamin said, caught up short
by the elbow in the ribs.

"See it," said Jerome. "Down in that swale. Down there—it moved." His bare feet padded swiftly across the flinty rock scarp.

"Eeeeyyhhhh, Eeeeeyyyyyaaahhh," the red-and-white patch bawled. His cry seemed weak.

Benjamin veered off and broke into a trot, "I'll hold him on the downward side. I'll head him." He dodged waist-high brush and gained a clear spot on the down-hill slope from which he could head off anything that fled his way.

The white-faced calf tottered on wobbly legs, head close to the ground, and bawled without hope. Jerome threshed the dry buckbrush, and the calf's head came up with alarm, front legs spraddled and red ears drooped. Jerome eased ahead, parting clumps of brush with his hips thrust sideways, careful to make no sudden moves. Then the calf bawled again and charged him.

"Poor little feller," said Jerome. The calf waved its tail wildly and bunted a slick muzzle against his overalls.

"No brand either, I bet," Benjamin said, when he had worked his way to them.

Jerome encircled the warm neck with his arm and felt along the ribs and back, "Figure maybe he ain't eaten for a
couple of days—at least."

"None that I can see," Benjamin walked around him, inspecting the hips, sides, and shoulders carefully. "No wattle or earmark either."

Jerome's fingers tucked the swollen tongue into the mouth, "No milk or water for some time."

"Not a mark on him. Several weeks old too."

"Wonder where his ma is?"

"Looks like good stock and . . . ."

"Maybe she's . . . ."

"Maybe even purebred!" Benjamin's eyes lit up at the thought. He regarded the knobby knees and deep red coat with a new respect.

". . . died. In one of these ravines. Alone."

"Bull calf too," was the triumphant cry.

"Hawkes's, surely. Hawkes's got whitefaces."

"Yeh, you think so . . . but seven or eight miles . . . ."

"They got lots 'n lots of cows. Awful dry . . . spotted a bunch up there about a week ago." Jerome nodded toward the long rim of bluffs to the southwest that formed the natural boundary between the big livestock ranches in the breaks of the river and the small farms and ranches plotted out along the farthest reaches of the Upper Muskie where the land lay flatter and stretched out more evenly.
"Down under the bluffs. Working along to . . ."

"Naw . . . " Benjamin shook his head dubiously.

"Hawkes's got so much grass and range . . ."

". . . working along to these plateaus and deep
buffalo swales," he shook his head doggedly. "I saw 'em
while you napped at the spring . . ."

"And besides, I don't think we know whose he is, do we?"

Jerome frowned and said evenly, "Let Uncle Jacob say
that. Uncle Jacob will look for the owner."

"But if he doesn't notice. He never sees the herd
anyway since we got to taking them out to pasture."

"He's got--easy now, little feller." Jerome crooked
his arm tighter and shoved the calf's flank against his knee.
The calf stood quietly again. "He's got to know. Uncle
Jacob decides."

"But suppose he doesn't notice him until he's older.
When he sees what a good bull he'll make . . . ," Benja-
mint eyes brightened. "Suppose we let Clem take one of
your calves home with him. Then if he asks, we'll say you
traded--we'll let him take one of mine too. Say, two for
one. Then later we'll . . ."

"He'd know," said Jerome. "Uncle Jacob knows. Any-
how he ain't our'n. Not to do for. Not to keep."

"Leave him here then," Benjamin said. "No use feeding
him and taking care of him for someone else. Let someone else take care of him."

He knocked his knee against the calf's shoulder. "Dumb lookin' calf, anyhow."

"No. I'll not. Not to die out here alone."

Benjamin sleeved the sweat from his eyes in exasperation, "Aw, he won't die. His mammy is prob'ly around close. She's prob'ly huntin' right now."

"He won't make another day alone."

"Well, if that don't beat all--three miles across country to the herd and four more home again." Benjamin squatted, chewing a twig of buckbrush. "You can't even get him to the herd alone--and you want to give him away again. Hawkes's have lots of cows. They won't even know he's gone."

"Uncle Jacob decides."

"Well, I s'pose, we could carry him."

"No," said Jerome. "We couldn't get half a mile in this heat carrying him."

Benjamin knelt beside the calf and slid his arms under the flank and brisket. He hefted the calf, "He don't weigh more'n--say seventy-five."

"He'd struggle if we carried him. He's weak now. It'd kill him sure. Too heavy anyhow. Too hot. Wouldn't get half a mile."

