FICTION

ROAD TO DAMASCUS

LEVI S. PETERSON

AT EVENING PAUL CONTEMPLATED TWO TREES on a distant ridge. They were both firs, one tall, straight, conical; the other curiously warped midtrunk into a great bent bush of a tree. The crippled tree troubled Paul. It seemed cruelly deflected, thwarted in its movement toward the open sky. Paul sat astride a slab of yellow rock. His mallet and chisel lay at his feet. The two men who had come that hot afternoon to work on the roof of his house were gone, but his resentment lingered. They were missionaries of sorts—stake missionaries set apart to preach the Gospel to men like Paul. He couldn't deny that they were good or that Christian love burned like a white flame behind their wind-blown faces. They had come without his asking and had started the rafters where Paul had brought the rock walls to their finished height. A good act. The rafters were there, installed and stable, ready now for sheathing. Yet he resented their having laid hands on his house.

One of them had admired the careful squaring and perfect seams of the stone walls. There was no stone cutter to equal Paul in central Utah. Paul chiselled and broke, handling his heavy hammers as if they were tools of spirit, the instruments of affection that broke not to destroy but to shape, to give dignity and identity to unformed stone. Brother Dalby said Paul's house was like the Church: each stone fit into its place, one upon another, with apostles for a foundation—twelve modern-day apostles, just as in the days of Jesus—and high priests, seventies,

LEVI PETERSON *is professor of English and director of the Honors Program at Weber State College.*

elders, priests, teachers, and deacons, and everybody else, depending one upon another in an exact well-fitted structure. Paul swallowed hard when he heard Brother Dalby's metaphor, but his wife laughed pleasantly. She had come from the little wooden house when the men arrived. She stood with them where Paul sat cracking squares of rock for the butter house. Regina liked Brother Dalby's figure of speech. She paced quickly to the walls of the new house and paused in the door. Looking at Brother Dalby, she said, "The door into the Church is baptism."

Paul felt a touch of fear. He dropped his eyes and studied the rock on which his hammer was idly tapping. These men were hungry to baptize him. He sensed that things were going to become more difficult. Once, weakly, without any good reason that he could think of, he had promised Regina that when the new house was finished, he would ask for baptism.

When the two men were gone, Regina came again from the little house. Paul sat in the gathering darkness, inert and languorous, his eyes still coming back to the ridge where the two trees stood. Regina strolled within the walls of the new house, quietly humming a hymn.

"It's going to be beautiful," she called. "Come and look."

He rose and went inside. Through an empty window they could see the valley declining gently toward a western boundary of jutting mountains. The valley lay with a thousand tiny lights sparkling up and down its miles. Cows bellowed distantly, ringing their remonstrance at full-dripping udders and empty mangers. Above the western mountains the sky glowed with the delicate peace of approaching sleep.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Regina asked.

Paul sat in the window sill.

Regina said, "I feel so much like . . . oh, I can't say how I feel. I have a burning here." She placed both her hands upon her breast. "Isn't that God?" she asked. "Don't you feel Him, Paul?"

Paul sighed and at last said, "No, I don't think I do."

She took Paul's hand and pulled gently until he stood up facing her. "Feel it! Around us, holding us. I think the night breeze is God's breath, it seems so cool and sweet. Our valley is His cupped hand."

"Don't say that kind of foolishness," Paul said. "I know you don't mean it, but don't say it anyway."

Regina's voice lowered with disappointment. "Maybe I do mean it."

Paul dropped her hand and walked to another window. "This is stone," he said sharply, patting the window sill, "and out there are some trees and a barn and our farm. It's stone, it isn't God."

"I know," said Regina. "It is stone and that is our barn. But He's there, Paul. God's real, I know that. He's waiting."

Paul turned and walked out from the walls. Regina followed him, and they stood again, looking toward the kerosene light in the window of the wooden house where they had lived for ten years. At first, it had been a two-room house. Then, as the children came, three other rooms had been added. Warped and weathered, the little house waited, and Regina waited, while the pile of yellow

stone from Paul's quarry slowly grew.

