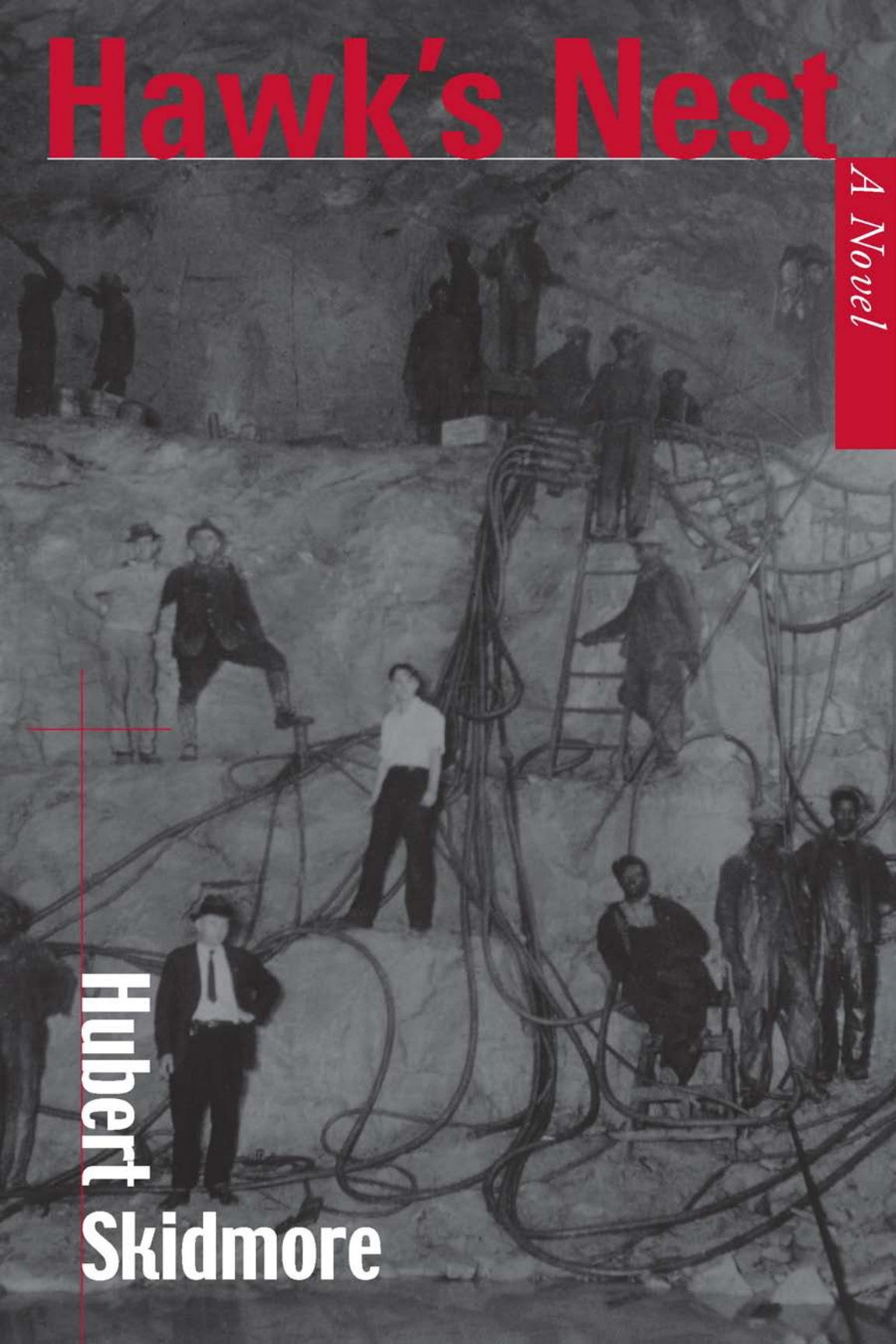
Hawk's Nest

A Novel



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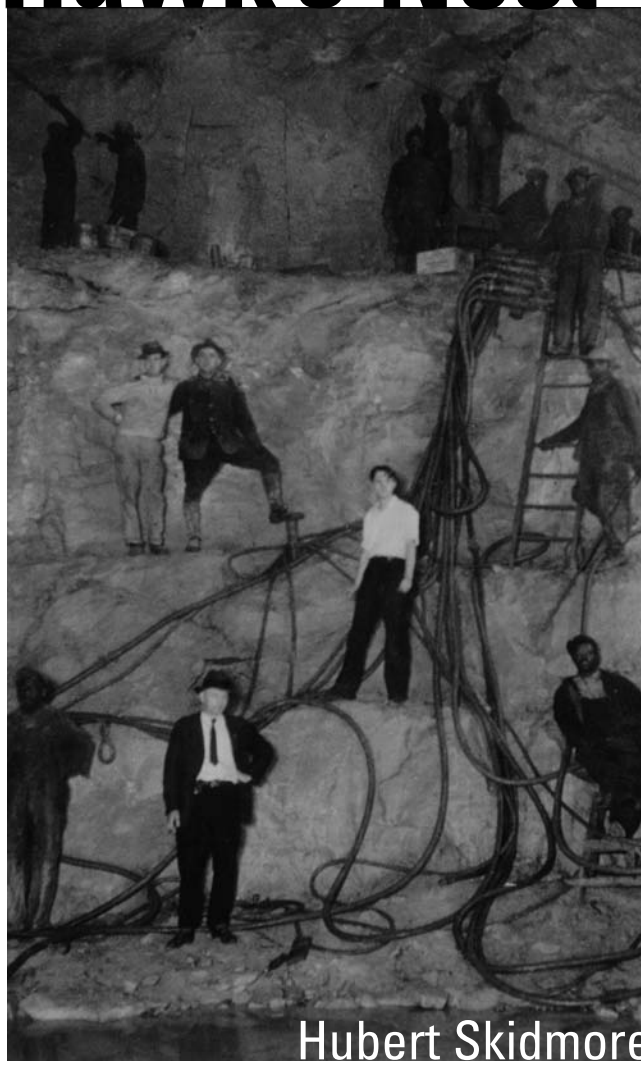

Hubert Skidmore

The University of Tennessee Press / Knoxville

First Edition. Originally published in 1941 by Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc.

THE APPALACHIAN ECHOES series is dedicated to reviving and contextualizing classic books about Appalachia for a new generation of readers. By making available a wide spectrum of works—from fiction to nonfiction, from folklife and letters to history, sociology, politics, religion, and biography—the series seeks to reveal the diversity that has always characterized Appalachian writing, a diversity that promises to confront and challenge long-held stereotypes about the region.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Skidmore, Hubert, 1909–1946.
Hawk's nest: a novel / Hubert Skidmore.— 1st ed.
p. cm.—(Appalachian echoes)
ISBN 1-57233-280-8 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Industrial accidents—Fiction.
2. Construction workers—Fiction.
3. Appalachian Region—Fiction.
4. Depressions—Fiction.
5. Silicosis—Fiction.
6. Tunneling—Fiction.
I. Title.
II. Series.