Finally it was decided that Benjamin would return to the spring at Box Elder Creek alone and help Clem and
Lum and Malhur drift the herd to evening browse. The herd would be pushed south—a mile or so from the swale—to graze isolated patches of buffalo grass spotted that day. Benjamin would tie the lead-cow Molly with the big udder to a rock or bush. As the evening cooled, Jerome could hogtie the bull-calf with his shirt and fetch Molly to the swale. Benjamin had wanted to cut Uncle Jacob's cows from the herd and come in later, after the bull-calf had suckled and slept to regain strength, with Jerome and the cows still together. But Jerome had figured that the bull-calf might not be strong enough to travel that far till late at night, and perhaps not at all. Then Uncle Jacob would worry where they were and come after them, so Benjamin agreed to go in alone.

Sometime past midnight, as near as Jerome could tell, he had worked the cow and calf past the deep shadows of Box Elder. The calf, though suckled and rested often, was too weak to go far. It would trot along on wobbly legs for a short distance and then suddenly buckle its front legs and lay down. Jerome would squat on his heels for ten or fifteen minutes, move the cow close, boost him to his feet, and push on a little farther. Later, maybe two hours later, they had covered less than a mile but had cleared the western plateaus and ravines and were out on the benchland, following the rutted wheel tracks on county right-of-way.
A large silver moon shone brightly and cast weird shadows. The tops of fenceposts buried under drifts of sand seemed like short stakes used by county engineers when they laid out a new road. Piles of tumbleweeds bucked tight into one corner fence looked like a homesteader's shack and Jerome half expected to see a barking dog dash out to challenge him. An abandoned tractor a hundred yards off the road looked like a derelict ship moored in a quiet harbor. An unusual stillness hung over the cold night air. They barely moved now, and when the calf plopped down again, tucked its legs underneath, and stubbornly refused to be budged, Jerome decided to leave them there until morning. With a short rope he tied the cow near where the calf had plopped like a toad in loose sand and quickened his pace up the road alone. He looked back a couple of times as he left them and once more from the first rise and saw cow and calf settled comfortably together in the roadway. They looked like two adventurers preparing for a long journey and resting comfortably for the train to come along to take them on the first lap.

Early that same morning the wind came up and the land began to move. Upstairs Jerome slept. He turned under the blankets when a gust of sand swept along the eaves. By five-thirty the wind increased in velocity. Uncle Jacob hallooed up the dim stairwell and Ruben and Benjamin and
Jerome tumbled down, buttoning their shirts as they came.

"Pooosh," said Jerome, folding aside the light curtain. Huge dry tumbleweeds shaken out from fencelines upwind bounced and whirled through the dusty air, collected against the sheds or on the wagons for a moment and then bowled across the plowed fields. The dust lifted and formed little blizzards near the ground. Then like a flash he remembered, "The little bull-calf. He's in the open . . ."

"Nuhhh--" said Uncle Jacob somberly. "In this storm no man very far moves. With calves ist the same--Ja, Helga, we turn the cows loose and come back yet."

"But I left 'em in the roadway--on purpose," Jerome said anxiously. "So's we could bring them up in the morning--he's out there alone, in the storm." He jerked at the doorknob and would have gone out, but Uncle Jacob had a foot wedged against it and the flat of a hand against Jerome's chest.

"Need shelter, the animals. Not to leave them at open road." said Uncle Jacob. "Storms. Many dust storms in dry years."

"But I came as far as I could. The calf wobbled and fell. He'd cry and then he'd fall. He kept doin' it." said Jerome. "I had to leave 'em. Just had to . . . ."

Uncle Jacob nodded in silent agreement, and Jerome knuckled his eyes with futility. Aunt Helga lit a kerosene
lamp and prodded the wood stove with a poker. The brothers tied flour sacks across their noses and mouths and pulled denim caps tight.

The cows had stacked up in the far corner of the corral and mooed deep in their throats near the barn, humped against the driving sand and swirling dust. Uncle Jacob flung the pasture gate wide and prodded at the cows near the barn. Several trotted out. Uncle Jacob and Ruben forced a few more through the opened gate while Jerome and Benjamin beat with their coats in hand against the ones in the far corner to get them to turn. Once outside, all four shouted and waved their denim coats furiously to hold the herd from drifting with the wind. When the lead cows finally reached the meandering creek bed, they dispersed rapidly in the heavy buckbrush and huddled under cutbanks, which provided some shelter from the suffocating dust. Returning up the hill, the four masked figures had the wind behind them and used little effort against the steep grade.