"I don't know what the matter is," Regina said. "You work so hard, you live righteously, you do things a man ought to do. Why can't you do just one little thing more for me? It's not so much."

"Lord, Regina," he said, "a man needs a little room. I didn't like those men up there setting my rafters today. They laid hands on my house. Up on the ridge yonder is a bent tree. How do you think things get bent like that? I just need a little room."

"I wish you didn't feel that way. I feel like things are so peaceful and full of light. I want you to feel it too." She came close and leaned against him.

"Won't you hug me?" she asked.

He put listless arms around her. After a while she said, "What's the matter, Paul?" He shrugged her away and walked off into the darkness.

The next day was Saturday. At dawn Paul haltered two mules and led them from the pole corral. The merest gleam of sun had struck the far western peaks, breaking the blue of dawn into rose on great rocks and cliffs and slopes of brush and pinyon. But the valley stood dew-wet and dark, waiting with its stretching hills of farms and fields, its long, broad lake lying blue and quiet, morning's mirror, all waiting for the sun to rise, to fill the valley with light, to fondle with warm love each house, each tree, every stalk of wheat and blade of grass.

Paul saw Regina in the door of the little house. He turned his back. He kicked one of the mules and jerked both animals forward to the saddle shed, where he attached packframes to the mules and loaded them with canvas bundles. When he looked up, Regina stood at the corner of the shed. She pressed her tired face against a grey, warping plank.

"You're going to go, are you?" she said finally.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm going. I told the boys I'd come and I told you I was going. Now I'm doing what I said I would."

"Can't you go on Monday?" she asked. Paul didn't answer. He went back to the corral and brought his horse out. As he saddled it, Regina repeated her question.

"No, I can't go on Monday," he said. "I have hay to put up."

She rubbed her hand along the weathered corner of the shed. "Won't you come home tonight?"

"Too far," he said. He turned squarely upon her. "I know what's eating you. You think I'll be breaking the Sabbath. You think I'll get thrown off or drowned because God doesn't like people who have fun on Sunday."

She shook her head. "Paul, be sensible, for heaven's sake. I don't think that. I do think those men aren't the best to spend the Sabbath day with."

"Lord, I haven't seen them in three months," he said. "Anyhow, I've got to take this grub up to them. They're counting on it, and it's my part of the bargain."

"What kind of a game are they playing?" Regina said. "They aren't going to get anything out of that mine. What if they did? How would you haul it out of the mountains?"

"We're not going to go into that again," Paul said. He mounted his horse. He pulled up the lead rope and jerked his little caravan forward. Regina stepped into

the path of the horse and the animal stopped. She came to Paul and laid her hand on his leg, gripping his thigh with her small fingers.

"Please, Paul," she said.

He looked down into her face. A tired face, but still pretty, full cheeks, large, pleading lips, dark eyes that also pleaded. A depth of intense longing there, longing for him, and sadness, like Christ in the rustle of walnut leaves. She bent her face against his leg for a moment. From behind her she drew a small parcel, wrapped in white cloth.

"A lunch," she said, "if you've got to go. Be careful. Don't drink, will you, Paul?"

His face grew red.

"I know you packed whiskey," she said and walked away. At the corner of the shed she turned. "I wish you could be back tonight."

Paul kicked his horse forward. He slouched in the saddle, a tired man. On both sides of the lane in which he rode, the land bore testimony of his unceasing labor. On the right, wheat and corn; on the left, alfalfa, watermelons, sorghum and vegetables. The wheat stretched across ten acres, thick and green, rippled by the morning wind into slow waves of certitude. The corn, tasseled and tall, grew in straight, unvaried rows converging upon a point of infinity. With his draft horses, Paul had plowed, harrowed, and furrowed. With a heavy bag he walked the broad acres in the windy spring and sowed his wheat. He thrust seed corn into the ground with a sharp-nosed planter. He went at night as often as in day to take his turn at the irrigation water from the canals, laboring without thought for uninterrupted hours, bending his back, straining his arms, lifting out mud with his shovel, filling here and excavating there until his land had slaked its thirst.