PS3537.K38H39 2004
813'.52—dc22 2003026432

In memory of those who
died at Hawk's Nest

Foreword

Hawk's Nest

A Novel of America's Disinherited

There's much more to the story of Hubert Skidmore's *Hawk's Nest,* first published in 1941 by Doubleday and Doran, than what the novel tells. By itself the novel recounts the tale of one of America's worst industrial disasters and the ensuing cover-up during a time when the rights of industry routinely overwhelmed the needs of labor. It is a kind of proletarian novel that stands alongside John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1940), Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* (1932), and Tom Kromer's *Waiting for Nothing* (1935). The time of the plot is 1930, the place Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, and a Charlottesville construction company has just been awarded the contract to dig a three-mile tunnel through Gauley Mountain to divert the New River in order to produce hydroelectric power. The call for labor goes out upon the land, full of hungry and frightened men. "Out of the south and out of the East they came, and out of Joplin, Missouri, and Picher, Oklahoma, searching their way toward the rocky irregular state. Depression-ridden and work-hungry, they set out, leaving their families behind. . . . 'Jesus Christ, Money in your pocket! A fellow said there was work in West Virginia . . .'"

Like Steinbeck's dispossessed Joad family in search of work and the promised land, Lumpkin's Appalachian immigrants, the McClure family, combating oppressive mill town hegemony, and Kromer's desperate and haunted narrator suffering the worst of

want, Skidmore's *Hawk's Nest* tells a heartbreaking tale and, as a result, presents a more comprehensive depiction of the human price paid for the confluence of power, greed, fear, and debilitating socio-political attitudes during the Great Depression. In addition, Skidmore's novel—like Lumpkin's, with its backdrop of the Gastonia Mill Strike of 1929—creates a compelling psychological and emotional record of an actual event in history, pieced together by eyewitness stories and written accounts in the local and national press. The Hawk's Nest tunnel project began as a public power project for, and endorsed by, the state of West Virginia, but the force of the river's 162 foot fall would never produce power for the people of West Virginia; rather, it was designed and built to produce power for Union Carbide Corporation's huge ferro-alloy smelting plant along the Kanawha River. This sweetheart deal between the state and industry got underway with a 4.23-million-dollar contract awarded to the lowest bidder, Rinehart & Dennis Corporation, on March 13, 1930. However, at all times, Union Carbide maintained complete control over design and construction until the first power was produced in January 1937.

Of the five thousand men who eventually worked on the two-year tunnel project (with just as many turned away), some risked the press-gang methods of a one-way rail ticket and company store scrip, some endured baseball bat beatings at the hands of an exuberant roustabout employed by the local sheriff, some spent cold nights in an open field or under rocks for a chance to find a place in the foreman's line-up. The work consisted of ten-hour shifts, six days a week, for as much as 75 cents per hour and for as little as 20 cents an hour. The men, who were fortunate to be granted work, lived in twelve-by-fifteen-foot, thin-walled tarpaper shacks, equipped with one coal heater and double bunks for as many men who could fit. The shack rented for 50 cents per week, coal cost 25 to 50 cents per week, and electricity, if provided, 25 cents. Each man was charged the same rate no matter how many men were living in the same shack.[1] At times, as many as ten men would share the same shack—some the same bed—during alternating shifts. Working conditions, though less cramped, consisted of drilling, blasting, and hauling away the rock debris in tiny trains from a tunnel originally designed to be thirty-two feet in diameter, then widened to

forty-six feet in diameter when rich sandstone deposits were uncovered. The excess debris, rich in silica, was used for an additional profit and mined at no additional cost and shipped to nearby Alloy, West Virginia, for processing.

Of course, the widening of the tunnel, unnecessary to the tunnel's original purpose, prolonged the work time inside the tunnel, as well as exposing the men to dangerous health risks due to airborne silica dioxide, an incipient cause of pneumonia, lung cancer, and tuberculosis, and the chief cause of acute silicosis, a disease verified for the first time by U.S. health officials as a result of the Hawk's Nest project. Official estimates placed the death toll of the Hawk's Nest debacle at 432 men, but epidemiologist Martin Cherniack, the author of *The Hawk's Nest Incident: America's Worst Industrial Disaster,* thinks the toll much higher, possibly 764 men or more.[2] What worsened the health conditions inside the tunnel was the use of dry drill bits and inadequate ventilation systems in violation of standard practice. The practice of wetting drill bits controlled airborne dust to some degree, but wet drill bits also made for slower drilling, impeding the progress of the tunnel, and thereby cut into contractor profits. Drilling began in March 1930 and was completed in December 1931, three months ahead of schedule.

In addition, racial attitudes of the time made the suffering even more intense for the 3,197 black workers, mainly from the South, who migrated to the job site, and who, of course, were predominantly assigned work inside the tunnel itself where the health effects of airborne silica would be the worst. Of the 1,488 men who worked inside the tunnel, 1,129 were African Americans, and they would represent more than three-quarters of the men who would die. (The actual figure is estimated to be 581, more than half of those who worked inside the tunnel.) At first, company doctors ignored the coughing and loss of breath, claiming the tunnel workers (especially "Negroes") exhibited unclean personal living habits, drinking and gambling addictions, and a lack of common sense. These vices, the doctors maintained, caused their sickness. After a time, when the number of sick and dying became epidemic, the doctors declared pneumonia or tuberculosis as the cause, or used the specious label of "tunnelitis," thereby absolving the company of blame. Area legends

suggested that many of the dead went uncounted, especially those separated from their families, and were secretly buried or thrown into the river. Skidmore's eye and ear record this tragic chapter of history in the novel as well.

