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The Earthbreakers

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Chapter 1

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A SLANTED, slashing rain saturated his wool coat while he rigged the pack animals, and coldness searched his bones. He scrubbed the wet saddle with a sleeve before he rose into it. Breakers of sand rolled from the nearby bluff to sting his face and when he lowered his head water poured from the crease of his hat into his crotch. Wind went scuffing and squealing along the earth and roared in his ears and was a cry across the world.

"Hup-hup."

The pack horses moved into single file, the two cows followed and the four dun oxen came after, swinging their heads at the ground in fruitless foraging. He used both hands to jam down his hat and made his way through a camp whose hundred wagons—their canvas tops casting a pale glow against the gray flicker of sand and rain—lay on a lava beach hard pressed between bluff and river. Weather-whipped fires burned a violent yellow, darkly dotted by crouched or moving shapes, and all through camp was the constant traffic of loose stock herds moving westward into a farther wall of mist.

At the river's edge log rafts pitched in the smashing rollers, some half built, some fully freighted with lashed-down wagons and ready to go; for after two thousand miles and five months of land travel, this wagon train of four hundred people was readying itself to make the last ninety miles into western Oregon by water through the gorge of the Cascades.

Rice Burnett stopped his pack outfit before a large raft on which two wagons—Lattimore's and Collingwood's—were lashed fore and aft. Lattimore stood on the lava shore with the raft's mooring rope wrapped around him, thin body swayed back and forth by the raft's sluggish heaving. A sagged hat rim made eaves around his ears, down which water steadily ran, and on his face was the habitual fatigue of a malarial man.

"God-damn' country," he said, voice only a murmur against the shout of the wind. "If I'd known it was like this I'd not come. I'm ready to go but Collingwood's off shakin' hands somewhere."

Edna came from the near wagon and came ashore to stand beside Burnett's horse. She said, "I'll walk a ways with you," and took his arm when he dismounted. A man's overcoat gave her upper body an extra heaviness; a shawl covered her head but rain blackened the exposed part of her front hair and wetted her cheeks and lodged its glittering droplets on her lashes. Her face was round and her mouth broad—an erect and rather taut upper lip lying against the lower lip's pronounced roll—and her lids partially closed on brown eyes as she watched Burnett to create an air of speculation.

Lattimore said "Now don't rove off where I got to go find you."

"Oh," she said, "Collingwood won't be here for an hour." She moved away with Burnett. "You'll reach the portage ahead of us."

He nodded toward the river. "I expect so. You've got a rough ride ahead, on the raft."

Waves rolled high and close-following on the Columbia's wind-beaten breadth. Earlier departing rafts stood out to midstream, rising in sluggish motion to ragged crests and falling into watery valleys and vanishing behind long horizontal streamers of spray. Through the day's dullness Burnett watched the little-figured shapes of men strain at the rudder sweeps.

"I don't mind," said Edna. "Things don't bother me much. Where'll I see you next?"

"At the portage."

"We might be late—and you'll have gone on."

"Then at Oregon City. We'll all gather there."

They skirted wagons and avoided ox teams dragging logs riverward from the pine hill where the Methodist Mission lay; they watched a woman crouched and crying before a fire's dense smoke. Groups of men, heaving together with their concerted "Now—now—now," moved wagons onto the rafts and other men stood waist-deep in the November water and flinched when the breaking surf slapped them. They passed Rinearson's fire. Edna's glance went to the young men gathered there and stayed with them until Moss Rinearson saw her, and then she looked quickly to Burnett and went on with him.

At the far edge of camp he stopped. "No use for you to get any wetter."

Her voice held half a teasing note, half a sweet tone. "At Oregon City, for sure?"

"For sure."

"Sleep warm," she said and looked steadily at him.

"Lone man never sleeps warm."

The answer delighted her and her lids again framed a glance meant to provoke him. "It could be better, couldn't it?"