At two in the afternoon the wind increased in velocity and fine, pulverized dirt swooped along at express-train speed. By five they could see a cloud approaching from a direction just south of the Rock. It had the banked appearance of a cumulus cloud but was black instead of white. It hung low and seemed to hug the earth. Instead of being slow to change form, it rolled and rolled upon itself from
the crust downward like measuring land with a big blanket by continually lifting the lower end over the upper in rapid sequences. Swiftly it descended on them and soon enveloped the house. Nothing could be seen through the windows. It was as though a second mantle had been spread above the earth's surface, and its people. All afternoon and most of the night fine blowdirt sifted by the window frames and door sills and gathered in neat little piles in the corners and behind the stove. In the morning when the wind had died enough to venture out, Uncle Jacob and Jerome hitched up a wagon and drove down the roadway. But they found no trace of either cow or bull-calf. Finally, reluctantly, they returned to the farm. Jerome never saw the bull-calf again.

The summer passed in the midst of teeming, worrisome days and heavy, fretful nights, nights spent dreaming of lush green grass and lazy contented cows chewing their cuds near clear pools of ice-blue water. Though often, when a sudden blast of sand was seemingly flung against the high attic window and scraped along the eaves to awaken him, Jerome sat up with a start and could doze only in short feverish snatches.

"No," Jerome said again, slowly and evenly. "No-- I'll not!"

"By hod!" said Ruben. "By hod--you'll not, eh!"

His team tied fast to the wagon now, Ruben poked a leg
between the barbed wires and dodged into the corral. His left leg hooked on a barb as he pulled it after him. It had caught on a seam. It wouldn't release. He hung poised there, splayed hands holding the lower wire down, helpless, for a short time. Then he tore the cloth loose. The milk-cows standing singly and in twos and threes grunted and scattered quickly as he lunged at Jerome. Jerome stood wide-legged, left shoulder dropped to catch the impact.

"You'll not, eh—you'll not, eh!" He crashed headlong into Jerome, spinning him, and grabbed a tight hunk of Jerome's shirt and aimed a hammered blow at his head. Jerome pounded at his head and face and drove one solid fist into his mouth and was himself knocked against the sharp barbs. Ruben bore down on him then, heaving and twisting, and after a short struggle, he grappled Jerome to the hard ground. He sat astraddle Jerome's chest. Blood spilled from his nose and mouth and trickled down his jaw. He shoved a knee tight against each straining bicep, pinning Jerome to the frosty earth, and clawed his hair with two strong hands. "By hod! Didn't I say get it, uh--" he said. He jerked Jerome's head back and forth. "By hod!" Jerome's head was pushed sideways. His right ear and cheek were shoved into the fresh cow manure. "Didn't I, uh!"

At ten Jerome had come to live with Uncle Jacob on the Upper Muskie plateaus. Most of the banks on the high plains
had swung their vaults closed after the bank run, and the few
that hadn't, the few that had dealt directly with the lean,
wind-burned farmers as thinking, feeling men who considered
their farms as much a part of themselves as an arm and who
worked it and ministered to it with as much energy and soli-
citude as they used in rearing their children (and some-
times more), instead of thinking of it as merely so many num-
bers of acres seeded and so many numbers of dollars invested,
these banks too had slowly buttoned up, one by one, during
the hot, dry years of dust and wind that had pervaded the
lands and destroyed the crops like a whirling dervish gyra-
ting on an ant hill. So the banks had foreclosed, and Jer-
ome's widowed papa had written a lengthy letter to his older
brother. It had been decided that Jerome would stay with
Uncle Jacob and Aunt Helga until good years came for Jerome's
papa again. Uncle Jacob's tenuous possession of seven hun-
dred acres of farm and pasture land on which to raise cows
for beef, butter, and milk and to tend a garden plot of
fresh vegetables that could be watered from the windmill had
loomed large as a patrimonial blessing.

At the railhead near the splintery wooden dock had
been where Jerome had first caught sight of Uncle Jacob.
The black engine had ground its string of sooty cars to a
stop, unhooked, and chuffed lazily away to dump clinkers
at the siding and take on water from the company tank that
stood just down the track from the yellow depot and looked like a huge cistern bucket on stilts. A few disconsolate passengers had alighted from the docked cars to stretch cramped legs and wander aimlessly up and down in the shade of the tiny depot flung out in the middle of parched, barren prairie. Jerome clung to the hot steel handrail with one hand, small bundle tucked under arm, and let himself down gingerly from the hot steel vestibule to the hot steel landing platform behind his pa.