This Paul did for Regina. He had taken land from her father because she wanted to settle in the valley and raise her children in the Church. Paul did not always quarrel with Regina. Sometimes she caressed his neck, kissed his forehead, looked on him with her bright face, her brows lifted musingly, her glance itself a caress of health and love and peace. She had soft hands, and in her eyes he saw a spirit, a breeze-blown emanation, an influence that moved out from her and wrapped about him, the caressing hands of peace that told him home was final and certain and that somewhere, far away perhaps, but somewhere surely and without doubt beyond the western mountains and then again beyond those mysterious purple peaks so far beyond them, somewhere was a golden kingdom, sun-brilliant, filled with utter day and the peace of peace, the place where God was.

Now he needed rest. He needed Sam. Regina had known that. She knew better than her sweet Christian conscience would allow her to admit that Sam was her enemy. Paul's heart quickened. The fresh wind of the canyon struck him, freed him, filled him with lightness and anticipation. For six years Paul and Sam had drifted from mine to mine and mill to mill. They worked hard, quit often, spent their cash prodigiously, laughed and gamed and drank. That had been a long time ago. Last year Sam had come back. He said there was a paying vein in the mountains to the east. He brought three young men with him and proposed

that Paul join the venture. The four comrades would sink a shaft, and Paul would keep them in grub. When the mine came in, all would share equally. Paul had accepted, not because he believed they would get rich but because he needed a place to go.

The horse had carried Paul beyond the farm country and now approached the mouth of the canyon through which Paul meant to penetrate the mountains. The mountains were thrust upward, thrown like gigantic fluids and frozen there, twisted and pulled by cosmic force. Everywhere the rising wall of mountains was lacerated and gashed by gullies, ravines and canyons. Forests of brush and fir and aspen grew upon the slopes. And beyond these mountains, Paul knew, were others, one range behind another, receding into a land Paul had not visited.

At first the canyon exhilarated Paul. The trail led generally along the bottom, frequently paralleling it some yards above, though at times leaving it for hundreds of yards and zigzagging back and forth over the steep canyon face. It was a faint trail, rarely traveled, slowly being reannexed into the mountain, as Paul hoped he too could be annexed. Glimpses of the valley far below told him how high he had come. He possessed the floating power of an eagle, he felt the unweighted swing of a diving hawk.

Then, as the day grew on, he lost that joy. In the late morning, he stopped at a small meadow in the canyon bottom. Heat waves rose from the tall grass of the meadow, and trifling breezes came from one moment to another, mingling odors of hot resinous gums and dank shaded mosses. Paul loosened the surcingles on his three animals, hobbled them, and left them busily cropping grass. He took the white bundle and crossed the creek. He sat with his back to a fir tree and ate the lunch. The food tasted good, yet it seemed peculiar, as if Regina's hands had given it a quality unknown to other foods. The day had become strange. He felt as if he were being watched. He turned and peered about, but he could see nothing unusual.

He lay in the shade, listening to the crunching and cropping of his animals and to the clear rattling of the little stream where at the meadow's end it began another hurried descent over rocks and roots. Finally he dozed. When he awoke, he lay with his eyes closed. Memories coalesced in his mind, hovered strangely and evaporated. He became aware that a wind was rising. The boughs of the fir tree overhead fretted and scraped.

The revolving rasp of a wagon wheel filled his memory. Jimmy, his brother, came in the cabin door. "The horses are harnessed," he said.

Their mother put on her bonnet and walked to the door. "Somebody coming with me?" she asked.

"I'm going to find the honey tree," Paul's father said.

"Might be other days for doing it," his mother said.

"Might be," his father replied.

"Ain't twice a year the preacher comes, and you got to hunt bees," she said.

Paul's father turned in his chair and began to tie the laces of his boots.

"You live in these dark woods, and your own boys ain't Christian," his mother said. Her voice was belligerent, but futility drooped upon her gaunt, seamed face.

The woods were not dark for Paul's father. In the cabin and in the cleared fields of his Ohio farm he was likely to be harsh with his sons and sullen to his wife. But in the woods or along the creeks, following a hound, hunting deer, taking catfish, he was another man. If his boys were along, he sang songs to them that told sad stories and he told them how it had been in the army of Ulysses S. Grant.