At the time, before Skidmore fully conceived his novel, the public Congressional investigation of 1936 focused the passion of labor activists and artists of the Left. Muriel Rukeyser's epic protest poem "Book of the Dead," for example, captures a surprising amount of detail about the disaster taken from those hearings. Josh White, whose pseudonym was Pinewood Tom, wrote a Woody Guthrie–like folk song called "Silicosis Is Killing Me"—"I said, 'Silicosis, you made a mighty bad break of me / Oh, Silicosis, you made a mighty bad break of me / You robbed me of my youth and health / All you brought poor me was misery.'" And in 1935, social worker-activist Bernard Allen, a.k.a. Philippa Allen, wrote a searing investigative report, "Two thousand dying on a job," for the leftist publication *New Masses,* which was founded in 1926 by political artists and writers like Michael Gold and John Sloan and featured political cartoons by Mischa Richter. True, much of the information that came out during the hearings had already been uncovered through newspaper and magazine accounts, and, certainly, the joint resolution establishing the investigative purpose of the House Committee on Labor of the 74th Congress, 2d session merely states what was then public knowledge:

> Whereas four hundred and seventy-six tunnel workers employed by the Rinehart and Dennis Company, contractors for the New Kanawha Power Company subsidiary of Union Carbide and Carbon Company, have from time to time died from silicosis contracted while employed in digging out a tunnel at Gauley Bridge, West Virginia; and Whereas one thousand five hundred workers are now suffering from silicosis contracted while employed in the construction of said tunnel at Gauley Bridge, West Virginia; and Whereas one hundred and sixty-nine of said workers were buried in a field at Summersville, West Virginia, with cornstalks as their gravestones and with no other means of identification.[3]

Returning from college in 1935, Skidmore became aware of the circumstances surrounding the disaster. Inspired by stories from eyewitness accounts and urged to fictionalize the event by his mother, he completed his novel in 1939. Doubleday then scheduled it for publication and distribution in 1941. However, coincident with Skidmore's efforts were state, national, and world events that would influence the fate of *Hawk's Nest.* On the brink of World War II, Union Carbide would be crucial to the production of war materiel—rayon, nylon, plastics, rubber, high strength alloys. As it turned out, Union Carbide was also instrumental in developing weapons-grade uranium for the Manhattan Project. In addition, the Smith Act of 1940, passed by Congress as the Alien Registration Act, made it illegal to belong to a group that advocated the violent overthrow of the government. This legislation later served as the basis for Congressional investigations and prosecutions of members of the Socialist and Communist parties in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This interpretation of the law was extended to the interests of business at a time when any labor movement was considered politically socialist. In 1941, Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Office of Censorship and appointed Byron Price as director; he solicited the help of J. Edgar Hoover to monitor the press. In the early years of World War II, for example, Dalton Trumbo's 1939 antiwar novel, *Johnny Got His Gun,* was criticized as anti-American and suppressed. Many of these and other developments of the time contributed to an intolerant intellectual climate.

Furthermore, in 1938 and 1939, the WPA Writer's Project planned to publish the *West Virginia Guide,* a kind of pictorial/essay handbook to the history, culture, and economics of the state. After seeing the initial draft, Gov. Homer Adams "Rocky" Holt disapproved of the *Guide*'s contents, especially details about labor history, the abuse of the state's natural resources, and the disparity of wealth attributed to absentee landowners and corporations with out-of-state headquarters, and so he blocked its publication. At the same time, Texas Democrat Martin Dies, chairman of the House of Representatives' Committee on Un-American Activities, blazed a trail for Joe McCarthy to follow in the 1950s by conducting various witch hunts, accusing, among others, the Boy Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, the WPA,

and Shirley Temple of subversion and radical leftist behavior. Governor Holt, who shared Dies's ideology, was paranoid about radical labor movements and hypersensitive to any representation of the state that was not good for business. Specifically, "[h]e insisted that the reports of the Congressional Committee that investigated the Hawk's Nest silicosis matter were unreliable. . . ."[4] The governor's astonishing vehemence paralleled the energy exhibited by Rinehart & Dennis Company and Union Carbide in whitewashing their responsibility in the affair. Holt would later serve as general counsel to Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation from 1947 to 1953. Due to this atmosphere, many West Virginians still believe Skidmore's novel—and Skidmore himself—posed a threat long after the lawsuits were settled out of court.

In her March 23, 1941, *New York Times* book review, Beatrice Sherman describes the narrative threads of Skidmore's novel:

> Men who hadn't had a steady work for a year—or two or three—took fresh hope when they heard the news. Some of them went alone, promising to send money, as soon as they were paid, back to their wives and young'uns. Others packed up family, bedding and cooking pots and set out for the promised land where there were jobs. The author speaks with authority of the character and courage of the various types drawn to the big diggings, most of them with the single hope of pulling out of their destitute state and escaping starvation. The Reips came from their worn-out farm in Slaty Creek, W.Va., bringing their three sons, the eldest 18, and their little girl of 7. Peter Cermak and Anna were of Polish descent and came from Pennsylvania mining town where they could no longer stand the misery of their hungry families and where there was not the slightest chance of their getting married because Pete couldn't get a job. Lessie Lee Rucker, a youngster of 16, but already abandoned by a worthless husband, came cheerfully looking for a job as a waitress. From Cranberry Creek in the Blue Ridge more than fifty miles away came Lock and Daisy Mullens, just married and hoping that Lock could earn enough bonanza money to buy a promising farm

> for $500 in the home neighborhood. 'Long' Legg and Jim Martin and the colored boy, Owl Jones, came up by train the hard, hobo way from Texas, gathering others, hopefully looking for work as they passed on the news about the big tunnel.

After these "various types" converge on the job site, it is not too long before the harsh conditions and unjust treatment begin to surface—dust so thick men could not see more than a few feet, a loss of breath and energy, the inability to sleep, the fear of losing their jobs because of sickness. Hope suddenly turns to disappointment and despair, and like his other novels set in Appalachia, Skidmore dramatizes the heroic attempt to fight back against the destructive habits of industry and encroaching civilization and, in so doing, highlights the perseverance and stubborn pride he found in the mountain people he knew. Many of his novels, from his very first, *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes* (1936), follow this same thematic pattern. *Hawk's Nest* unflinchingly relates a series of personal and family disasters due to the murderous conditions in the tunnel; yet, the beauty of the book rests on the simple hopes and dreams of these people who resist and suffer in humility. The need to right this injustice is plainly felt, but justice is never realized, which places this book firmly within the Appalachian consciousness. Nearing completion of the tunnel, the company methodically and hastily scatters its work force, burning the company shacks and belongings left behind, covering up the evidence of the disaster, and planning a nearby golf course to beautify the site.

Of the six novels Skidmore wrote, all were published by Doubleday Doran, a major publishing house; yet, only *Hawk's Nest* was withdrawn from the market immediately after its publication. Oddly, it was a novel that was not his last—one year later Doubleday Doran would publish and distribute *Hill Lawyer* (1942), a defiant story of a lawyer aiding mountain families in their fight to maintain their rights against out-of-state timber interests. Obviously, Doubleday Doran was not intending to sever ties with the author. Furthermore, Skidmore himself thought *Hawk's Nest* was his finest novel, one that received a favorable review in the *New York Times,* which concluded: "His book is not only an obvious [legal] brief for the unfortunate but a well told and honest story."[5] Skidmore "was heart-broken that it was not given a better

reception." He thought his book had been condemned by a conspiracy. According to his twin brother, Hobert, in a letter dated 14 Oct. 1947, "he [Hubert] knew who or what was instrumental in having the book 'tossed down a rat hole' as we say."[6]

