

FICTION

SHOCKS OF GRAIN

ROBERT L. EGBERT

"WHOA." Benjamin Vaughn pulled back on the lines and stopped his four-horse team. It was midmorning and he had just finished cutting his ten-acre patch of barley. With the binder stopped, Ben grasped the lever that disengaged the cutter bar, pulled back and squeezed the handle and then pushed it forward. "Giddup," he called and the horses started forward, pulling the now free-rolling, borrowed binder to the yard.

Ben unhitched his horses and drove them to the barn. He'd have to get that binder back to David but not today. Dave's grain was cut already and he wouldn't mind if Ben kept the binder another few days—just so it was back in time to be put in shape for winter. In the meantime, clouds were piling in and crows were flying up the draw. It was going to rain and that barley must be shocked or it never would get dry enough to thresh.

Ben folded the harness lines and quickly looped them over hames, unhooked the horses from each other and removed the harnesses to hang them in the barn. As he turned with the last leather harness, Old Sally, made restless by a late season horsefly, lifted her left hind hoof and set it down upon Ben's instep. He gasped in pain and threw the harness back on Sally, then swore a hill man's curse and shoved the mare until she moved her weight. With his foot released, Ben seized a nearby bundle fork, to beat some sense into the dumb beast's head. But even as his hand closed on the handle, he stopped, stunned by the savagery of his own anger. An image of rage and violence long since forsaken passed through his mind. Ben's hand relaxed

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and he turned slowly back to complete the task he'd set aside, to hang Old Sally's harness in the barn. And finally, he let the team out to pasture, through the barb wire gate next to the barn. The way the weather looked, he wouldn't need any horses for a few days.

With looping strides, Ben headed toward the barley field. Only if he worked through dinner would he have the bundles in shocks by dark.

Ben's quarter section lay in the Valview hills next to the Wyoming border and south of Badger Creek. The lower end of his land was in quaking asp country, the upper end, in pine. Barely one-fourth of his hundred and sixty acres had been scarred by a farmer's plow, or ever would be. Ben and Agnes' house was three miles from Church, four and a half from school, eight from the nearest store and ten miles from a doctor.

From the front door of their two-room log house, Ben could see the Teton Peaks, like sharks' teeth, the Big Hole Mountains, light blue with distance, and the wheat covered hills of the Basin's west side, fifteen miles away. Entering those hills were the gray-dry brush and tree-lined cliffs of the Narrows, the Canyon cut by the Teton River as it left the Valley. These weren't Kentucky hills; Ben and Agnes were not yet sure they liked them.

Each winter the snow fell deep among the trees of the Valview hills, stairsteps to the Tetons' western slopes. For months each winter transportation was a horse drawn farm sleigh; sometimes not even a sleigh could make it through the dugway's drifts. Then Ben had to ride a horse or hike to do the things he must. Sometimes the kids missed school and even getting the family to Church was not possible. But neither winter's deepest drifts nor springtime storms could keep the weasels away from his chickens.

Forty-five feet from the packed-earth front step of Ben's sod-roofed house was a spring. Year round it flowed clear water—drinking water, bathing water, washing water, stock watering water. It ran between the rows of willows a scant ten yards away and trickled down the draw until it disappeared into the dry earth.

Ben and Agnes Vaughn had married young and had two kids. Then the Mormon missionaries came—and nothing was ever the same again. After he and Agnes joined the Church, even their own families didn't much care for them and so they left the Pine Mountains and moved to Idaho. They had lived in Valview a bare three years, still talking with the nasal twang of Kentucky's hill country. Some folks laughed at the way they said their words and so Ben didn't talk very much. He didn't talk at all about Kentucky and how they joined the Church. Nor did he talk about the feud between his family and another family. Ben had left the feud behind him, but he still had his rifle; it hung on the wall in the kitchen. The only time he used it now was when the family needed meat. He still could drop a deer or elk with a single shot—farther away than most of these farmers could see it.

Ben reached the field where barley bundles lay in sets of four and five as he had dropped them from the binder. Hundreds of bundles strewn in rows must be put together in shocks, bunches of ten or twelve, their golden heads pointed up. Another man might have wondered how many bundles there

were and how many nine or eleven bundle shocks they would make and how long it would take to form each shock and thus how long it would take to complete the field. Ben didn't. As the first drops of rain struck the parched gray earth, he set two bundles upright and began leaning others against them.

One shock and then another and a third and a fourth Ben made as he worked across the field. The sprinkle became a slow, steady drizzle that soaked his shoulders and ran unheeded down his arms. Bearded heads of barley shoved their whiskers through his sleeves and climbed his arms, scratching as they went.

Stoop, reach, grab and stack. One hundred bundles and then one hundred shocks. Ben's shoulders grew tight and his back ached and his arms were raw from barley's sharp-toothed whiskers.

Stoop, reach, grab and stack and fumble a rain-slick barley bundle and then pick it up and stack it once again. Scores of bundles, hundreds of bundles, thousands of barley bundles—each one a trifle for Ben's arms and back, but a thousand of anything, even trifles, take their toll. And the rain came down and soaked the soil and the bundles and Ben. The rain reminded him of October in Kentucky.

Back and forth across the rows of barley Ben moved, building shocks, straight up and true shocks, making sure that his grain could ripen under September's slanting rays. His gut gnawed from dinner missed, and his throat was parched. He never could figure why a man got thirsty in the rain.

Water soaked through his hat and mixed itself with sweat and trickled down around his ears, both front and back, and dripped from his chin and nose. Rain mixed with dust that earlier had sifted through his clothes. Dust and rain formed mud and the mud caked on neck and face and arms and legs.