He rose to the saddle and lifted his coat collar against the slashing rain, and he looked down upon her with his smile. Wind colored him and stiffened his face until it assumed a lank length between temples and jaw point. His eyes were gray, made brisk at this moment by his humor; the edges of his hair showed a dark copper cast rough hair, heavy hair. He had an English nose, high-bridged and prominent, and a long mouth.

"You're slow," she said.

"There'll be a time to answer that."

She shrugged her shoulders and watched him ride into the stormy morning's twilight, body bent and head bent, and when he looked back she saw his weather face—everything pulled inside. She waved and returned through camp.

Abreast the Rinearson fire she paused at the circle of young men and stood across the blaze from Moss. He was the middle brother of the three Rinearson boys and, at twenty, a year older than she. She spread her hands before the fire, slowly revolving them; she gave each man around the circle a moment of personal interest before settling her attention on Moss.

"Where's Whit?"

"Went down the trail with the stock."

She moved around the fire. "You ought to wear a heavy coat."

"Wet heavy coat's just as cold as a wet thin one."

"Ah," she said, and touched his chest with a passing hand; then she looked beyond the group and noticed Rice turned on the saddle, watching her, and she left the fire and went on through camp with her head lowered in thought. When she came to the raft she found George Collingwood ready to go. Her father's futile irritation fell upon her.

"We been waitin' twenty minutes."

George Collingwood shook his head, laughing at her. "No, I just got here." He was forty, more than twice her age, but his light blue eyes paid her a strong interest. He wore heavy buckskin gloves, a fine plaid coat, and beneath his hat the rim of curled yellow hair showed. She delayed a moment to let him have his look, then moved to the raft and entered the near wagon's half darkness, catching the voices of her brother and her mother in the far wagon where Mrs. Collingwood was. Rain drummed loud on the canvas and the smell of wet wool clothes and oiled harness and bacon rose around her. She heard Collingwood say:

"You got any tobacco before we push away, Ben?"

"There's a twist in a can beside my toolbox."

She moved to the toolbox and reached for the can, but a thought drew her back and she waited while Collingwood came over the raft and crawled through the wagon's front opening. He said: "You know where his tobacco can is?"

She settled to her knees on a straw tick and lifted the can. He crouched beside her and the edge of his body came against her and stayed there while she opened the can and got the chunk of tobacco. He reached for it, hand brushing her shoulder, and his pressure grew against her; she turned her head to observe the tense line across his mouth and the

bright shine of his eyes. She didn't stir, but as she watched him a speculative smile came about her mouth and her curiosity was plain. His head came tentatively forward, and withdrew; he laid a hand on her knee and pushed himself to his feet. She raised her glance to hold his attention.

Outside her father impatiently called: "For the love of God, let's start."

Collingwood murmured "Edna," in a smooth, stroking voice and turned from the wagon. She remained kneeling; she stared at the dark canvas before her, eyes half closed and her face returning to its smooth calm. The log chains began to groan, the raft increased its pitching and the wagon swayed from side to side. She drew a deep breath and smiled into the darkness.

Chapter 2

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THE camp and its echoes faded, the whirling rain mists closed in. Along this well-worn Indian runway loose stock bands moved ahead of Burnett toward the throat of the gorge forty miles away, but he saw nothing of them in the blind day. The river was beside him, bearing its freight of scattered rafts, and though some of these were forty feet long and sixteen wide the wind-trenched water shook them as though they were small boats. The trail, too rough for wagons, crossed an ancient field of lava and moved through a succession of sand dunes until, about two hours from camp, it rose in stairstep creases along the face of a hill. Around noon of an already dying day he found himself following the rim of a bluff loosely covered by pine. The river was a thousand feet below him, unseen in the fog, and he was smothered by the twilight of a cloud's breaking center, and wind shook him on the saddle and the tumultuous rain came upon him in hard-breaking drops. He was thoroughly wet, his shoes were water-filled; coldness passed from a burning to an ache and finally to a lack of sensation in legs and knuckles and ears.