Interest in reviving the novel and the history that it tells has always been strong in the region. Martin Cherniack, who reinvestigated the Hawk's Nest disaster in the early 1980s, observed, "The building of the tunnel is only a generation or two removed from current memory. There are old men and women who remember it from their youth: the children of many of the best known protagonists are now in their fifties or sixties; and it was, after all, the landmark event in the history of an area that is deeply traditional and where consciousness of local history is wide spread. About fifteen years ago a historian of the area undertook a history of the tunnel project. He claims to have given up when death threats rose to double figures."[7] What further intrigued Cherniack were "crucial deletions" of routine documents from Union Carbide files concerning the tunnel project. "There was not a single document related to work on the tunnel, allegations of silicosis, or the hundreds of legal actions that were brought on behalf of the workers."[8] To Cherniack, this was an odd circumstance because of the enormous attention and exposure the incident received in the press at the time, which included the Congressional public hearings of 1936, the nine articles concerning the incident that appeared in the *New York Times* between 15 January and 23 February 1936, coverage in *Time, Newsweek,* and *BusinessWeek,* not to mention the hundreds of the well-publicized lawsuits brought against Union Carbide and Rinehart & Dennis Corporation.

Moreover, in the early 1980s, the founding editor of the *West Virginia Hillbilly* and the publisher of *West Virginia Heritage,* Jim Comstock, tried to track down the rights to Skidmore's "lost" novel because the book was obtainable only through rare book dealers. Perhaps only a few hundred original copies are extant since the original production run was pulled after production and destroyed. According to historian Otis K. Rice, "criticisms and threats of lawsuits caused the publisher to withdraw all available copies."[9] Furthermore, Comstock found the Skidmore file at Doubleday empty of all documents pertinent to publication of the novel. Specifically,

Comstock believed that libel suits threatened by Rinehart & Dennis Corporation (Skidmore did not change the company's name in his novel, but spelled it Rhinehart & Dennis) forced the publisher to withdraw the book.

More recently, Hawk's Nest history provided some of the historical frame for Denise Giardina's 1998 novel, *Saints and Villains,* about the life of German theologian and humanitarian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Giardina has Bonhoeffer travel to Gauley Bridge to witness the suffering there:

> "Anyway, they're drilling the tunnel now, been at it a year. Mostly black men working inside, but they got some white men from the hills around there too. Pulling people off the breadlines in Charlotte and Winston-Salem and Durham and putting them on trains bound for Hawks Nest. And keep looking for more, because word Doc's been getting, they're dying like flies up there."
>
> Dietrich had gone very still.
>
> "How are they dying?" he asked.
>
> "Don't know. Even Doc didn't know for sure, last we talked. All he knew was fellow name of Earl Harvey who rides the rails a lot has been up there and says so. This Earl has a reputation for being kind of crazy. Only saw him once myself, but I can vouch he's strange. Called Doc on somebody else's telephone, said there are skeletons walking at Hawks Nest. Dead men walking at Hawks Nest. And said they need a doctor. Then there was yelling in the background and somebody cut him off."[10]

From the facts and fiction about the Hawk's Nest disaster, there has been a strong suggestion of an attempted cover-up and an active willingness "to spin" the tragedy to fit the political outlook of both industry and labor. In the aftermath, an atmosphere of paranoia and distrust emerged. Indeed, the paternalistic laissez-faire attitudes of industry promoted the idea of "opportunity" in a place where there was none, and labor, of course, viewed industry as sacrificing the workers and the environment for the sake of profit. Certainly, these attitudes already fit the well-worn tracks of labor history of the West

Virginia coal mines and timber industry. Similarly, there is also a readiness "to spin" the circumstances surrounding Skidmore's death.

Skidmore perished in a house fire in Dauberville, Pennsylvania, on February 2, 1946. He was only thirty-six years old and had already written six published novels. The fire was investigated by state troopers and the U.S. Army, which gave the official explanation as a defective oil stove flue. He had been staying at a farm he had leased a few months before on the Dauberville-Belleman's Church Road, some ten miles north of Reading, Pennsylvania. He was on leave from the Newton D. Baker Rehabilitation Center at Martinsburg, West Virginia, where he was recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder or combat fatigue. He had been a first lieutenant in the 3103 battalion of the Signal Corps (intelligence) and served in the D-Day invasion of Normandy, then later as acting mayor in an occupation town in Germany. Returning from the war, Skidmore had become estranged from his wife, writer Maritta Wolff, author of *Whistle Stop* (1941) and *Night Shift* (1942), and who was living in an apartment in nearby Reading.

That evening he and a tenant at the farm, Paul Manwiller, had a few drinks at Trump's Hotel (now called Wagonsellers Kountry Inn) where they had been talking about their war experiences. About 9 o'clock, they left the hotel to walk home, and at about 9:30, Skidmore arrived at the stone foundation and wood-frame springhouse where he was staying, some fifty feet away from the main farmhouse, which was under renovation. Hours later, Manwiller was awakened by Charles Hoy of Mohrsville, who sped down the farm lane blowing the horn of his automobile alerting everyone to the burning springhouse engulfed in flames. Manwiller remembered seeing a light still on in Skidmore's room and calling out, but there was no answer. Skidmore's charred body was recovered from the wreckage the next morning. The investigation of the fire lasted only a few days, but there still remains a suspicion of foul play among those familiar with Skidmore's work. This belief is, perhaps, evidence of persistent paranoia about corporate conspiracy and cover-up, or, perhaps, something suggested by the ending of the novel itself—who can say?

Still, it is curious that the 4 February 1946 issue of *The Reading Times* reported: "Skidmore, whose latest novel was *Hawk's Nest,*" when clearly it wasn't—*Hill Lawyer* was published in 1942, and it is

also curious that the *Charleston Gazette* obituary would insist that of Skidmore's six novels, "[t]he best known, *Hawk's Nest*" was published in 1941"—a novel that was withdrawn and never distributed.

Flamboyant and outgoing, Hubert Skidmore never set out to be the bellwether for social or political causes, but he did set out to be a writer. He attended the University of Michigan and won the Avery Hopwood award for his first effort, *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes* (1935), which would also begin his relationship with Doubleday Doran at the suggestion and encouragement of Sinclair Lewis, who was one of the judges for the award. Skidmore followed that work with a steady flow of novels, all set in the mountains of West Virginia: *Heaven Came So Near* (1939), *River Rising* (1939), *Hill Doctor* (1940), *Hawk's Nest* (1941), and *Hill Lawyer* (1942). Skidmore's writing is known for its accurate dialect and description of mountain folkways. For a time, Skidmore even taught folklore workshops. His themes came from the stories told to him by his mother, the former Daisy Mollohan (a "Daisy Mullens" appears in *Hawk's Nest*), who was the best-educated member of the family and who encouraged the advantages of education in her children—Hobert, Hubert, Cebert, Bill, and daughter Lula. Both Hobert and Hubert pursued writing careers after graduating from Clarksburg's Washington Irving High School (the same High School Appalachian writer Davis Grubb attended), and both had considerable success. Skidmore's stories would also reflect concerns inherent to the people who grew up and around Laurel Mountain where he was born and the area surrounding Webster Springs, heavily dependent on the timber and coal industry. His father, Cornelius Patrick "Neal" Skidmore, was a clerk and foreman for a glass company near Clarksburg, who moved the family to Elmira, New York, in 1927 to work for Corning Glass.