Paul's mother left the cabin and climbed into the wagon. She clucked and the horses moved forward. Suddenly Paul ran from the cabin. "Wait, Ma," he shouted.

Paul got to his feet and moved from the fir tree. He knelt at the stream and had a drink. The day was no longer warm. The sky darkened, a chill gathered, a wind swirled moaning and crooning across the forested slopes of the canyon. Paul felt an inexplicable anxiety. He looked in apprehension at his animals. They fed peacefully in the meadow. For no particular reason he gazed through the trees at the far side of the meadow. Suddenly his hair prickled with horror. A tall, thin figure came through the trees. Paul retreated and looked about to see where he might run. Out of the aspens into the meadow, drifting rather than walking, blown like a scuttling leaf in autumn, came a woman. She moved in the foldings of a long robe, and her mouth was bound by a cerement, like one prepared for burial.

"Regina!" Paul muttered, staring with transfixed horror, licking his lips with a dry tongue.

At the stream she stopped. She had passed between the horse and the mules, but they made no response to her presence. The dust of time filled the lines of her face. Her grey hair rippled in the wind. She stared past Paul. No rancor showed in her eyes, no hint of harm or evil. She merely wept.

"She's dead," Paul muttered, staring fixedly. His face contorted with remorse.

"Is it true, Regina?" he said. "Are you really gone?"

Only the wind sounded. It passed through a hundred thousand trees in a billowing roar.

"She is dead," he said with finality. His throat tightened, his breath rasped, and for an instant he thought that he too was on the brink of that world where spirits whisper and wait.

"I'm sorry, Regina," he said. "You cried on the day we were married." He took a step toward the stream. The figure retreated. He stopped.

"How do you think that made me feel?" he shouted suddenly. "What was I supposed to do?" He ran forward and splashed into the stream. In an instant the figure was gone.

"No," he screamed, running toward the meadow. "Come back, Regina. Don't leave me. Regina! Regina!" His cry was snatched up by the rushing wind and carried across the swaying forest.

A deep rumble answered him. He snapped back his head and looked at the sky. Dark clouds boiled over the edge of the canyon. In the south a thunderstorm was mounting. Paul looked around. His three animals stood in the meadow, their heads high, their ears pointed alertly toward him.

"Did you see her?" he started to ask. Then he felt ashamed. Talking to

animals! "Well," he said, still needing to hear a voice, "I'm glad nobody saw me running around like that."

Paul rode through the rain in a depressed and sullen mood. By mid-afternoon he arrived at the cabin. He brightened when he saw smoke funneling from the chimney. He thought about supper, the warmth of a crackling fire, the odor of pine logs and thick tobacco smoke. He knew there would be talk of large ventures, there would be laughter about old times, women they had known, tales of close escapes from death and law.

But when he had unloaded his animals and tethered them and entered the cabin among his friends, none of them laughed or asked him a provoking question. There were only three. Christopher, two days gone, lay somewhere lost in a fissure struck by the horizontal shaft of their mine. Sam had dangled into the fissure from a rope, had dropped rocks into the void beneath himself, but had heard no bottom and had seen no ledges where Christopher's body might lie.

"We ain't had the spirit to work," Sam said.

"No, I guess you wouldn't," Paul agreed.

"Lord, I wish we could at least fetch him out," Raymond said.

"I'll have to go look for myself," Paul said. "I don't know what to think."

"Nothing to think," Sam said. "You go look. I'll go down with you in the morning. But there ain't nothing you are going to do about it. You'll just have to report it when you get back to the valley. Maybe the coroner will want to come up, but it won't be no use. He's gone."

"Dammit all!" Paul exclaimed. "Don't I have enough troubles!"

"Who you feeling sorry for?" Raymond asked, lifting an eyebrow. "Hell, mister, we been eating, sleeping and working with that man for three years, and you say you got troubles."

"No offense," Paul said. "Things aren't so much fun where I live either."

"Why don't we just quit worrying about him?" James said. "He ain't worrying about anything. Why should we?"