There was a way to handle weather and the way—lying in a man's thoughts—was to retreat from the surface misery and build a wall and when the weather broke through that wall, to retreat to a deeper layer of flesh and build another wall. There was never any danger until the last wall was breached and the weather reached that small center cell which housed the will to exist. At that point a man sat as a

spectator and listened to the battle between his will and the thing which came to kill him.

Loose soil and pine stems whipped by; overhead the steady hiss of the wind kept on. The horses footed steadily forward from one rocky ridge to another, down a long slope and across the insecure ford of a swollen little river near its junction with the big river; and somewhere in the noisy day he heard a man's weak voice cry out. Fifty feet distant a horse stood on a rocky flat with its rump to the wind. A few cows stood under the shelter of a tree and a small tent, ripped from its pegs, slapped back and forth beneath a branch to which its peak had been tied. Riding in that direction he discovered Alpheus Stricklin's head stuck out from a cocoon of soaked blankets.

Burnett got down and squatted before that hollow face with its fringe of curly red whiskers. Stricklin's eyes were so deep and round that they seemed to have no pupils. A rank odor came from blankets and from man. Too sick to light a fire or to recapture the tent which had blown off its pegs, Stricklin lay in the day's full blast and could not muster energy enough to shiver.

"How long you been here?"

"Two days."

Burnett walked to a pack horse, hauled off its pack and got an ax. He chopped a set of pegs and tacked the tent cloth around Stricklin; he cut the rope which held the tent's peak to the pine bough and let the canvas lie collapsed over Stricklin. He rustled through the trees and collected a stack of wood and from the pack he got a handful of pitch kindling and crouched close to the ground to build a fire under the

shelter of his coat. He stood by until the fire caught on well; and he made a frame of wood chunks around it and found his coffee-pot and filled it from the river and laid it over the fire.

"When did you eat?"

"Yesterday morning," said Stricklin. "Nothing stays down."

"Any fresh blankets?"

"No."

Burnett dragged his pack near the fire. He poured half the water from the coffee-pot into a small bucket, dropped a chunk of jerked beef into the bucket and a hand scoop of coffee into the pot; and put both utensils over the fire. Stricklin made a feeble scratching on the tent cloth and pulled it back until his head was in the weather. "Jesus, what a smell."

"Crawl out of there and sit up to the fire."

"Can't make it."

Burnett squatted over the man. He shoved back his hat to keep its drip from Stricklin and short, sharp critical lines of attention sprang around his eye corners. "You're a down horse and you've decided to die. Crawl out of there."

Stricklin said nothing but Burnett thought he saw the slight shining of resentment, and he reached down and ripped the protecting canvas from Stricklin's body. Stricklin brought an arm from the blankets, doubled his fist and struck at Burnett's face. Burnett laughed at him and pulled the blankets back, rolling Stricklin half over toward the fire. Stricklin kicked out with a leg. Burnett seized the man at the shoulders and dragged him to the edge of the fire.

"Sit up to it," he said and took his ax into the nearby trees to make more wood from the broken deadfall limbs. Stricklin curled himself at the fire and steam rose from his clothes and fresh rain sparkled in his whiskers. His deep-set eyeballs rolled from side to side as he kept his attention on Burnett. Burnett got a cup from the pack and filled it from the simmering bucket.

"Sit up, Alpheus."

"Can't make it."

Burnett circled the fire and took Stricklin by one shoulder and hauled him to a sitting position; he steadied the man with gentle cuffs with his palm until Stricklin made a gesture of protest. Burnett dropped his hand but stood by to be sure Stricklin didn't capsize again.

"All right," said Stricklin irritably. "All right."

Burnett handed over the cup and went into the trees to continue his wood gathering. When he came back the cup lay empty on the ground.

Stricklin had both hands across his belly and showed his misery. "It's started again." He lifted his glance to Burnett and dropped it. Sick as he was, he was embarrassed. "I can't get up."

Burnett lifted Stricklin by the armpits and walked ten feet from the fire; he slipped down the man's galluses and trousers and he spraddled his legs and lowered Stricklin to a squatting position. Stricklin wrapped his arms around Burnett and butted his head against the latter's stomach for support; he swayed like a half-filled sack of flour and body cramps shuddered him and the coldness of the day made

fine tremors through him. "What a hell of a thing," he groaned. "Jesus, I'm ashamed."