Hubert was born fifteen minutes after his twin brother Hobert on April 11, 1909.[11] Apparently, the women, acting as midwives, had set the chimney ablaze while boiling hot water. The fire began shortly after the first twin, Hobert, was born. Alarmed by the growing flames, Daisy herself carried the mattress out of the burning house to the shade of nearby tree, where minutes later she delivered Hubert as she watched the house burn. From that time on, family members noted that Hubert had an overdeveloped fear of fire and of being burned.

Tom Douglass

Notes

1. Martin Cherniack, *The Hawk's Nest Incident: America's Worst Industrial Disaster* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), 26.
2. Ibid, 104–5. "An estimated toll of more than seven hundred men, arrived at through a series of necessarily speculative but consistently conservative calculations, may well be too small. It is clear that many deaths occurring in Fayette County went unreported. It would be reasonable to suppose that less care might have been taken to record the deaths of migrants than those of local men. . . . There was, moreover, no clinical reason to limit the number of deaths from silicosis to those occurring before the end of 1937, since the disease might well have brought a slower death to workers for many years afterward."
3. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Labor, 1936. An investigation relating to health conditions of workers employed in the construction and maintenance of public utilities: Hearings on H.J. Res. 449, 74th Congress, 2d session.
4. Jerry B. Thomas. "'The Nearly Perfect State': Governor Homer Adams Holt, the WPA Writers' Project and the Making of West Virginia: A Guide to the Mountain State," *West Virginia History* 52.7 (1996): 1–14.
5. Beatrice Sherman, "Tunnel Diggers," review of *Hawk's Nest* by Hubert Skidmore [368 pp. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc. $2.50]. *New York Times Book Review* 23 Mar. 1941: 6–7.
6. Hobert Skidmore, qtd. in Shirley Young Campbell, "Lest We Forget: The Skidmore Twins Hubert and Hobert, Part III," *West Virginia Hillbilly* (19 Oct. 1989): 9.
7. Cherniack, *Hawk's Nest Incident,* 3.
8. Ibid.
9. Otis K. Rice, *West Virginia: A History* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1985), 259.
10. Denise Giardina, *Saints and Villains* (New York: Norton, 1998), 58.
11. See Hobert Skidmore's *The Years Are Even: the Story of Identical Twin Brothers & Their Haunting Search for a Single Destiny* (New York: Random House, 1952).

Acknowledgments

The press gratefully acknowledges Maritta Wolff Stegman for her interest in reviving Hubert Skidmore's lost novel. Let me also acknowledge Phyllis Moore for her unflagging support of my research; Gordon Simmons, formerly of Renaissance Books, for contributing an original edition of *Hawk's Nest* to the press; Sylvia Elzner of Bridgeport Public Library for her generous support; Patty Raikes of Fairmont, West Virginia, who compiled an invaluable biographical file; author Robert Skidmore, nephew of Hubert Skidmore; Pam Hehr of the Reading Public Library for her research expertise; James Presgraves of Bookworm & Silverfish for providing an original cover illustration of the first edition; Martin Cherniack for his provocative detective work; and Susen Douglass for her editorial assistance.

Tom Douglass

As autumn gave way to winter, the nights chilling the hills beneath their bright covers, more and more men found their way into West Virginia. Out of the South and out of the East they came; and out of Joplin, Missouri, and Picher, Oklahoma, searching their way toward the rocky, irregular state. Depression-ridden and work-hungry, they set out, leaving their families behind with the great chat piles: crushed rock from which the ore had been removed.

"I'll send for you and the young'uns. First regular pay, I'll send for you and the young'uns."

Down from Michigan, from the quiet shops of Pontiac and Grand Rapids, Detroit and Saginaw. One young insurance salesman left Elmira, New York. Left his wife and two children with no money and no coal. They sat in the kitchen by the gas stove and the wife cried, watching the flame, afraid it would stop.

She only bought what they couldn't live without, knowing the A & P man on Lake Street extended their credit out of his own pocket.

"Ralph went to West Virginia, looking for work. We want to pay every cent we owe."

They came out of Ohio and Indiana and Illinois, listening along the road. There's work in Buffalo, in Rochester and Richmond. Stay away from the cities. The families are throwed out in the streets with their furniture. Lots of guys are heading for Texas, for Texas and Arizona and California They stand on a bridge with a gun, and if you ain't got a job and money in your pocket, they chase you the hell back.

"Jesus Christ, money in your pocket!"

A fellow said there was work in West Virginia.

"They're diggen a hole through a mountain in West Virginia. Even the niggers are maken forty cents."

Hawk's Nest

1

At the end of the black iron bridge which barely extended from stone ledge to stone ledge Lessie Lee Rucker stood shivering in the murky half rain that hung over the Kanawha Valley. The bright pink fuzz of her imitation angora sweater caught in streaks like wet hair and her sharp heels spiked the clay at the road's edge as she moved away from the abutment and then returned again.

Examining the road which followed the river up the deserted valley, Lessie turned and looked back over the bridge, her ears alert for the drone of a motor mounting its low arch. None came, and beyond the town of Montgomery shriveled somberly in the gray morning drizzle. As her eyes reached the flat walls of the hospital Lessie's hands rose to cup the tight clean bandage which fitted her head like a skullcap but for the few strands of blonde hair heaped into a pile at an opening on the top. Carefully she fingered the strands, trying to relieve their unbecoming soddenness.

Down the road a Ford rounded the bend beneath a huge overhanging rock and pointed its nose up the valley. Lessie stepped onto the pavement, almost indifferently, and raised her right arm. She did not wave but merely held it there, her fingers bent up the road toward Gauley Bridge.

The Ford idled down, but as Lessie stepped forward it turned sharply, rattled over the bridge and dropped down into Montgomery. She did not look after the car but remained where she stood, absently watching her right foot. As she exercised it, bending at the toes, water squashed and foamed out above the thin sole and Lessie's head began to bob in response to the movement. For a while she studied it, not thinking particularly, but fascinated by the mud-dirtied foam her shoe produced.

Presently she halted and her hand flew up again. A car muttered to a low halt just beyond her, throwing up a fine spray as it passed.

Thoughtfully Lessie stomped the red clay from her feet on the pavement, caught the door as it was thrown open and bent to step inside. "Howdy, mister," she said pleasantly, closing the door without banging it.

