

Chapter #18 (Nov. 1860)– Botheration

Valentine positioned his graveyard 500 yards from his cabin. He chose a beautiful, shaded spot bordered by aging apple trees. A venerable Chestnut stretched its loving, protective limbs over the family plot below. Over the years, the family interred seven loved ones there in two neat rows. Because Valentine insisted, each was marked with an expensive stone marker. Valentine's rested in the back row. Beside him, dark slate marked the final resting place of his parents, Patrick and Grace Garrett. His stone like those that identified his children, Sarah, Joseph and Zechariah along with his best friend, Finn, had been fashioned from clouded limestone. Someone once suggested that he fence in the little cemetery. Valentine replied. "Restrictions on them is done. Why fence in people when they die?"

They stood in a silent half circle around the stones, the Garrett family and friends. Mother acted as master of ceremonies, "Here," she handed Sam a clutch of Asters and Pansies, "You lay the flowers."

Sam shrugged, accepted the flowers, then threaded a path through the graves to place them all carefully at the base of Valentine's stone.

Geoff gave further instructions. "No, y'fool idjit. Spread 'em out. Give each one of 'em a couple."

Sam did as directed but not without mumbling, "I know, I know."

It was the occasion of Mother's 42nd birthday. At her suggestion she and her well-wishers walked with her to the graveyard to pay their respects. Valentine's began the custom and carried it out on all family birthdays. Said it was the right thing to do to keep alive the memories of the dead. After his passing the Garretts saw no need to change their ways. Besides Mother, present were Gabe, Geoff, Becca, Sam, John, Notnot, Victor and his father, James. Neighbors: Sharp, Stephen and Billy McCune had also come to celebrate with Mother along with her Mennonite friends, Aaron, Susan and Hannah Müller. And of course Mable and her half grown pups.

Sam returned to stand before his Mother who slipped her arms around him.

"Thank you one and all for your friendship. For coming this day. Makes my heart glad." She stepped forward to stand beside the graves of her two stillborn children. Alright then, let's us say a piece about each of those passed on. We'll save Valentine f'last." Taking a deep breath, she squatted and placed a hand on each grave.

"These are my angels. They never breathed a breath but neither did they suffer any pain. If there is a God, and I ain't sayin' there is, he is surely graced by their presence.". She stood again " Becca, you speak to Nana and Banpa."

Becca stepped behind the slate headstones to address her neighbors and family. "These here are Nana and Banpa, Valentine's parents. We only knew them for a little. They traveled here with us but died of typhus soon after we settled. They were kind, good-hearted people who only caught their death because they ministered to a family of sick immigrants." Becca choked a little on her next sentence. "Nana taught me to bake soda bread."

Sam inserted, "Banpa taught me t'whittle."

"We miss them terribly and remember them al'ays. " Becca finished.

Mother put her hand on her eldest son's shoulder, "Gabe, it's fitting you speak to Finn's remembrance. You seemed to know him better'n even Valentine."

Gabe stepped to the foot of Finn's grave. At first, he didn't speak. When he did, he spoke only to the headstone. "Miss you, Finn. You was like another father t'us kids. Rode us 'round on your shoulders. Took us swimmin' and fishin.' Got between us and Valentine's belt more'n once. Those of you didn't know. This was Valentine's best friend. Had no family of his own. We were his family. Traveled west with us like Nana and Banpa. And like them sickness got him. What they call what got 'im, Geoff?"

"Sepsis – died of infection"

"Yeah." Gabe stretched wide his fingers then formed them into fists. "Ain't right you leavin' us, Finn. We miss you too much."

Mother then nodded to Geoff. "You have the honor. You speak to Valentine now.

"Standing off to one side of the group, Geoff inclined his head to show he'd heard but remained where he stood."

"Hope you rest peaceful, Valentine, wherever that might be." Geoff paused so long that several in the group turned to see if that was all he meant to say.

It wasn't.

"Cain't say if I, if any of us ever called you father. You was just always Valentine. You was the strongest, kindest, wisest man on the face of the earth. Still be here with us if y'hadn't cared s'much bout other folk."

Mr. and Mrs. Miller bowed their heads and added punctuation. "Amen."

"Not sayin' it weren't right what you did. Just ... just left us wond'rin' what t'do without you. Y'left the way you lived, showin' us how to live right." In his mind, Geoff conjured the day Valentine died. Two years now, yet the heartbreak was fresh.