"It's all right, Alpheus. Let 'er go."

"No use. Nothing in me."

Burnett pulled up the man's trousers and guided him back to the fire. He filled the cup from the bucket and passed the cup to Stricklin. "Keep at it." He built the woodpile until it was big enough to last a night; he fried himself a chunk of bacon and warmed himself with the coffee. Three boys crossed the little river with a band of stock and disappeared in the rain-downed twilight; wind ripped through the timber and smashed down branches and felled a tree, and rain walked across the earth wave after wave. Burnett took Stricklin's blankets from the collapsed tent and laid them flat in the rain, weighted by rocks, for washing. He pulled up the tent pegs and dragged the canvas around Stricklin. After he had restored the loose pack to its proper horse he stood a short time at the fire, attempting to read Stricklin's face.

"Keep the fire going. I'll leave the bucket with the meat in it. Just work away at it. You be all right?"

Stricklin dropped his head. He said something which was lost in the wind; he raised his voice. "Sure."

"That diarrhea lasts about three days. You've had two. Lay over tomorrow." He got in the saddle but delayed his departure; for Stricklin's eyes, fixed on him, were like the entrances to the emptiest of tunnels, and around his mouth an expression had settled. It wasn't sickness, Burnett thought, as he turned away to collect his pack outfit. He found the trail and worked his way about a rocky point and

up another ridge. The image of the expression, with its unremembered familiarity, haunted him. A good mile down the trail he stopped his horses and sat still a full minute, and at last he shook his head and turned back to Stricklin's camp.

Stricklin had dropped flat before the fire and was entirely covered by the tent. He pushed the canvas back when he heard Burnett and sat up, and the stiffness dissolved from his face and left it weak; his eyes glinted in the firelight. Burnett said: "It'll be dark in half an hour so I might as well camp here." He unloaded the packs and covered them with the canvas and let the animals drift. He dragged his bedroll to the fire and crawled into it and lighted his pipe.

"What's your age, Alpheus?"

"Fifty-three." Stricklin sat up and filled his cup from the bucket; he curled both hands around the cup and sucked at the beef water. "If I'd known it was like this, I'd never come West. It's too late for men old as me. I had a good farm in Missouri."

"You'll feel different—couple nights' sleep and a few good meals."

"I'll put ten years' sweat into a new farm, but it won't please me no more than the last. It's not the constitution of a man to be happy with what he's got...This stuff ain't cramping me as much. I think I'll sleep." He fell back and pulled the tent over him.

Burnett left his bedroll and squatted beside Stricklin. He straightened the folds of the tent beneath the man, and wrapped the upper part over him. He laid a hand momentarily on Stricklin's shoulder. "You were at the forks

of the creek for a couple of minutes," he said, and returned to his bedroll. He was hungry, but he had a short stock of food which had to last him until he got to Oregon City or Fort Vancouver and so he lighted another pipe, stored his boots in the bedroll and fed the fire.

Stricklin said: "Been married?"

"No."

"How about that Edna girl?"

Burnett made no answer. Presently Stricklin said: "What'd you do back East?"

"A little clerkin', a little farming. I was in the Rockies trapping a couple years. Soldiered in the dragoons."

"If you'd not come back I'd been dead by morning."

"You're not that sick."

"Sick is one thing. This is another. It's like hanging to a rope forty feet off ground. Pretty soon you can't hold on and you don't give a damn anyhow."

Burnett settled into his bedroll and scrubbed hip and shoulder along the ground to make comfortable trenches for them. Night moved in full of sound; the little river roared over its stones, the racing clouds broke above camp and rain rattled like buckshot and blackness closed on him as the jaws of a vise. It was aloneness which had broken through Stricklin's last wall. Nature, hating the solitary thing —for the solitary thing has no function—had placed in man a sense of incompleteness which made him drift toward others; denied this closeness, he shrank and died. Not that she cared; for man was a vessel she created by the millions, and it didn't matter how many of these claypots were cracked along the way so long as a few survived to transmit

the liquid she had poured into them; it was the liquid that mattered to her, not the pot. Man's dream of dignity was his own creation, not hers, and his suffering came of trying to make the dream real against the indifference of earth and sky to his individual fate.

