

Sheep on the River

The hot, coaxing smell of meat on the stove was a postlude to starvation but almost a prelude to another kind of hell

By Ida Faye Sachs

PA lowered his head against the early morning sun and sniffed at the yellow stains on the newspapers that covered the table.

"What's the good of drippings without bread?" he boomed in the good-natured way that generally caught ma's ire.

She sat down with the baby, a line of soot bordering her nose, her long sharp jaw and ragged hair leaning out in hateful answer.

"I get so tired of listenin' to you. I can't tell you how it deafens me," she said.

"All right," he replied sternly, "can't I cast the blame on my own head if I want? Did I say you was to blame we haven't got it, for gosh sakes? So help me," he added, looking with pitiful appeal over to Sid as if to remind him of their secret understanding against ma, "I never seen a longer, nastier tongue 'n hers. Tell the truth, I'd as soon get my teeth knocked in as be rammed so much with her rotten temper." His squatty big shoulders nudged against his shirt, and his red face pointed to the black crack in the boards, tried and helpless-looking in self-pity.

She pushed her fingers into the corn meal, drew her lips down in distaste, then took a mouthful that showed up gritty and pale with her wide, heavy chewing.

"Yeh, you'd as soon," she sneered. "Well, I'd as soon die as put up much longer with what I got to put up with."

Pa sighed. It was a sigh that shook like a bundle of leaves. He looked at the empty pan, glued on the edges with what was left of the meal, then leaned back with his chin up and idleness all over his face.

"At least," he pronounced as in a dream, "you can't say I didn't make to try, Clary. In all that's right you can't begrudge me that," he said winningly. Ma poked at Sid to go on with his eating.

"Oh, what the stinkin' hell's the good of it," she said quietly, a worn grief in her eyes. "Nothin' kin budge you. You'll always be sittin' on your rump full of good excuses."

"Why not?" said pa, unruffled. "God knows I been tryin' every other thing."

"Sure," she said. "Jest leave it to me. Let me go on to my grave tryin' to keep us all goin'. Jest alive and that's all. Nothin' more nor less. You jest stay on your behind and let me do the rest."

"You must be a smart one," he said smiling at her.

"I'm a smart one," she said, in a drawn-out groan. "And the pains'll be killin' what little strength there's in me. It's a life to be livin', somethin' pretty fine and decent," she

said. "Sure. I don't deserve no better than that. Like somethin' holy you kin give thanks to God about it," she choked to herself.

"Maybe I'll whistle," he said. "Maybe it'll come dancin' to you."

Ma took a long digging breath and turned to the baby, making automatic little stirs with her fingers against his face. Then his gray watery eyes opened, and ma's hand crept down below her throat and lifted out her breast that was long and yellow and empty-looking like an old flower dead from the sun. The baby sucked blindly, his fists hard against her. Little Ellie crawled under the table, cramming her mouth full of the coffee grounds and dead ants that happened to cross her way. Pa watched the baby as if the baby were air. Sid gazed through the rusty screen window of the shack down to the river. There was no sound except for the gurgling panic of the baby at ma's breast.

SID LOOKED OUT, pleased that pa could still hold his own against ma, for pa's idleness, that she hated so, to him meant a definite power. It was through pa's roaming idleness, he remembered thankfully, that he had been saved for two years from being locked up in school. And it was pa's way of trying things that shifted them back and forth and back again, from the dry gray plains down to the valleys, then up to this red mountain dust where there might be work in the fields or the canneries or the mill, making each day count and color up in his mind. And now it was the river and the flimsy bugs skittling over the rocks and pa naming for him the animals and birds, an exciting certainty to last as long as pa hiked now and then the thirteen miles down to the mill to see what was doing, as long as there lived in pa the will not to grieve.

He looked up, startled. Ma, gasping and creaking her chair, yanked her breast away from the baby, pulled her dress into place, muttering to herself, and put the baby back in the apple crate.

"Say, it looked like there was somethin' there all right," pa said calmly.

"What do you know?" she cried, outraged. "What do you talk for when you don't know nothin'?"