No one could recall a wetter summer. Seemed the rain would never relent. Valentine had been returning from Sharpsburg in the middle of another storm. He promised to purchase a mule that day and exclaimed over Mother's protests that neither hell nor high water would keep him from it. Geoff could still picture him that morning, wrapped up in his slicker astride his horse with rivulets of water streaming off his hat, his hand raised in farewell. It was the last time he saw his father alive. Valentine made the trip to Sharpsburg easy enough. Trouble lay on his trip home. The family expected him back soon after dark but didn't worry much when he didn't show. Like as not he stayed to wait out the storm. But that wasn't the case.

Nigh on to midnight. Valentine's horse arrived home carrying Hannah, the little Müller girl. First they knew of it was her pounding on the cabin door. My but she was a sight. Much of the mud had washed off in the rain but it was clear that her torn dress had previously been caked with it. She wore only one shoe. She shivered violently and her eyes were red from crying. They warmed her by the fireplace, cleaned, dried and comforted her as best they could. Only seven at the time, Hannah could hardly be expected to deliver a coherent story but gradually, between her hoarse sobbing they picked up the basic elements of what had happened. She apparently got lost. A man, presumably Valentine, found her. Then there was something about a tree and the man being hurt by the river. Somehow, she managed to clamber onto Valentine's horse and the horse took her back to the Garretts.

Gabe and Geoff saddled up and rode out in search of him. The nearest river was the Potomac, but that was miles away. More likely Hannah meant the Antietam Creek which was currently at flood stage. To her young eyes it probably appeared to be a river. Later that night, actually morning, they found Valentine's body. He lay in a ravine beside the creek, pinned beneath the rising water by a massive tree limb. Seemed so senseless to them. Valentine, their hero. Valentine, who had been larger than life. Maybe that was it, life just couldn't compete with him, so death took him on. Why Valentine? Why him? Try as they might, he and Gabe wore themselves out straining to get the limb off, but couldn't. They collapsed there beside his body and cried. They sat through the storm. The rain stopped. The sun rose. Still they were slumped down in the mud on the bank of the Antietam, all cried out.

Only later did the full story come about. Searching for her cat, Hannah wandered away from her cabin and gotten lost in the woods. In the dark, in the rain, she became so despondent that she huddled in a hollow near the creek screaming for her mama until Valentine came along. Seems he got off his horse to help her up when he heard the crack of

the limb breaking. He'd just enough time to shove her away before it crashed across his back driving his face into the earth. Still alive and of sound enough mind, he directed Hannah to get on his horse, knowing it would find its way home. It did, but by the time they got back to him the creek water had filled the ravine and filled his lungs.

The memory of his father's broken body being pulled from that ditch haunted Geoff. Ever since, memories of his father were more vivid. More – well – real, almost as if he could call up Valentine's presence whenever he liked now. He missed Valentine yet he was always present. Kind of confusing.

Mr. Müller wrapped an arm around his shoulders and said aloud for all to hear. "Your father, He was a fine neighbor and a great, good man, Ya? Ve shall never, ever forget him!"

Back at the cabin solemnity slid into laughter as Mr. Müller put everyone in a celebratory mood. He brought out his fiddle and sawed away on his strings until the women, the girls, Sam and Notnot took to high-steppin' in the dirt, Gabe, John and Sharp clapped them on. Mable howled and her pups joined in. Prior to the celebration the boys slaughtered a pig which had been slow roasting over coals since that morning. The delicious aroma saturated the air so that even though Stephen and Billy alternately turned the spit, they found that one by one everyone wandered over to assist and give advice.

Over the past week, Geoff, Gabe and Sharp, with Sam's interference, had constructed two great tables for the event and benches as well. The ladies covered the tables with checkered tablecloths, flowers and all the fixin's for the feast, roasted ears of corn, apple fritters, cole slaw, peas, carrots, biscuits, fresh baked bread, potato salad and off to one side sat apple, peach and rhubarb pies. Both Mother and Samuel kept a close eye on them – for different reasons.

When mother thought the time was right, she called everyone to table. When Sam and Notnot started to nibble. Geoff swatted Sam's hand and told him to wait. Taking the hint, Notnot quickly withdrew his own hand. Stephen took offense at his presence. Unnoticed by the other guests, he directed him to sit elsewhere as Geoff stood and directed attention to mother.

"Everyone! EVERYONE! This here's Mother's special day. We gather to table as Valentine would have us do, to pay respect to the woman who bore and raised us. She tended us in sickness. She raised our spirits when they was none to be had. She reached out to neighbors when none else would." Geoff paused for effect, "Happy Birthday, Mother!"

A chorus of "HAPPY BIRTHDAYS," followed, along with hoots, hollers, stomping and clapping. Mother reddened then gave license to dig in. Utensils were grasped and hands reached but paused when Mother raised her hand to regain their attention.