Chapter 3

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MORNING came to him as a feeling he had slept long enough; there was no other sign of day. Wind rushed along the river's trench and burst into violent eddies; throughout the night he had heard trees, unpinned by the rain-softened soil, go down. The air had a biting chill and now and then the screen of rain thickened with the half-solid shape of snow; the little river, when he went to it, had risen two feet. He built the fire, he put on the coffee-pot and fried breakfast. Alpheus Stricklin sat up with the tent around him and relished his meal.

"I'm over the hump but I'll lay by today. Tomorrow mornin' I'll be fine."

Burnett spent an hour dragging wood to the fire pile; he was another hour bringing in his strayed animals. He packed, he crouched at the fire to smoke a pipe and to soak in a store of heat against a day he knew would be bad. He rose and looked at Stricklin a moment. "Anything else?"

"No. Good luck."

The trail through the timber was a tunnel of furious sound. Wind knocked him around the saddle when he rose to the crest of a small ridge, and wet snow spatted more frequently against him. He followed a narrow strip of open land two or three miles toward a shadowy barrier, and in the first dismal daylight this barrier became a rocky point pressing hard upon a river whose half-mile surface was

corrugated by spray-frosted waves closely following each other. Little by little he was crowded toward the water, the trail twisting out to the beach, climbing over the shale slopes which set up minor avalanches under the feet of his horses, threading gloomy aisles between moss-green rock pillars. Near noon he paused in the shelter of a cottonwood thicket to smoke a pipe, glad to escape the wind's beating for a short time; the farther he rode during the afternoon, the tighter was the river caught between the mountain's jaws, the more relentlessly blew the wind and harsher became the weather. From time to time he saw rafts wallowing in the water, made sluggish by the extra weight of solid ice around wheels and wagon beds.

It was growing dark at four o'clock when he came upon a meadow cramped at the base of the lava palisades and found Whitley Rinearson and the two Lockyears before a fire. With them was Watt Irish, a boy of fourteen shivering within his shabby coat; in the background the hundred Rinearson cattle stood dumb against the blast.

The boy was obviously miserable clear into his bones. He turned to Burnett with plain relief. "I got two cows mixed in with their stock and I got to get 'em out."

Whit Rinearson gave a short laugh. "You can wait till we get to the portage."

"They'll all be mixed up in the dark by then and I'll not see 'em. I got to get 'em now."

Whit Rinearson said, "Walk in and get your cows," and again let go with his brief laugh.

"I can't walk through all those horns," said Watt.

Burnett dismounted and came to the fire. He said to Whit Rinearson: "You're slow—you started three hours ahead of me."

"Cattle strayed last night and we had a hell of a time."

"It's just two cows," said Watt Irish to Burnett. "I got to get 'em out." The weather wizened his face and in the firelight he seemed to Burnett not so much a boy as a stunted man; he had his feet braced apart, he doggedly nourished his hope, but the strain of facing these three unsympathetic men had been hard with him.

It was now half snow and half rain, white flakes streaking across the firelight; wind boomed along the gorge and the river surf crashed on the rocks of this ragged shore. Burnett crouched at the flames.

"What's the harm of snaking out the boy's two cows?"

"We got trouble enough," said Whit Rinearson, shortly. "He can wait, or do what he damned pleases."

"There's your permission," said Burnett to Watt Irish. "Go get 'em."

"On foot?"

"Take my horse," said Burnett.

Watt Irish turned immediately to the horse and pulled himself to the saddle. Cal Lockyear spoke to him. "I've got some stock in that bunch. You stampede anything and I'll break your God-damned head."

"Not in this weather—they won't," said Burnett. He turned his hands at the fire; presently he lifted his chin to catch the weight of all three sets of eyes on him.