Then Sid gave a cry and pointed to a sheep on the opposite bank of the river. Ma dropped her fury and flew to watch it. His father, careening out of meditation, pressed against the screen and stumbled out of the door. Clary's rangy legs bounded toward the stove and ran out, her long feet now madly

alive to cover the spaces between her and pa.

Sid stood by the window. He could see the sheep's blunted head looking up in elegant inquiry at pa's rushing toward it, then as politely turning to ma, who was hurrying over the narrow crossing of boulders to the other side.

"Corner it," howled pa. He snatched the rope from ma and took a step toward the niche where the sheep stood.

Ma retreated toward the crossing, her body bent over a rock.

"Stay where you are," pa howled again. She nodded. The sheep swerved its head, sniffed, and all at once sent its stiff legs flying in terror into the thick woods beyond the bank. The two of them shot up with the swiftness of light after it. For a little while all three stayed out of sight while Sid waited. He could hear, out of the tormented quiet of the river, the mingling sounds of hoofs and leaves and their hurrying feet. Then suddenly, ma's sharp sides appeared above a shoulder of rock, her face tense and wary. There was a throaty moan. Pa sprang out of the shadows, his red hair gleaming from the rock light, then began stealthily moving toward a thick hedge of bushes below near ma. She backed precariously toward the stream, nodding at him. Sid heard a crackling break of twigs from inside the bushes. The sheep, all dirty whiteness, rose out of the leaves and turned to face pa. Slowly, its eyes dully staring, it moved with the calmness of a cloud, to find footing on the stony ledge nearby. Pa threw the rope several times, landing it on trees, on rock. The sheep, knowing and quiet, stood watching. Then again pa hurled it. This time a light twisted cry came out of the sheep. With a lift of its hind end it bolted through air and away.

Hot-footed and gasping, pa and ma ran together. Sid strained to the screen. Without sound of words they climbed over the bleached round stones, scrambled into the bushes, out onto the rocks again. Then the two of them, pursuit somehow binding them close, disappeared into the trees. Sid waited a little longer, and idly poked at the swill burning in the stove. There was no doubt, he thought, that pa would catch it. Not because of ma with him, but because of pa's nature alone. Complacently he returned to the screen and saw that ma was running ahead over the crossing, and that behind her was pa, leading the sheep on the rope. Sid went to the maple tree near the door. Silently they walked through the dust up

to the shack. Their faces were sweaty and red; their bodies slouched together, carelessly slow, in new partnership.

Ma heard the baby crying and stood still awhile, digging a hand into her forehead.

"Got your breath, kid?" said pa, panting and walking in circles.

Ma went to the door, pushing the hair from her face.

"It's the kinda weather, if you want to know it," she said, "I can't endure no more."

Pa winked at Sid and made a double harness of rope before he tied the sheep to the tree. The sheep flexed its neck, nibbled the leaves, and with a last thought of escape made crazy turns around the tree, getting itself tangled in the rope.

Pa said it had strayed from a flock. In its straying or running from ma and pa it had torn a deep gash in its side, a dark redness that was buried deep in its dirty skin.

"Here."

Pa held to its nose a handful of leaves. The sheep gave a disdainful tug at the rope and ran as far as it could, shaking the tree, and staring around in a recaptured wildness.

Ma came out with the old rusty ax in her hands, that pa had found on the premises.

"Now I expect you're gonna leave me to do the butcherin'," she said.

Pa pulled the sheep over, dragged Sid's hand down to touch its wool and pressed leaves into its flat, turned-in lips. "I figgered on findin' out whose it is, then we'd get cash for that," he said. "This way, it's what you call a felony, if it belongs to somebody else."

Ma came closer with the ax, her face convulsed, her shoulders trembling. She let out a cry straight into pa's face. "I got my heart set on it. I got my whole life banked on it," she cried. "Here you got meat for a week like it dropped from the sky. Here all you kin do is open your big mouth about it." She burst into angry weeping, pulling at the rope, furiously trying to pull the sheep away from pa's hold.

Then Sid started in. He ran over to pa, then back to her, begging them both not to kill it so soon. It was learning so well to stay near the tree, to eat from pa's hands, he pleaded, running between them frantically. Pa shoved Sid away, giving ma his whole consideration.