Uncle Jacob, spare-built and square-jawed, rested calmly under the shade of the depot overhang. He wore loose bib overalls like Pa only stiffer and unfaded, a blue chambray shirt buttoned tight at the neck, and cowhide lace shoes. His straw hat looked new above a thick brown mustache. Pa's mouth turned up at the corners and his eyes lost their tired look when his big hand met Uncle Jacob's firm grip and slowly tightened, all the while the two measuring each other with their eyes. They talked quietly about the drouth and the chances for a crop this year and the Government's AAA program until Pa gave Jerome a glance and pulled Uncle Jacob aside by the elbow. Jerome squinted his solemn grey eyes and peered through the shimmering heat waves. He tried to appear unconcerned. He set five bare toes on the left instep and stood awhile, staring at the water bubbling over behind the coal car, and then the other five on the
right, but squinting up and down the string of cars now. By
and by the big engine hissed into the loading dock, nudged
its string of cars to life, and tooted.

Pa wrung Uncle Jacob's hand hard and paced directly
to Jerome. "Remember the prayers--like yer mama taught
you, young fellow," he said kindly. He placed his heavy cal-
lused hand on top of Jerome's head. "And take care you don't
take no hurt." The heavy hand came down several times on
Jerome's bowed head in a rough pat. "But if you got to choose
between takin' a hurt and actin' a man--if you got to do it,
choose right. Choose to actin' a man."

Jerome kissed his pa on both rough cheeks, then
backed off and gripped his big hand fiercely. The black
engine panted dockside hollowly, emitted a long blast of
steam against its ponderous wheel drivers, and tooted again:

"Board," chanted the blue-coated man, arm waving a
signal at the man in the cab. "Board!"

The heavy drivers took up slack and rose toward the
top of the wheel, until the jerk moved through its string
of cars, hissed loudly, and gathered momentum. Black smoke
curled from the stack. Soon it chuffed along far up around
a bend of the river until Jerome could see only a plume of
grey smoke drifting lazily against haze-blue skies and a tiny
gleam where the shiny rails curved away to the west. Jerome's
speckled grey eyes batted back salt tears. A few escaped to
be sleeved quickly away. He felt sad and dejected, as though the scoriated cinder curled under his toe was stuck in his throat. His ears heard no sound and his chest heaved like a live thing trying to break loose. For a long time he remained at the edge of the track, bare feet scrooched under the cinders, and squinting into the west from cupped palms.

Afterwards Uncle Jacob's lithe stride led him across the powdery dirt road past the hitchrail where the bay team and grain wagon remained tied under the dazzling sun and into the coolness of the wide-fronted store. Along the walls tins of stewed meat and green spinach and red beets ranged neatly to the ceiling on shelves. In one corner bins of white flour, black-eyed peas, red potatoes, and white sugar were bunched, and shovels and pitchforks leaned together on the floor to form miniature tipis. Flies buzzed in the corner near the sugar and a sudden gust swept a smidgen of dust through the open door. Shades drawn over the front windows held back the sun. The darkened store stood empty.

A red-whiskered, corpulent tradesman emerged from a room behind the counter when Uncle Jacob jingled the brass bell on the cash register. "That tall one," said he, extending a freckled knuckle in Jerome's direction, "be no
Uncle Jacob spoke slowly and in an old-country way that sounded different than one's who've been born here. "Ja, ja," he said from lips sucked in from thought. "Ja—mine to provide for. Mine to do for. Ja, he's mine." He laid his charge on the tradesman. Shoes he wanted. Tough cowhide shoes for the boy's callused feet.

The tradesman threaded his way between cracker barrels to where harnesses and horse collars hung from wooden pegs. A shelf of shoe boxes were stacked near the floor. He measured Jerome's foot on his knee and grunted in mock surprise. "Ten be it themne," he said in a soft burr. He peered from fiery red brows first at Jerome and then slyly at Uncle Jacob. "A ten-size for a skinny lad like he be. A laddy who'll balance no more'n seven stone on an honest Fairbanks. Tch, tch." He shook his head sadly.

"Take a boy now," said Uncle Jacob as he poked a finger at the tradesman, "---a boy now with his feets big. First the feets grows. Like so, huhhh?" Uncle Jacob spread strong hands apart as though holding a dozen ears of corn bunched. "Like so the feets grow. To grow big inside also." He patted his chest with two palms, and his brown mustache bristled ferociously, "Inside he grows also." He stared belligerently from beetled brows.

The red-whiskered one shied off and rummaged the
shelf for shoe sizes, still muttering to himself. "Seven stoone. An' thaats wringin' wet. An' with pliars in his poocket too.'