"That's right," Paul said. "Let's think about something else. I was just hoping I could get my mind off things for a while."

"Looking for a change?" Sam asked, his eyes lighting with interest.

"Maybe so," Paul said. "I've about had a belly full of that farm."

"Do you ever think about getting on the trail again?" Sam asked. "We used to talk about Alaska."

"Wouldn't that be fun!" Paul said. "Hell yes, why not?"

"We ain't doing so good here," Sam said. "Some silver according to the assays, but it's got to get a lot richer or it ain't worth building a road."

They cooked supper and while they ate, they talked about Alaska. Afterward they sat before the open door of the stove, staring into the crackling flames and drinking whiskey. They relaxed and began to reminisce. When Paul crawled into his bunk, he felt secure and removed from any problem.

On Sunday morning, Paul went into the mine. The long, deep bucket held only one person, and Paul went first, dangling by a cable spun off a hand-operated windlass. The bucket clanked and banged against the walls of the vertical shaft, filling Paul's ears with dismal, twisted reverberations. Fine jets of water sprayed

into the shaft. The feeble light of Paul's lantern glinted upon the pasty slime of this gigantic intestine, this gut of stone.

At the bottom, Paul climbed from the bucket, stood aside, and heard the bucket rise clanking above him. Its sound grew fainter and fainter until only a weak drumming pervaded the fetid air. He was to wait for Sam, but he could not force himself to sit quietly. He stooped and labored along the horizontal shaft of the mine. It opened suddenly into a cavern. Paul did not think he had gone far, yet as he held his lantern forward, he saw the void before him. An orifice opened at his feet, a gulping interstice of treachery. It gaped like a toothless mouth, a silent, humid grin.

Paul knelt and held his lantern over the fissure. It ate the weak light. He peered more intently.

"Christopher!" he shouted.

Echoes converged from a hundred points. "Christopher! Christopher! Christopher! Christopher!"

Paul edged back. He set the lantern by his side and groped for a rock. In coming about again, he tumbled the lantern over. Desperate, he lunged for it, but it was gone and his chest fell against the emptiness of the fissure. He watched the lantern with a horrified stare until it struck far below and went out. He listened for what seemed a long time as the lantern continued to bounce and ring into a gradual death of sound.

He drew himself gingerly back from the hole, found the damp wall of the cavern, and sat against it. He was seized by claustrophobia. He wanted to run and scream. He thrust his hand before his face. He tried to see it, he compelled himself, he willed vision with a desperate surge of energy. But everywhere was unyielding, absolute darkness.

And then it seemed, right at his side, not two yards away, something sat. Paul held himself perfectly still. He could not risk so much as a motion or even a thought. He heard the faint distant rush of subterranean waters. And also, though he at first refused to hear it, he told himself it could not be so, he heard a deep, labored breathing, like that of an asthmatic or a stricken animal.

A cloth brushed his face. It was a thin, dangling strip. It smelled of the seepage of a wound, and it was crusted as if with blood. Paul convulsed hysterically, he tore at his face as if it were covered by ants or wasps. His hands found nothing.

"Help me," he whimpered.

He saw flames licking hungrily around a great black kettle. Soap bubbled and writhed, foaming over the lip of the kettle, redoubling the fire. The sun glistened through the haze of Indian summer. The clearing was littered by autumn leaves—red, orange, brown. Some of them hung yet in the walnuts and maples. Here and there sifted by the breeze, they relinquished their hold and drifted to the ground.

"No!" Paul shouted. "No, no, please, no!" He started up. Then he remembered the fissure. He wrapped his head in his arms and tried to suffocate the vision.

Then a voice spoke. "Do you hear me, Paul?"

"Yes," Paul said at last, "I hear you."

His mother came from the house. Paul followed her. She stumbled at the fire. Her scream drowned in the bubbling soap. In a moment she pulled herself from the kettle and ran into the woods. Her shrieks hurtled through the air, one upon another. Her skin came off in large pieces and her eyes were gone. The doctor wrapped her in thin strips of cloth soaked in boric acid. Paul was asleep early one morning in the corner of the room where she lay. He was awakened by a stir among the big people and he knew she had died.