"All right, if you got your heart set on it, I'll butcher it then," he said.

"Oh, leave it stay a little longer," begged Sid once again.

Pa gave him a shove that sent him falling to the ground.

"Quit your bawlin'," he mocked. "If you don't want to watch, go hide under the stove."

Ma cleared the old pine stump and ran with crazy joy to help pa untie the sheep.

"Roast today. Stew tomorrow and the next day cold," she was screaming delightedly. "God knows what all if the blow-flies don't get it."

Sid put his hands to his eyes, and on hearing the scraping sound of the sheep being

dragged to the stump, ran inside. He could hear ma wheedling pa to hurry, and pa, in conspiracy, testing the ax on the stump and laughing loudly over the struggling sounds of the sheep. Then he heard a quick bony crash and a thin curdling noise. He had to cry. He had to cry that pa was so quick to ma's bidding.

"There," ma was saying. Pa said nothing, but went on making more sounds with the ax.

Ma came in smiling, blood all over her dress and hands. She put her hands to soak in a can of water, and after they were free of blood, went out with a heavy laughing look on her face to pa. They started counting the chunks of meat in low voices, and ma with the blood still running down her dress onto her shoes, rushed in with a huge piece she set in a pan and put on the stove.

Pa cleared the mess from the stump and hung the meat on the tree by the screen window. Ma sent Sid down the road for twigs and rubbish to keep the fire going, while pa busied himself far down behind the trees burying the hide.

The hot coaxing smell of meat on the stove pushed into the corners of the shack, made the air dense, rushing with promise. Sid waited by the screen. Pa hurried his steps to ma's bidding, answered her easily in obedience.

"Betcha he's still thinkin' of that there mutton," pa said when they sat down at the table, giving ma a wink.

The two ate with a wildness. They clawed the tough brown meat. They stuffed their mouths, chewed, swallowed, patted their bellies in pleasure.

"Hurry, eat," said ma, with her bulging dripping mouth.

"I'm eatin'," whined Sid.

With great effort he was eating slowly. He wanted to keep his pleasure cool, private, instead of having it spread lawless and greasy all over his face, as it was doing to them. He could feel his separation from pa grow as pa went on eating, as ma gnawed in haste to match her hunger with pa's. Pa was no longer to be set apart, loved for his idleness. Now together, with their fat racing jaws, the brown grease on their lips, their eyes wild and roving with secret, they were bound against him—all because of the sheep. Pa's lazy powerful life crawled, went on crawling to ma's keeping because that thing had sought to wander here, to nuzzle its dirty fleece among the bushes.

"I'm what they call a transient. That's why, I figger," spoke pa, "they won't take me down at the mill."

"Well, go down tomorrow and see again." Ma groaned sweetly over the new slices of meat pa put on her plate. "If not," she went on, "there's always the hop season. Much as I kin hardly endure it, me weanin' the baby, there's hops."

"Sure," he returned. "We kin take our time while the meat holds out, then start movin' like we done before."

"Pray the blow-flies don't get it," she said.

"Anyhow them lumber trucks should be shovin' down to the valley for winter supplies before long," he said. "Then it won't be the walkin' like it was the last time."

They talked more about it, and out of the new content of their bodies sounded a future of goodness meant for themselves and no one else's interference. Pa was hacking off another hunk of meat for himself when they heard a car far off come down the road. Ma ran to the door and said it was the sheriff's car she'd once seen outside the Centro courthouse. Pa gulped fast, his hand over his mouth, then walked slowly, idly out to the road. Ma sat down again, took a few slow bites of her meat and stared at pa's plate.

"Go see. Hurry an' tell me what it is," she choked out at last to Sid.

THE ROAD made a sharp turn, and ahead stood pa, his shoulders still, his eyes grave and unmoving on the car standing a little away from him. In the car, the fat puffy face of the sheriff returned pa's look, and behind the sheriff, the small, unquiet eyes of a little man who twisted in his seat, turned sharply from the trees to the sky, then down the road to the roof of the shack where a ribbon of smoke hung lifeless and blue in the air.

"No, I didn't see nothin', nothin' at all," said pa. The rattling voice of the little man bore down on him.