The plumpish, florid-faced man bent low over the wheel, looking sidewise at the bandage, his eyes candid and humorous. "Boy, sister," he exclaimed, touching the accelerator, "it looks like you spoke out of turn!"

Lessie smiled at him, her stubby fingers trying to fluff up the damp angora. "We had a car wreck," she explained genially. "A feller picked me up down by Cedar Grove yesterday—he was a driven devil, I'm tellen you!"

"What'd you do, smack into somebody?" He shook a pack of cigarettes until one jumped forward, half out of the tear. "Cigarette?"

"Thank you kindly," Lessie said, reaching inside her sweater. "I've got me some." She lighted a Sensation and settled back against the seat. "No sir, it wasn't that way a-tall," she explained. "He was comen up the valley, fit to kill, and I kept seein he was over on yon side of the road. I was goin to tell him, but when a feller picks you up you don't feel like headin in, do you? You know, it don't seem right to tell him what he ought to be doin, after he's picked you up that-a-way. Well, he was goin along, lickety-split for hell, and half the time he was on the wrong side of the road. And when we got to a turn he just sort of took a short cut. You couldn't of drove a cow between him and the hillside." She paused, memory clear in her face. "I was goin to get out, but there's this here job I heard about in Gauley Bridge, and I figured Id better get there as soon as I could. Well, sir, 'bout a mile yon side of London we come tearen round a bend, and there was a truck plunk in front of us! This feller—he was sellen somethin, I reckon—he tried to get back on his own side, but the car shot right off the road and clear out into a field!" She halted, a little breathless from the long recital, and then added, "Turned over three times. You never heard such a racket!"

"Fellows like that ought to be locked up," the plumpish man declared soberly. "He get hurt bad?"

"I reckon not," Lessie reasoned slowly. "When I woke up I was in the Coal Valley Hospital, in a clean white bed. They said the feller had gone back to Charleston. A nurse there, she lent me these clothes.

Mine was all gormed up. Reckon I must of been bleeden like a stuck hog. It was mighty nice of her, huh, wasn't it?"

The man nodded his head and was silent while he passed a chain of cars dragging along behind a decrepit truck.

"I figured I could get me this job," Lessie went on. "Way the girl told it to me, a company's putten a tunnel right smack through a hill up there, and men are comen in from every which direction, comen there to get the job. But I ain't never worked in a restaurant before."

"Yep," the man agreed, "the tunnel's goin' to bring a lot of work to Gauley Bridge. Ever time I come up here I hear they took on a couple hundred more men. Probably be the best thing that ever hit that town." He turned and looked at Lessie's round face, bland and white beneath the tightly wound cloths. "How old are you, kid?" he asked, his voice no longer darkened by her account of the accident.

"Sixteen, goin on seventeen."

"How long you been working?"

"This last place, 'bout a year," she replied enthusiastically. "And you never heard tell of better folks; just this man and his wife and their two kids. Five dollars a week they gave me, and my keep. First I just went to do their washings, and then they took me on regular. Lordie, they was nice to me. They was schoolteachers, both of 'em. You wouldn't believe it, but after I got the young'uns to bed of a night that man used to teach me things out of books. It never done much good, but I liked him for tryen. Honestly, you couldn't ask for nicer people."

"With two kids," the man ventured casually, "it sounds like a lot of work for five dollars."

"No it wasn't!" Lessie exclaimed earnestly. "No sir, it wasn't a-tall! After liven with my husband, it seemed like I had next to nothin to do."

"You been married?" he asked rather loudly, his eyes again running over Lessie's round face and slight figure.

"Sure," she replied, surprised at his lack of knowledge. "My name ain't Rucker. I'm a Lee. Lessie Lee. My folks live back on the Williams River. Ever hear of Williams River?"

The man nodded slightly. "Went clear back there hunting one fall. Where's your husband now?"

"He run off."

"Where'd he go?"

"I don't know, and I ain't worryen s'long as he don't come back. Mister, I'm tellen you, he wasn't worth a cryen dime! That man never done a lick of work from the day I met him, 'cept find washin's for me to do. Then I had to tote 'em back and forwards."

"Jesus Christ!" the man exclaimed and spat out the window.

"And I'll never forget it," Lessie went on. "One day I asked him for twenty-five cents—I wanted some dress goods. I was a burnen shame for folks to see on the road to Richwood—and damn if he didn't baste me in the jaw. Knocked a tooth out!" With a finger she pulled back the corner of her mouth, exposing a hole in a row of moderately clean teeth. "And it was my money too. I'd earnt ever cent of it over a washboard, down by the crick bank."

"Some men ain't worth a goddamn. Makes a fellow feel kind of ashamed he belongs to the same race."

"No," Lessie cried. "No sir! Men are al'right. Like I told you 'bout the one I worked for, wanten me to have some book learnin' and such. No, it ain't men, mister. It's them Ruckers. There ain't one of 'em worth a wet hole in the snow! Somebody ought to kill 'em all off, same as you would a snake. That's the way I come to look at it."

"Un-huh," the man grunted, depressed again. For a moment he fussed with the windshield wiper and then settled glumly back into the seat. "Hell of a day to be out looking for work," he said in sour consolation.

"'Tis kind of drizzlen," Lessie replied and suddenly sat erect, her eyes on the driver. "Mister, could I ask you somethin?"

He looked at her a moment, paused and said, "Shoot."

"Well, it's 'bout this feller that give me a ride yesterday. Like I said, they took me over to the Coal Valley Hospital, and I was layen there in bed. I heard a couple fellers talken outside the door, then this state trooper comes in and begins asken me a lot of questions. Scared me plumb out of my wits. I just shut up and never said aye, yes or no. I was scared sure he would put me in jail, and lordie, that'd a-been awful, with me 'bout to get a job and all. Well, he talked around a lot and I just kept my mouth shut tighter'n birch bark and after a while he makes ready to go. Then he tells me I have to go over to Fayetteville

today and meet him in the county clerk's office, I think it was. Said I had to sign somethin so's I wouldn't sue this feller that picked me up—you know, sue him for rollen out into that field, like I told you."

"Fayetteville, for Christ's sake, in this rain!" the man exclaimed indignantly. "It's nearly sixteen miles the other side of Gauley."

"What I'm wanten you to tell me," Lessie continued, "is do you reckon that feller'll be worried too much if I don't get up there afore tomorrey? You see, I don't want somebody else to get this job afore I get there."

"The hell with him," the man said. "Why should you hike up there in the rain to sign something that you won't sue him just so's he'll feel better. Let him worry awhile, it won't kill him."

"Well, if you say so. But if a feller's nice enough to pick you up—you know, if a feller's that nice——"

"Go get your job," the man snorted, "and wait until this rain's over. Then if you want to hike to Fayetteville, go ahead."

"I thought it'd be al'right," Lessie said, "but I wasn't real sure. I knowed I wasn't goin to get no law on him, so I thought it'd be al'right."