"I can't stand it," Paul said. He got onto his hands and knees and began to crawl. He rose and started to slide along the wall. On which side did the fissure lie? He had forgotten. He sank again, his back to the wall.

"Do you know me, Paul?" the voice muttered.

"Who are you?" Paul shouted.

His echo rebounded. "Who are you? Who are you? Who are you?"

The voice said, "Yes, who am I?"

"I know you," Paul said.

"You have known me always, haven't you, Paul?" the voice said.

"Yes," Paul said quietly.

"I am your lord, am I not, Paul?"

"Yes," he said.

"It will not be long and I will come for you."

Paul's temples pounded with the oppression of the vast evil about him. His intestines pushed against their outlets. Violence and fire possessed his mind. He dropped into senselessness and rose again a dozen times. Then suddenly there came the clank of metal on rock, the muffled sound of the descending bucket.

When Paul and Sam came up from the mine, they found Raymond alone at the windlass. On the hill above the cabin, at the edge of the little mountain lake, James stood, stark naked, a bottle in one hand and a book in the other.

"He's taking a bath," Raymond said. "He's already drunk."

"We better get up there before it's all gone," Sam muttered.

Paul panted heavily on the steep slope. Sam looked back.

"You don't look so good," he said. "Do you feel sick?"

Paul nodded. "I feel pretty bad. It was cold in the mine."

James set the bottle and the book on the ground. He waded into the lake, swam a few strokes, then turned back and leaped from the water, shouting and laughing. He grabbed a towel made from a flour sack and rubbed his body dry. The other men sat on a log and watched, warm in the brilliant morning. Drops of water sparkled on delicate white flowers and on pale, drooping mountain grass. A blue jay screamed in the trees and a squirrel clattered along the rough bark of a fir.

Sam picked up the bottle, drank, and handed it to Paul. Paul reached for the bottle, then stopped and smiled apologetically. "Maybe I shouldn't."

Sam stared at him. "You paid for it, for hell's sake. Come on, boy, you wanted to get away from things in the valley. Drink up. You'll feel better pronto. No reason why we shouldn't sit here in this sunshine and feel good, is there? I got some stories to tell you ain't heard."

Raymond picked up the book from the ground. He held it before his friends. It was the Book of Mormon.

"You know," he said," maybe Paul shouldn't of drunk that whiskey. Look, a Mormon Bible."

Paul stared at the book. "Where did that come from?"

"It was wrapped up with that bottle," James said. "Mixing your religion with your fun, ain't you? Or maybe you meant for old Sam and Ray here to read this Bible while you and me took care of this whiskey. I call that gentlemanly of you."

Paul took the book and leafed through it. It was Regina's.

"I didn't put it there, boys," he said. "My wife did it."

"Don't worry about it," James said. "I ain't ashamed of it. I'd be glad to have a Bible. If you don't want this one, let me have it."

"Well, it isn't a Bible," Paul said, "not exactly, anyhow. Dammit all, why did she do that?"

"Some men ain't afraid to knock their woman down if she needs it," Raymond said.

"Cheer up, Paul," Sam said. "It don't make no difference. Have another drink."

Paul shook his head gloomily. "The fun's ruined," he said.

"No, it ain't," Sam said. "Paul, there ain't anything to keep us from saddling up our horses and hauling ourselves out of here for Alaska."

"She sent that book because she knew it would remind me," Paul said. "In any corner of my house, out in the milk shed, in the hay field, no matter where, she's there. She doesn't say much, but I know what she thinks. The Church wants this, or the Church wants that, or God won't like you doing this, or God won't be happy if you do that! God!"

Paul leaped to his feet. With a violent heave, he threw the Book of Mormon into the air where it fluttered open and fell with rustling pages into the lake. Stunned silence held the men while the book splashed and circular waves receded from the spot where it struck.

James shook his head. "You shouldn't of done that."