"I'm tellin' you," he said, "it's three more I'm missin'. Listen, partner, if you ain't tellin' the truth, they'll be hell poppin' here and it'll pop, I promise."

Sid stayed in the shadow, saw pa lift his head and breathe in the dust from the car with slow deliberation.

"There's thirty mile of river bank between here and Centro to find your goddam sheep in. So find 'em," he said.

"All right, you know it," said the sheriff. "You know, well as me, if you ain't tellin' the truth, you'll be arrested and tried, and you won't get no mercy. Got a feller locked up now for rustlin' which sure ain't no different from this."

Pa kept his eyes on the steering wheel.

"I'm swearin' I didn't see it," he said gravely.

The sheriff growled to the little man, then the car backed into the turn, and sped up and on to the pavement of the highway.

Pa remained stock-still, listening to the fading sound of the car. When it had gone, he clutched his sides and his shoulders started shaking.

"Hey, pa," whispered Sid. Pa turned a face as cold and as unloving as stone and walked down the road to the shack.

"Come on," he called back, all of a sudden. "Come on, kid, we ain't through eatin' yet."

Sid didn't move. He stood looking at where pa had been, a loving pity welling up within him.

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READERS' FORUM

Life in the Spanish loyalist trenches—And trade unionism in the Deep South

● It seems as if all the anti-fascists in the world have come here for a finish fight. I was staggered when I first learned the extent of the movement. I've even seen a Chinese here. For many it was not simply a matter of traveling to get here. In the French train were two Germans who had just escaped from a concentration camp. They beat it to the coast, got a rowboat, and rowed to France through the open sea. There were six or seven Austrians who came through France. More had started with them, but some had been shot down at the Austrian border. I've found out from a German comrade that Hitler has trained some excellent soldiers for the People's Front; Germans are coming here right after the end of their army-service terms.

If anyone had any doubt as to the wishes of the Spanish people in this war, the doubts couldn't stand up against what we saw on the train ride coming in.

As the troop train went by, every peasant in the fields stopped working to raise his fist in greeting; at the railroad station they clustered around, shouting "No pasaran!" and "Salud!" At one place a bunch of kids came down with their teachers, singing the "International."

We got off for lunch at Barcelona in the "Carlos Marx" house—a building four stories high on a full square block. Barcelona is strongly Anarchist, as evidenced by the large number of red-and-black flags. But, although our column was preceded by a hammer-and-sickle banner with the words "Brigade Internacional," that made no difference as far as the enthusiasm of the people went. Here, as everywhere in Spain, the clenched fist is the universal greeting.

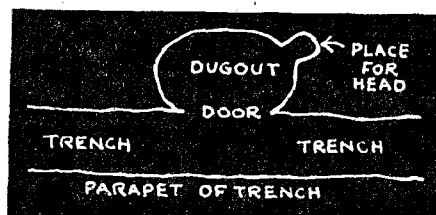
We entered Valencia in the early morning, while it was still dark. There were no lights and it was somewhat eerie marching through a large city that seemed to be deserted. There were some refugees here, sleeping in the streets, as they had no other place to go. At times in the dark we would hear a soft "Salud!" It was getting light by the time we returned to the train. It was here that I first saw refugees. Refugees don't look like other people, somehow. There was an expression in the faces of these people who had been driven from their homes that cannot be described. I don't like to think of it—people living in empty cars at the railroad station. . . .

I am sitting in an olive grove, which would be a beautiful place if there were not trenches dug through it in various directions. The last couple of days have been quiet—only an occasional rifle shot or burst of machine-gun fire. This is what you get when neither side can make an advance against the other for the time being. However, the stalemate right now is all to our advantage. In the last couple of weeks, the International Brigade, of which our American Lincoln Battalion is a part, has made a big advance and we are now in a strong position. We have the fascists opposing us encircled on three sides, with a river on the fourth side. We hope to wipe them out within a few days.