The car slowed down, rattled over a spur-line track and approached the town of Gauley Bridge which clung to the narrow strip of flatland between the river and the sharply rising hill. Only the change of pavement marked where the state highway ceased and the village street began. Lessie, watching out the window, saw the houses draw together and then a store, a garage and another store. Back of the rain-splattered sidewalks men were clotted in doorways and beneath overhanging roofs, their clothes dark and somber through the mist.

"Lordie," she exclaimed abruptly, "all them men look like they was waiten for a funeral! Guess it must be the rain."

"There's the bus station," the plump man said, drawing into a flooded gutter. "I got to make a call in the drugstore."

Quickly, as though it had completely slipped her mind, Lessie began a futile effort to mold the loose hair on top of her head into some sort of presentable shape. Then she gave the sleeves and front of her sweater a quick ruffing and reached for the door handle. "Thank you very kindly," she said. "I don't reckon I ever would of got here if you hadn't come along."

"S'all right. I hope you get the job."

"I reckon I will now. The way the girl told me, they're needin somebody pretty bad, on 'count of that tunnel and all. Well, now, good-by, mister."

"So long."

When she had closed the door he leaned forward over the steering wheel and through the rain-streaked window watched the small figure, topped by a white-bound head, walk around a group of men, cut across the street and go directly into a door beneath a red cafe sign which wiggled and jerked electrically.

2

Leaving Memphis, puffing hard, the freight had headed north an hour before. Through the yards, through the scattered, half-lighted outskirts it went, gathering speed, and then, shrieking across Mississippi like a frightened animal, it bore its way into the night, the caboose lights whipped along like a tail it tried to pull in quickly, fearing harm.

Inward it sped, wanting Kentucky. The rapid tattoo increased, diminished and then clicked upward to a high, steellike stuttering; the smoke bent down across the flat-topped freight cars, cindery and blistering.

Knuckling at every joint, it screamed into a curve, pulled out again, rumbling a little, and plummeted forward.

Over its back two figures ran, cross-leaping, dark and almost obscured by the streaming smoke. Far forward the first dropped, squatting and crawling, found the ladder irons and lowered himself down the car's side. On the bottom rung he crouched, pulled together like a ball above the backward rush of broken stone and tie ends. The second followed, moving more slowly, bent partly sideways as he came down, his stick clumping against the red wall.

"No—Jesus, no! I'll get off!"

The stick fell twice only, flattening knuckles against the iron ladder rail, and the lower figure sprung backward, spread out against the wind, bounced on the road shoulder and rolled down the embankment, spewing gravel before it.

The freight could still be heard, a distant rumbling, when a tall, hulking figure came hurriedly up the track, paused, stepped over in the path and looked down the short incline. For a while the man stood, legs far apart, a small package caught at the end of an arm which nearly reached to his knee. His eyes moved along, examining the embankment which sloped down into the elder-stalked

ditch. Finally his searching stopped and he went down the incline, his long legs planted stiffly in the crumbling dirt.

"Hey," he grunted, touching the sprawled figure with his toe. "Hey!"

There was no answer and he bent down, flopping Jim Martin over on his back. "Hey," he repeated, slapping Jim's face. Then he got up, wiping the sticky, dirt-thickened blood off on his trousers, and jammed the package into the front of his shirt. Squatting down, he caught an arm and a leg in either hand and swung Jim across his shoulders, jouncing himself to level the load, and methodically climbed back to the railroad bed.

A quarter of a mile further on, bearing his load easily, Long again left the track, found the creek-divided gulley and made his way down through the dense brush toward the shadow of a fire.

Four men squatted about in the little clearing looked up at Long but said nothing as he crossed to a level spot and placed Jim down on the ground.

"That sonuvabitch of a brakeman," Long explained. "He knocked him off. Must have been doin' fifty!"

A low moan escaped Jim's lips. The four men watched him quietly.

"We oughta lay for him with rocks," a lean man said. "We oughta lay for him and knock his goddamn brains out!"

Long looked down at Jim and then turned his broad, heavily browed face toward the fire. He said nothing, but as he drew the two small cans of beans and loaf of bread from inside his overalls one corner of his lower lip came out a little, twitching and jerking.

"He bad hurt, Mistah Legg?" a colored man asked, nodding toward Jim.

"Get some water, Owl," Long replied, dropping the beans down beside the fire. "We got to wash the dirt out of his face."

Sam Givens, the lean, half-toothed man, slid forward, an open jackknife in his hand, and began to cut the tops off the two cans. Hungrily the other two men watched him dump the beans into a smoked kettle.

"Rinse the cans out good," the quiet one offered. "It'll make more to sop the bread in."

The other squatted down, his chin fenced in his fingers, nodding firmly.

Owl, the colored man, came back with the syrup can filled with water, placed it down beside Jim and stood aside. Having rolled Jim over on his back, Long examined his face, his thick forefinger shaving away the dirt and coagulated blood. From below his right cheekbone, up across the corner of his eye, most of the skin and part of the hair had been torn from Jim's face.

Getting to his feet, Long reached inside his overalls, pulled out his shirttail and tore off a piece. Tilting the syrup can, he soaked the cloth and pulled it down over the wound.

"Jesus," Jim swore, muttering incoherently. "Oh, Jesus."

The face finished, Long ripped open the shattered tear in the right leg of Jim's pants, brushed the bruised knee a couple of times with the wet cloth and then took up one of his hands. For a moment he looked at it, laid it down and picked up the other. Both hands were badly torn.

"That dirty bastard," he muttered, "knockin' off a kid like that."

"It sure looks bad," Owl added. "Sure looks bad, Mistah Legg."

"Get me some more water."

By the time the beans were steaming above the slow fire Long had left Jim, his hands bandaged in the torn shirt, and stood before the fire.

"I heard somethin' in town," he said. "Man in the store there——"

"They ain't comin' after us," the worn-tooth man interrupted. "The law ain't comin', is it?" Gaunt, bony-faced, Sam Givens had left his home a week before, left the poor cotton rows which touched his back door, and fright came easily to him. For years he had lived on credit that did not stretch to planting time, on land that was not his own, on bad land and bad crops and bad markets, and he moved as an animal moves when its wind is gone and there is only furtive hiding and cleverness left.

"A nigger come into the store with a letter," Long went on. "I heard this feller readin' it to him. Guess it was from some of his folks, further north." He bent down and set the beans off the fire and they all drew up about the kettle, knives of shaved sticks poised in their hands. Owl opened the bread, dividing it.

"Seems like this feller that wrote the letter knowed about some work up there," Long stated, spooning some beans onto a lardpail lid and handing it to Owl. "Place in West Virginia somewheres."

The quiet man stopped eating, a knifeload of beans halfway to his mouth. "Work?" he asked incredulously. "You mean just one job?"

"Didn't sound that way."