Paul ran to the edge of the lake and dived in, boots, clothes, all. He was engulfed in snow-cold water. Like hammers the cold pounded at his body. He flung his arms about, feeling wildly for the book, but grasping only water. Down, down, down. Then his hand touched it, the sacred book. He closed on it, took it firmly, let his feet sink below him to find the bottom and shove himself upward. There was no bottom. He kicked and stroked but still he sank. A scalding fear swept his veins. He knew he could not swim with his heavy clothes and clumsy boots.

His lungs convulsed. They asked only one breath of air. To pull and draw again, to suck so easily in and out the animating air! He began to dream dreams and old days came back to him. He sat with a plate of sliced tomatoes and a shaker of salt. The cabin door was open. Specks of dust and lint floated from the darkness of the room into a bright shaft of noonday sun. His mother came from the hearth, her skirt scraping the puncheon floor. She forked a chop onto his plate, then sat by him.

"They say Jimmy drinks," she said. "What'll I do if he goes the way of his pa?"

Paul stared at his plate while his mother wept. He saw obliquely the

convulsions of her body. Her fatigue lanced his shoulders like a scalpel. Then his tight-clenched jaws and his retching throat brought him back to the water closing fast over his sinking body.

Somewhere from above, in the water or out, he could not know, swirling amid glistening bubbles of air, circled about by a luminous aura, a woman came smiling. It was Regina, he thought. She called in a gentle voice down to him, and he thought she said, "Paul, repent."

He peered upward and there was no water. Regina stood there, clothed in white with bare feet, and her golden-red hair floated in a breeze. Her face shone with a transcendent loveliness, a reflection of light from far away, from beyond the western mountains in that sun-filled kingdom where dawn has broken forever and oceans roar a chorus of infinite praise to God and God Himself sits in blinding robes and utters the word that elevates continents and casts off globules of stellar fire.

"I love you, Paul," she said.

He stroked once more, crying now to his limbs for a strength they had never before possessed. He felt nothing but the grind of his tight-shut jaws and the flowing force of his arms and legs. She retreated above him, and he stroked to reach her. Above the bank where they pulled him, while he lay gasping like a fish and his face slowly turned from black to red, unseen in its approach in the high mountain air came a bird, a mountain mourning dove. It stopped in mid-air above him, confused. It fluttered in the sun, then turned and flew away.

When he had come to his senses, Paul looked about at his friends with shame and uncertainty. He pulled off his boots and drained them of water. Piece by piece he removed his clothes and wrung them out and put them on again.

Finally he nodded at the three men and said, "Thanks."

He walked to the log where his horse was tethered. He bridled the animal and led it to the saddle hanging on the side of the cabin.

"Heading off?" Sam asked.

Paul nodded. "Let's just call it quits. You've got the grub. I'll throw in my mules and packs if you want them. Maybe you'll hit it rich. But don't count me in. I won't be back."

"Don't walk off on me again, Paul," Sam said.

Paul ignored him as he finished saddling his horse. When he looked up, Paul had tears in his eyes. "I can't help it, Sam."

"I thought maybe you had had enough of settlements," Sam said.

Paul said, "I hope you won't look me up again."

"Damn, Paul, you don't just walk out on friends. What we going to do about that body in the mine?"

Paul mounted the horse, "I'll tell the sheriff," he said. His horse swung about nervously, pulling against the bit. "Don't look me up anymore, unless you want what I've got."

Sam raised his eyebrows.

Paul added, "But I don't think you will. There's nothing to say except goodby."

He kicked the horse in the ribs with the heels of his boots. The horse snorted and broke into a gallop. Paul reined the surging animal in and pulled it about.

"Keep the mules," he shouted. Then he waved and gave the horse its head.

Paul rode hard until he came to the high ridge where the trail overlooked the western valley. He paused there and dismounted. A patchwork of fields and pastures spread across the valley. A dusty haze hung over the little towns. The lake glistened in the afternoon sun. Paul peered closely, and there, far below, he could see the squares and blocks of his own farm. Across the canyon from where he stood he could see two trees. He recognized them instantly. One was tall and conical, the other bent and bushy. Paul looked for a moment, and then, leaning his head against the shoulder of his horse, he wept bitterly. At last he shook his head, mounted his horse, and rode into the canyon.