Others had not noticed but Mother had seen the Müllers bow their heads. Although neither she nor her family had any intention of joining them in prayer, out of respect they and their guests waited impatiently for heads to be raised. When their heads bobbed up, platters, bowls and plates emptied so fast one would have thought locusts had descended. In short order, buttons were near-popping and the boys signaled an end to the meal with a spectacular burping contest. The women rolled their eyes as they cleared the table. John, Notnot and Billy helped by making off with what remained of the Apple pie.

That evening, midst occasional flatulence, the sated gathering separated into two camps. Men retired to the porch to sit, smoke and talk politics. Women returned to the tables where they exchanged gossip and recipes. John joined the men on the porch where she learned the details of Lincoln's election.

"Hear you attended the Republican convention in Chicago," Stephen said to Gabe,
"Yup, I's there."

"Well," Stephen pressed, "you got news. Tell us."

"Awright. Twas a big to-do. The party met in a newly constructed convention hall. They called it the Wigwam. Huge place. People said they was room for 15,000 and the place was packed full."

Stephen scoffed. "Fifteen thousand ain't s'much. More'n that at both Democratic conventions."

"That's just what fit in the hall." Gabe shot back. "I heard tell that more'n 50,000 traveled to Chicago for the convention. N'I believe it. Streets, hotels and restaurants were plum full to overflowing. People, fine people, were sleeping five and six to a room. Place was so crowded I saw some gents resting two to a billiard table!"

The young listeners were bug-eyed at such numbers.

Sam challenged. "No lie?"

Mr. Müller spoke. "I Hear you met Mr. Lincoln there, yah?"

"I did, but not there, Aaron. Met him back in Kansas when he was still campaignin'."

This was the first John heard of it. "You really and truly met the man?"

He smiled at her, "Mmm Hmm. Surprised hell out of me too."

"What's he like?" James wanted to know.

Everyone leaned forward.

"He was ... he was ... not what you'd expect. He had a squeaky voice, but overall, kind of a regular fellow, tall, homely, down to earth. Oh, he was a glad-handin' politician, no doubt, but pleasant, y'know. In fact, downright humorous at times. I got the feeling he actually meant what he had t'say."

Sam announced. "My big brother met the president!"

Hoping to make a favorable impression on *his* brother, Sharp pointed out, "Ain't a single solitary southern state voted for him." Then looked to see his brother's reaction.

Victor laughed. "How could they. Not one of 'em had Lincoln on the ballot!"

"So you liked 'im?" Stephen asked.

"Didn't dislike him." Gabe thought on it then added "Yeah, I liked him well enough t'vote for 'im. Reminded me of Valentine somehow. Seems the sort of fella you could jaw with all day long and never tire of it cause he al'ays had something new and interestin' to say."

Stephen spat. "So he's the perfect man for the job, eh? What about Seward? What about Cameron. I heard they's good men too."

"Uh-huh. They all had their chance. At first, seemed like Seward had it in the bag. In fact, I read a newspaper pamphlet just afore the convention got underway, didn't even list Lincoln among the candidates. But he was, and he made an impression. After three ballots he had all the others beat. Looked like Cassius Clay of Kentucky was to be his running mate but then this Maine fella, Hamlin, took the prize."

What's this about him being a railsplitter? Sharp asked.

"Right." Gabe sat up and chuckled. "The Republicans wanted to make him even more regular than he is. Found out how he split fence rails as a youth and played it up. Why they even rode him into the hall on a couple of fence rails someone brought in just for the occasion.

"Like as not," Stephen grumbled, "ride him out on one as well."

"What" Victor asked, "was your impression of the Republican platform, Gabe?"

Stephen spat again. "There's the question."

"Well, seems it were all about slavery."

"I knew it." Stephen stood and vehemently declared. "Damned Judas!"

Geoff had been quiet, but now he stood to face Stephen, "Here. Settle some, Stephen. Remember, you're a guest."

Notnot slunk off.

Stephen met Geoff's glare with a steely gaze of his own. With barely concealed anger he responded evenly.

"Lincoln is a contagion. His election will lead to our ruination. You know it. Everyone here knows it. Hell, South Carolina voted to secede not more'n four days after the vote got tallied.

Geoff scoffed. "Buchanan say he don't agree with South Carolina."

"Buchanan ..." Now Stephen was getting het up. "Buchanan also says they ain't nothin' in the Constitution can stop it."

Geoff yawned and stretched. "Then I say, good riddance."

"Bah." Stephen stepped off the porch but then stopped and turned. He pointed an accusing finger at Geoff. "You'll regret backing the wrong horse here, all of you will. Mark my words. Lincoln's election means there's a storm comin'." He stalked off toward the barn where his horse was kept.