"Mines," declared the cotton farmer. "Mines, I betcha. My wife had a brother that dug coal in West Virginia. Right after the war he got him a job. Married a girl from up there someplace. Sent my wife a picture."

"Ain't mines either, far's I could hear. They's a company puttin' in a power tunnel——"

"Oh, God Almighty," Givens exclaimed, "if they's a job there I'll crawl on my hands and knees! Four months I been lookin' for day's work—I ain't meant to be runnin' around the country. I get so's I can't write my old woman. I'm ashamed to tell her they ain't no work to be had." He paused, staring at the path Long had come down. "I'd work for next to nothin——"

"In the letter it said they needed more help," Long added, spreading beans over a slice of bread. "I been on the road four years, workin' here and there. A feller gets a feelin' 'bout where work is. You hear a lot of talk, bummin' round, but you get a feelin'. First year I run all over hell and gone, lookin' my eyes out for a job." His jaws showed bonily in the firelight as he paused to chew. "Went from Baltimore to Oklahoma to Kansas—and away the hell to the top of the state of Maine, pickin' taters, three cents a barrel. Ever time I heard they was work I went for it. After a while I slowed down." He took another bite, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I got a feelin' they's work in West Virginia."

"Maybe," suggested the man who had not spoken, "maybe that nigger didn't mean it—the one that wrote that letter."

Long did not answer, but without raising his head he turned his eyes toward Owl, nodded, as though his own word was to be verified.

"No sir," Owl stated assuredly, "ain't no colored boy goin' send no letter less he means business."

The quiet man licked the blade of his knife and snapped it shut. "Where's West Virginia at?" he asked.

"Up north somewheres," Givens supplied anxiously. "Close to Pennsylvania, way I remember it. My girl had a schoolbook with all them states in it, all colored up, red, yaller and green. All four my young'uns was goin' to school the same time. Myrtle, the oldest'un,

was clear up to number eight. Then the de-pression come along and they clear quit out. Never had no clothes or nothin'."

"I went acrost the corner of it once," Long supplied. "It's 'bout six-seven hundred miles to the northeast. A man could make it in two-three days if his luck was any good."

Beyond the shadow of light Jim Martin moved restlessly, the pain entering his numbed mind. Once he started to sit up, but when his hand touched the ground he gave a sharp, hurt cry and settled back; his head rolled to one side and his eyes fastened glassily upon the group about the fire.

"That po' boy is sufferin', Mistah Legg," Owl said. "Reckon I oughta give him some drinkin' water?"

Long nodded his head but spoke to the three men who stood before him.

"We'll head up across Tennessee and into Virginia. Someplace 'round Roanoke ought to be 'bout right. Then we'll cut over into West Virginia. If they's work there, we'll get it."

"Maybe we ought to start now," Givens said, buttoning an old army coat across his chest. "Again mornin' it'll put us where we can pick up a ride." Then fearful that he had spoken out of turn, he hastened on. "You heerd 'bout it first—you get the job if they's only one. But I'd kinda like to be there, case they was wantin' to take on another man. I'd send my woman a card, just kinda let her know if things was lookin' promisin'."

"Get some sleep," Long urged. "In the mornin' will be time enough."

"I'd kinda like to get started along," the man persisted hesitantly. "Be a shame to miss it——"

"You ain't goin' to pick up no freight through here tonight," Long said. "First place, it's too dark for you, and besides, there ain't none out of Memphis before daybreak."

The man looked at Jim's quiet figure, seeing his two bandaged hands held on his chest up near his chin.

"I was thinkin' I'd hitch up," he said. "I ain't had much experience ridin' freights."

"I feel 'bout the same way," the silent one added. "I ain't uset to 'em. Gets me scared all the time, thinkin' I'm on somethin' I ain't no

business on; makes me feel sneakin'. If a feller picks you up on the road—well, you kinda feel like he's oblidgin' you."

"Okay," Long said, gesturing his hand. "See you in West Virginia maybe."

They moved away, their steps tentative and halting. Almost out of the circle of light they paused, whispered a moment and came back.

"I don't reckon, partner," Givens asked, "you'd mind tellin'—did you hear whereabouts they're buildin' that tunnel?"

"At a bridge, some kind of a bridge place," Long supplied readily. "The way this feller wrote it, you go to Charleston, that's the capital, then it's thirty-forty miles up the river from there. Kanawha, I think."

"Charleston," the man mumbled. "Charleston, West Virginia."

"Think you can remember that?"

"Sure, sure, Long."

Again they walked away, this time disappearing into the brush. For a while Long sat looking after them. Owl, who had given Jim a drink of water, pouring it slowly between his dry, stiff lips, came up and sat down beside him.

Through the brush they could hear voices, and presently Givens reappeared.

"We ain't feelin' just right," he said. "You don't reckon you'd like to come along with us?" he said.

"Nope," Long replied. "You get goin'. 'Bout four miles up the track you come to a highway. Take a turn right."

The man took a step, paused thoughtfully and called to Owl: "You want to come along, Jones?"

"No sir. I reckon I'll stay with Mistah Legg."

They both sat looking at the brush, moving imperceptibly where the man had disappeared. Presently they could hear footsteps climbing up the embankment.

Twisting about, Long stirred up the fire with his boot. "Ain't it a goddamned shame," he said, "the way men have to go 'round beggin' for work?"

3

Below a stump-clotted field and well above the dark, gurgling Cranberry Creek the Thorpe cabin squatted heavily against the rocky side of the hill. Though the sun, coming early to the cloudless sky above the Blue Ridges, had not yet found its way down into the valley, the hard-packed yard about the cabin had buzzed with activity for more than an hour. Soon after the last thin smoke of the breakfast fire had spiraled into the sky a tall lanky figure left the kitchen door, crossing the back yard in long, down-thrusting steps, and disappeared into the lean-to barn which haunched uncertainly against the hillside.

By the time Lock Mullens had harnessed the team and drawn the wagon around before the cabin a pile of bedclothes and a barrel of household goods had been stacked on the rickety, sloping porch. Beside the bulging, corner-tied dumpling of a crazy quilt stood an ancient valise, cracked and gray from its years above the rafters.

"The sun's up and full day's come," Lock said, seeing the last morning vapors recede, foglike, into the hollows, leaving the autumn hills damp and bright. "The sun's up and we'd best be headen along."

Halfway through the door Daisy Mullens paused, hugging a plump feather tick in her brown arms, and let her eyes come to rest on her husband. Furtively, hungrily she watched him, seeing the solid, downsloping shoulders, the arms, the back she had embraced for the first time the night before. Memory brought a bright flush to her cheeks and impulsively Daisy pressed her head against the bulging feather tick. It was the first time she had really dared look at her husband since he had crawled from bed, slipping noiselessly into his trousers, and stirred up a morning fire on the hearth. She had waited then, her eyes tight shut, until he had