We are given to understand that the military situation is very favorable to us. The new conscript army which the Spanish government is raising should be ready for a big push within a few weeks. The fascists seem to be getting short of both man-power and material. Their man-power, moreover, is very unreliable. I haven't seen it yet myself, but I have been told that the Moors and other mercenaries have gotten pretty tired and are likely to give way before a determined attack. The fascists also have within their ranks many conscious anti-fascists who have been forced into their army. Just a couple of days ago a Communist Party mem-

ber came over to our own lines, bringing nine others with him.

Perhaps you would like to hear about my home. For the past week I had been sleeping in a ditch about a half-mile from the front, as part of the reserves. This wasn't so good, since one was exposed to the weather quite badly. A blanket spread over the top of the ditch was only a slight help. But now I am much better off. This is my third day in the front lines. When I got here I found that the dugout assigned to me was a hole cut into the side of the trench away from the enemy. The hole had an opening about eighteen inches wide, after which came the dugout proper, with dimensions of about four by three feet and high enough for me to be able to sit up. I have improved this by digging out a corner into which I can place my head when I sleep. By a little ingenuity I can make myself quite comfortable. I drape a blanket over the opening when I sleep, so I am protected from both rain and cold. Here is a drawing of the place, viewed from the top except that my dugout is not open at the top:



And by the way, who was the s.o.b. who invented the phrase "sunny Spain"? It's rained for four days out of the last week. Rain is one thing when you're in New York and another in this proletarian army where you have only the clothes you wear and you wear them till they're worn out—the fact that clothing is wet doesn't mean it's worn out, except on rare occasions.

For the last couple of days the food has been much better than usual, although it has usually been of fair quality. The reason for the improvement is the discovery that a Chinese comrade who was doing tolerably well as a machine-gunner was a first-



Marantz

class chef. He protested, but he now works as a chef, since we have plenty of machine-gunners.

A couple of nights ago the fascists put on some loudspeaker propaganda for our lines. They spoke in French, and warned us to give up in five minutes "or else." They attacked after five minutes, but got nowhere. The next night we put up a loudspeaker for some propaganda of our own. I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw this loudspeaker. We christened it the "street-corner speaker's nightmare." It came in two parts, each carried on a big truck. The first truck carried the electrical apparatus and an armor-protected room for the speakers. The second truck carried the horn, which was about twenty feet long and six feet wide at the mouth. It would do pretty well for Union Square gatherings.

PAUL.

Terror in Louisiana

● Reuben Cole, an organizer for the Farmers' Union, had been walking through several southern Louisiana parishes visiting locals and interviewing members in regard to complaints growing from failure to receive A.A.A. and soil conservation checks. A large number of letters had been received at the state headquarters of the union in New Orleans from members of the strong Weyanoke and Tunica locals near the Mississippi state line in West Feliciana Parish. The following affidavits tell their own story:

State of Louisiana
Parish of Orleans

Before me, Herman Midlo, a notary public for the above parish and state, appeared Reuben Cole and under oath makes the following statement.

I am an organizer for the Farmers' Educational & Coöperative Union of America. On June 23 I was in West Feliciana Parish and was at the home of Willie Scott and spent the night there.

On June 16, Gordon McIntire mailed a letter to Willie Scott telling him that I would be at his house on June 24. Scott never received the letter; the mob that went to Scott's home on the night of June 24 knew the contents of this letter and expected to find me there. The fact that I arrived at Willie Scott's a day earlier than I expected and left early next morning, June 24, prevented the mob getting me.

Willie Scott has been a active member of the union and is president of Weyanoke Local No. 8. The announced purpose of the mob was to break the union in West Feliciana Parish.

(Signed) REUBEN COLE.

Sworn and subscribed this 2nd day of July, 1937.

HERMAN MIDLO,
Notary Public.

State of Louisiana
Parish of Orleans

Before me, Herman Midlo, a notary public for the above parish and state, appeared Irene Scott and under oath makes the following statement.

I have been living on a farm four miles from Weyanoke in the parish of West Feliciana with my husband Willie Scott. We had good farming and had five acres of cotton, twelve acres of corn, peas, two cows, a horse. We started building the union one year ago and had plenty of good results in organizing. We never did do anybody any harm and was only concerned with making a decent living and making the union strong.

Last Thursday night Willie left the house and went to a brother's house to get some corn. I was