Whit Rinearson said: "Not right for a kid to have his way against men."

"The boy's dead-beat."

"If he's goin' to play man," said Whit, "let him stand it like a man."

"You play it well as he does and you'll be doing fine," answered Burnett.

He looked beyond the group to see young Irish cut through the cattle; he brought his glance back to Cal Lockyear. The man wore buckskins, a big blanket capote around his shoulders, and a trapper's round fur hat; his neck came up as a stout column through the capote's collar to flat ears, a round heavy chin and black eyes. Chest and shoulders stretched the capote; he stood motionless against the weather and seemed not to feel it.

"If this herd belonged to me," he said in a touchy tone, "I'd not permit the kid to fool around it."

"Squirrel's pretty small game for a buffalo hunter," said Burnett.

Cal Lockyear retorted, "You can go to hell."

"Right now that would be a comfort," said Burnett.

Watt Irish came from the herd with his two cows and left the horse beside Burnett. He spread his hands at the fire, he crept closer to the heat and he watched the growing night, its anticipated misery forming around his mouth.

"It will get no better looking at it," said Burnett. "Get on before your cows stray again." He watched the small shape bend against the wind and fade with the two cows into the snow-streaked darkness; he rose to catch the fire on another quarter of his body.

Whit Rinearson had baited Watt Irish for no better reason than to cause somebody trouble. Whit was the senseless

one of the Rinearson tribe, and needed to feel a lot of pain before he'd ever know anything about pity; or maybe he had been making a display of toughness for the benefit of Cal Lockyear, who was another breed of cat entirely.

Having put in his time trapping through the Rockies, Burnett understood Lockyear better than the people of the train did, for Lockyear had been in the mountains too and such a life reduced a man to the lean meat of his character. Lockyear would do as he pleased, let others take care, and that part of him Burnett respected since he had some of it himself.

But there was about this muscular man a mixture of the unsure and of the threatening. He was thirty, Burnett's age, and thus old enough to have achieved some consistency of view, yet he was more frequently unpredictable than reasonable. He was by turns boastful, rudely humorous and overbearing; he could swing from a civil manner to surly silence in the space of a breath; he had spells of affable familiarity which, when not properly received, turned at once to insolence; he had great extremes in him and seemed to care nothing for the effect he made on anybody; and though he usually accorded Burnett a better manner than he gave to others—he showed little liking for the farmers and shopkeepers and mechanics composing this train—he was nevertheless offended by Burnett's defense of Watt and couldn't quite restrain his ill-humor.

"You want the kid's mother to keep you warm nights? Hell, that's not hard to do. Go ask her. Won't have to ask twice. She's lookin' around. She'd take anything that came—even a cripple like Veen."

In the background Veen stirred, gave Burnett a short glance and dropped his eyes to the fire. Whit Rinearson let go with a flat laugh. Burnett looked from one man to another, ignoring the remark; he turned again to soak in the heat.

"This ain't our country," said Lockyear. "It's Siwash country. Up in Jackson Hole we'd be fixed for winter: good cabin, plenty of meat, plenty of tobacco, no trouble."

"Plenty of cold," added Burnett.

"Dry cold. This air's too wet. What'd we come for?"

"I got to thinking like an Indian," said Burnett.

"That's all right. That's fine."

"Fine for an Indian."

"Well, by God, there's times when I like Indians better than whites. These people—I don't know. They ain't our style. Let's go back and eat buffalo hump."

"Nothing there any more, Cal. Beaver's trapped out. No market for furs. Ever meet Bill Cash?"

"On the Green once. Bigger liar than Beckworth."

"Fifty years old, looked eighty. Ate his meat raw because he was too damned lazy to cook it. Crippled up by rheumatism. Lived past his prime. Good old days gone and no good ones left. He'll drift around the mountains looking for men not there any more. Then he'll start talkin' to those fellows. Then he'll crawl off in the brush and die."