Jerome had sat alongside Uncle Jacob on the high springseat as the wagon had angled southwest toward the river. Ahead the Rock's crude spire had unfolded, layer after layer of massive rock slowly unwinding to reveal the lower entablatures. The wagon had mounted the grade from the bare prairie and swung due south along the upper bench parallel to and a mile away from the booming river. A hawk circled the pinnacle of the Rock, dipping and gliding on air currents, and winged over the bluffs and disappeared in the blue haze. Strata of encircling shelves ran crookedly along the side of the Rock and then, abruptly, broke off where a section of escarpment at one time had tumbled away to the swirling waters below. Jutting ledges collected enclaves of earth for scraggly shrubs, and even a few small patches of browned grass grew on lower reaches far below the spire-like pinnacle. A long stretch of uneven rock that visibly protruded like miniature atolls split the rolling waters upstream from the Rock. Nearer the northwest base slabs of rock torn loose over the years formed steep slopes of natural riprap that protected the upper rock cleavages from the devastating force of the surging waters; while at the southeast great blocks of entablatures had broken
partially away and exposed cavernous recesses like lateral niches for religious statues in the grim cliffs. Under the lees of these hidden caverns on a long yellow sandbar lay the stranded ferry. With its white-bleached wood and its broken paddle wheel the River Sprite rested in desolate solitude like a toy boat discarded in a sandbox by frivolous hands.

The brittle crack of wood under the baking sun sounded like the pop of pine knots on a fire. The horses plodded ahead, step by step, their sweaty shoulders lathering up froth where harness leathers rubbed. The mile-consuming clatter rolled steadily forward, brown dusty road unrolling between the horses' ears. The steady motion of the horses' shaggy fetlocks, the grate of the doubletrees against the oak wagon tongue, and the squeak of dry leather on the uphill pull blended into a dreamlike rhythm. The road sloped to the east, doubling back, and entered the mouth of a wide coulee. Jerome's feet felt squeezed in his new shoes. Gradually, his eyes and senses blurred and he drowsed, feet on dash and head propped against Uncle Jacob, in the suffocating heat of the still afternoon. He was going up the Upper Muskie Creek for the first time. He was asleep.

Jerome picked up the lighted lantern and turned back in its feeble glow to the corral. His cheek still stung from the insult of fresh manure. By hod he had said, thought
Jerome bleakly, by hod, eh! He stooped forward slightly to fend off the abysmal welling within as at the bottom of a dark cistern. The rockiness crept up along his ribcage and the taste like bare metal clung to his teeth until, slowly, the sinking sensation ebbed out of him and left him momentarily weak and slightly nauseated. Then he straightened and the chilly air fed into his lungs with a rush.

The glad little snaffle of a tired horse whose work is done for the day and the clink of chains sounded clear as the weary teamsters climbed down to talk quietly to their horses and drop the links on the doubletrees. Then they saw the erratic jiggling up and down of the gleaming lantern, halfway across the yard now, and swung their heads to the corral and back again to the lantern. They patted the rumps of horses and tied them fast behind wagons and to fenceposts. They crowded forward to the outer limits of an unmarked circle, moving in slowly as the circle tightened, and ran shrewd, appraising glances over the two recalcitrants—the older one, arms akimbo in a Svengalian stance and lidded eyes contemptuous, was heavy through the chest and arms long and muscled, nearly a man, and the other a tall awkward boy, large bare feet padding doggedly forward, face shadowed by the yellow jiggle of light clutched tight in his hand.

When Jerome approached the indelibly outlined form standing disdainful at the corral, he said nothing. He simply
feinted with a left and swung. The lantern flashed in a wide arc and crashed against the dark cap. Ruben fell in a lump.

Jerome slipped from the back of the saddler when he reached the cottonwoods behind Doigtweiller's sheep farm. The sorrel's breath came loud through flared nostrils. He pawed with a forefoot. He flung his fretful head. Then he stood patient at the restraint imposed by the tanned hand at its bit. Jerome listened to the small night sounds. The stiffened autumn leaves rustled as a sudden breeze sprang up and then died. With first a hushed scamper and then an alive silence, a white rabbit poised at attention in the brush. A cricket chirped a new theme close to the foot of an eroded hill. From far away floated the muted wail of a coyote, so far that his cry lifted in the stillness as though it had pierced through from an unknown dimension. Below, frozen crystals of frost glinted on the grass and earth. Above, the resplendent dust of the Milky Way glimmered against the black vaulted heavens.

Soon he would seek a new life on west. He would swim the river before daybreak at Newberg's Crossing. He would ride on west. He would be his own man then. He would find work that he could do. He would find work.