The barley shocks increased in number, and with each shock there were ten fewer bundles on the ground. And still Ben moved. Stoop, reach, grab, and stack. Back and shoulders and legs throbbed and Ben's mind produced a stark image of Cousin Fred stepping off the train in Lexington. One bullet and then a second one smashed against his chest and drove him back against the step. He sagged and died, and when Ben heard about it, even the trail that he and Fred had walked became a barren place.

Inside the house, out of sight from Ben's barley field, Agnes moved around her kitchen and wished her husband would come in for dinner. She'd been keeping it since noon. She could see the binder in the yard so she knew that the barley was all cut and that Ben must be putting it in shocks. Agnes put another pan under a muddy drip and hoped the rain would stop.

Ben straightened, rubbed his back, and looked out to the west. It would rain all night.

Just two more rows to go. He would be finished well ahead of dark. More slowly now. Mud clung to his boots. Ben slipped, then caught himself, and slipped again. One more row of bundles and he could leave the rain and mud and the skin-stabbing barley whiskers.

The threshing machine wouldn't reach Valview till Monday and then it would take two weeks of good weather to wend its way to him. Most of that time Ben would work his rack and team for other men, pitching bundles with his three-tined fork and hauling them to the separator; pitching them onto the slatted conveyor belt which carried them into the slashing steel jaws that cut the twine and chopped the stalks and freed the heads of grain. And everything would disappear into the bowels of that great, gray steel giant and then, mysteriously, it would all come out again, the straw and chaff blown to an ever-growing stack, the kernels of grain shunted down a metal tube and into burlap sacks. Almost no one knew what took place inside.

At last the field was done. Ben slogged head down through mud and stubble, among and between the shocks. At the door he stuck his head inside and asked, "Have you milked the cow, Aggie?"

"Yes, Ben, I've milked her."

Ben kicked and scraped his feet against the lowest log, the one set on flat rocks to keep it off the ground. And then he stepped into the overheated, fresh-bread-and-mutton-stew-smelling kitchen. He unlaced his shoes and tossed them under the peg where he hung his coat and then he took the round tin wash tub from the wall. The kids all disappeared to the other room when Ben poured boiling water from the tea kettle and cold water from the bucket into the tub and slumped his body in.

By the time Ben had soaked and soaped and washed, Agnes had his dry clothes waiting on the nearest chair. He dressed and lifted the tin tub and its contents and opened the door and threw the mud and sweat and rain and barley whiskers and water as far as he was able.

As the mixture flew and fell, Ben saw a mounted figure on the road, and then another. George, it was, and Jake, sons of neighbors farther down in Valview—talking and laughing as they rode, the way young boys will. Ben called out "Hello" and they called back and kept on riding—quiet now.

Agnes put the bowl of stew and plate of bread on the bare, wood table and called the children and held the baby on her lap. Each one sat in front of oatmeal-package plate and glass while Ben thanked God for their blessings, including supper, and asked him to bless the food and protect each one of them.

Ben spooned and chewed and swallowed; his eldest child, Ruth, asked, "Why did we leave Kentucky, Pa?"

Ben stopped chewing, slowly raised his eyes, and looked at Ruth. Agnes interrupted, "They've been talking about it in Primary, Ben. Each child tells where them and their parents come from."

"We come to Idaho to be where the Church is."

"Wasn't there no other reason, Pa? Seems like I remember some shootin' and hollerin' just before we left."

Ben looked at Agnes and then at the other children—and back to Ruth. He hawked the frog from his throat, swallowed it, and said. "Some folks in Kentucky shoots others, Ruthie. After we become Mormons, we didn't want no more killin'".

"Why'd they shoot each other?"

"No reason. Just did."

Yes, Ben thought, the others kept on killing but he couldn't get out of his mind Elder Walsh's voice when he said "Thou shalt not kill." Even today he could remember when that young boy opened his Bible to the Book of Romans and read, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."

The kitchen was quiet except for the sounds of eating, and then Ruth tried once more. "They must of had some reason, Pa."

Ben ducked his head and ate another bite of stew before he said. "My daddy's pa told me that some boy throwed his rope onto a crazy old man's fence and pulled it down. The old man got mad and shot the boy and the boy's uncle shot the old man. Whenever one would get caught out by hisself, the other side would try to kill him. So we left."

Ruth sighed a dry-mouthed sigh and went back to eating mutton stew. The two boys, their supper finished, left the table. Ben once more looked at Agnes and asked where was the piece of cake left from last night's supper.

The next morning, as soon as it was light, Ben stepped from his front door into a clear, frosty morning. He yawned, stretched sore muscles, and reached back inside the door to get his hat. The rifle hung beside it and when he saw the little used barrel, he thought of Ruthie's question. Slowly he closed the door against the sight and walked to and past the line of willows, kicking holes in the earth as he went. As he walked, Ben's thoughts left Kentucky; they returned to Idaho and to his land. "Must of rained an inch," he thought. "Glad I got that barley shocked. Even with all that rain, it should get on its way to drying now."

Through the line of willows, Ben raised his eyes to view the rows of barley shocks—and stopped, perplexed. Where were they? Where were those shocks he spent all day yesterday building? Where were all those bundles standing up on end and supporting each other?

Ben broke into a trot—and then he ran. The shocks were down! Every last one! No bundle leaned against another. And then he saw the tracks. Horse tracks. Back and forth across the field. Boys laughing. Stoop, reach, grab and stack. Back hurting and shoulders aching. Horses running. Boys laughing. Barley beards scratching raw flesh. Rifles flashed and men fell. Hate burned white. Ben ran. Women screamed and children cried and Elder Walsh said "Thou shalt not kill."

And then Ben stopped and his shoulders sagged. Ben cried.