"You been sleepin' cold," said Lockyear. "What you want —"

Burnett said, "Now give that a thought before it comes out," and leveled his glance across the fire; he was cool, he was smiling. Insolence gleamed in Lockyear's eyes, the

prompting of temper was there, the reckless moment was there; then he let go with a rough laugh and passed the challenge by. Burnett turned to his horse, used his sleeve to scrub snow slush from the saddle and rose into it. Riding over the clearing, he reached the rocky trail and once more followed its crooked course.

Two hours later, in the trembling blackness of a hard snowstorm, he heard the rising roar of the river rapids. Fires burned ahead of him and rafts landed from their down-river run, crowded the rocky beach. Even at this hour men worked their wagons ashore from these rafts, to remount the wheels in preparation for tomorrow's land journey to the foot of the rapids. Neither cargo nor passengers could live through that particular six miles of water; when the portage had been made, the rafts would be let go to run the cascades empty, would be retrieved in the calmer current below, and would again be loaded for the last thirty-odd miles to the mouth of the Sandy. From there on the final two days' journey into Oregon City would be by land.

He drifted forward in search of a camp spot. Traffic had churned the ground into foot-deep slush, and livestock milled about in search of forage, and wagons and fires and rough shelters lay close-crowded along a narrow strip of land between river and gorge wall. He passed and hailed the Kitchens and the Millards and he swung his horse to avoid Lorenzo Buck, who crouched close to the earth in search of some lost object. Directly beyond, Burnett came into the glow of the Gay fire. Katherine Gay saw him.

"Put up here, Rice."

A ridgepole ran between Gay's landed wagon and a nearby fir; over the ridgepole hung a large sheet of canvas beneath which several people were gathered. Six of them were Gays, Katherine, her fourteen-year-old brother Joe, her parents—John and Martha Gay—and her grandparents, Sophia and the Old Man. The Howards and the McIvers had joined the group to save the work of making their own fires. Dr. Ralph Whitcomb, who as a single man had shared one fire or another all across the plains, stood beside Harris Eby; and though the doctor was neither short nor thin, he seemed to be so against Eby, who was by far the largest man in the train, six feet six of bone and hard tissue, great feet, thick legs, maul-shaped fists, and an upper body which had a kind of treelike sweep to it; all of this topped by a blond head and a round and quiet face. On Eby's other side was Lot White, though Lot's vanity always made him step far enough back from Eby to make the comparison less pronounced; and Lot, as usual with him, was involved in rather loud and positive talk. He broke off long enough to cast a short glance at Burnett, to say "Hello, Rice," and to wait for his audience's attention to return.

Though canvas and wagon afforded some protection there was no escape from the freezing whip of the wind, or the inslanted snow, or the mud underfoot, or the reverberations of the river in its cataract. Burnett picked an empty spot not far from the fire for his pack pile and unloaded his horses with a slowness he could do nothing about; he had no feeling in feet, hands or knees, and he watched his animals drift into the night and pitied them. He

stood well away from the fire to scrub some kind of sensation back into ears and nose.

Katherine brought him a cup of coffee and tested his overcoat with her hand. "Have you got anything dry?"

The heat of the cup scarcely registered in his palms though it scorched his tongue. "Buried somewhere in that pile."

She pushed him toward the fire. She looked around the circle and said to Lot White: "You've got the warmest spot. Move over."

Lot White said: "Rafts still in the river, comin'?"

"A lot of 'em," Burnett said.

"Lot," said Katherine Gay, "move over."

Lot White gave her a glance and reluctantly moved. He was a short, turkey-cock man with an upper body shaped by his blacksmithing trade; his hat, thrust back, showed a half-bald head; his eyes were a shade of blue too light for his complexion, thereby lending an unusual insistence to his glance; his mouth, though forceful, was thin enough to be without color, and his jaw was stubborn and his words came out with a kind of tumbling effect, as though sped by the pressure of other impatient words behind.

"They should have sense enough to not creep down this river by night. Out there the weather's too much to bear, and if they overshoot this place they'll be in the rapids and that's the end."

John Gay said: "We ought to keep these fires bright so they can see the way in." He looked to his son Joe. "If you're fairly warm go rummage up a few more big branches."

Half beyond the reach of the fire, Joe Gay was overtaken by Dr. Whitcomb's advice. "Be careful you don't get hit. The wind's knocking dead branches down like rain."

"He won't get hit," said Lot White; and said it with such certainty that Dr. Whitcomb's glance moved to him with its small amusement.

"You trying to throw a mantle of mercy over him, Lot?"

"He won't get hit."

"If he's standing in the right place at the right time, he certainly will," said the doctor.

Lot White slapped both hands briskly together and meant to carry on the talk. Katherine Gay stopped it. "Let each other alone. You're both old enough to know you can't change anything by talk."

"Lot feels he's got a call to change me," said the doctor. He settled himself at the foot of the wagon wheel, his face reddened and made cheerful by the firelight. "What reason brought you to Oregon, Lot?"

Lot White searched the doctor's face for guile. Then he said: "I couldn't abide slavery. I won't live where it is." He stared steadily at Whitcomb. "You meanin' to make fun of that?"

"No," said the doctor, "that's a good reason."

"You got a way of lookin' and just listenin' without believin'," said Lot White. "It's a way that disturbs people, for they think you're smart because you're a doctor, and if you don't believe in things, they get to wonderin' if they're right. You can't do that."

"That's right, Lot," said Ralph Whitcomb, and smiled at Lot White's renewed rise of suspicion. "So, why don't you let

my beliefs alone?"

"Because you believe wrong and it's my bounden duty to make you see it."

Whitcomb was too weary to laugh outright. "You ought to be a Jesuit.

"And you ought not use education against a man that's got none," said Lot.

The doctor's smile disappeared. "You're right about that, too. Well, a Jesuit's a man who'll use any argument to gain his end."

Lot White meant to carry on with the talk but Whitcomb turned from him to John Gay. "Why'd you come here?"

Gay had been only half attentive; his thoughts were with the fire, which he pushed together with his boots. He looked back toward the raft pitching in the water, to the ropes which held it to the shore trees. He stepped to the edge of the covering canvas and shook away its load of snow, and returned to the fire. The first sloping of middle age was visible in his shoulders and the first settling had begun around his mouth, to give it an extra pinch of resolution. His arms were the long arms of the outdoor worker, wristbones heavy, fingers enlarged and slightly bowed from the year of grasping and twisting and squeezing. His face was composed rather than sensitive; without formal schooling, he was one of those natively intelligent men who move slowly from point to point in their thinking.

"Why," he said, "I suppose it was the land I wanted." He looked toward his wife. "Anyhow, that's what I told Martha." He stopped to replace a rolled-away chunk of firewood. "Most of the men of this train lie a little about their reasons.

We've all got some sort of itch in our feet to try a fresh place, and that's almost the main reason in some of these fellows."

"That's what I think about," said Martha Gay, "when I remember all the nice furniture I couldn't bring and the new apple orchard just ready to bear." She looked steadily at her husband. "Sometimes I just hate the people who bought our place."

John Gay turned to the doctor. "You're such a hand to ask questions. What for yourself—what brought you?"

"My maternal grandfather was a young man in the Lewis and Clark expedition. I listened to those stories for years."

Voices roughly shouted down the trail and the Rinearson cattle broke through the fire's light toward the shelter. John Gay seized a limb chunk and waved it before them, driving them back around the wagon into the farther darkness; the steady stream of beasts moved past, and Whit Rinearson and the Lockyears appeared in the light and vanished.

"They'll knock over half the shelters in camp," said John Gay.

The doctor got up and put his hands to the fire for a last warming. "I should look at Provost's baby again."

Burnett said: "If you've got any whisky, give Mrs. Irish enough to mix Watt a toddy."

Whitcomb's departure broke the group, for the Howards and McIvers and Lot White soon left. John Gay said, "I hear somebody on the river," and moved beyond the firelight's reach as Grandmother Sophia and the Old Man, after soaking in a last warmth from the fire, entered the wagon.