Confused, Sharp stood to watch his brother go. He searched Geoff's face then coming to a decision turned to Billy. "Stay if you like, Billy. I got to go after Stephen." He headed for the barn as well.

In the uncomfortable silence that followed, Victor pointed out. "Stephen is not entirely wrong you know. Lincoln got a bare 40% of the popular vote. Was the electoral college what won it for him, not the people."

"What's an electoral college?" "Billy whispered to Sam.

Sam answered. "Dunno."

Victor went on, "I read that not a single Southern state was represented at the Republican convention. So, half the country wanted nothing to do with him, that right, Gabe?"

"Pretty much. Couple of Texans claimed they was there as representatives, but no one seemed to take 'em serious. Come to think of it, weren't much heard from the border states neither."

"Yah. Mr. Bell, he carried those states." Aaron said

"Not Maryland." Victor countered. " Breckenridge carried our state."

His father nodded saying. "Along with every single southern state. That tell you anything, boys?"

Geoff sat back down. "Yeah. Ain't no more compromise."

Victor disagreed. "Not entirely, Geoff. The Republicans ran on the belief that slavery shall not be extended into the territories. They never said a thing about ending slavery and that's what the South is so worried about. Gabe?"

"True enough."

"Even Lincoln said as much." Victor continued. "I say reasonable people can still work this out."

"Reasonable people..." Geoff snorted. "Like Stephen there?"

Gabe ignored him, "I'll say this, The South might have its fire-eaters, right enough, but Republicans got their own radical wing. And those folks got a phrase inserted into the convention proceedings that caused quite a stir."

"What might that be?" John ventured.

"That all men are created equal."

"Vell, aren't they?" Insisted Aaron.

"Not niggers?" Billy said to himself.

"Saw an interesting thing at the convention – made me wonder," Gabe advised the group. Just afore I got into the wigwam I saw a policeman wearing a Republican badge refuse entrance to an Indian woman. Now understand she was dressed up fine and was with a fancy-dressed gentleman. Man said the lady was his wife. Like to think she was his wife. Well, the policeman at the door says. Squaws ain't no ladies and she weren't allowed. Makes me think there might be different definitions of equality floatin' about.

James inquired, "Think South Carolina really will secede from the Union?"

Geoff came back with, "Yessir, they will. They's convinced long afore the election was held."

"But the Constitution—" Victor started.

"Constitution be damned, Vic! They was already convinced. Lincoln's just the last straw is all."

An explosion of shouting and cursing erupted from the barn. Most of the men struck out to investigate with Geoff in the lead. The ladies too were on the feet, following in tow.

Out of the barn entrance bolted four negro figures, two men and two women. One of the women saw the approaching crowd and froze. A male companion ran back but before he could reach her, Stephen burst from the barn and commenced to beat her to the ground. Her companion and Sharp arrived simultaneously. The negro male ignored the furious white man. He grabbed the woman's arm and tried to drag her away while Sharp intervened in the beating. As Sharp struggled with his brother the woman came to her senses. She and her male rescuer sprinted for the trees.

Stephen shrugged off his brother. "LET GODDAMN GO OF ME!"

Notnot staggered out the barn bleeding from a gash on his forehead.

Stephen pulled his pistol and took aim at the fleeing figures.

A gunshot blast surprised them all, Stephen included.

As the dark figures disappeared into the night, Stephen turned his weapon on Geoff who held his own smoking gun in the air.

He addressed Stephen in the same casual manner he used on the porch. "I'll thank you t'holster your gun."

A tense minute passed as Stephen pointed his pistol at Geoff and Geoff in turn levelled his at Stephen.

Slack-jawed, Sharp backed away from his brother.

Notnot ran to Mother who dabbed his wound with her apron.

Stephen's hand started shaking.

Geoff spoke soothingly. "Dunno what happened, Stephen, just want to see this ended. Understand?"

Slowly. Both men lowered then holstered their pistols.

Quivering with raw, uncontrollable anger, Stephen threatened him. "Law's gonna hear 'bout it!"

"About what?"

"You hidin' runaways, is what."

"Stephen, I-"

"Everyone here seen it. Don't even deny it."

Perplexed, Geoff held his hands up palms out.

"Even if you didn't know, your nigger did! And you're responsible for him!"

Mother spoke. "I'll not have you strike a member of my family, Stephen McCune."

"FAMILY?" Stephen roared. When further words failed him he just shook his head.

"Get on your horse." Mother ordered. "You and your threats are no longer welcome here,"

Without looking at his brothers, Stephen called to them. "SHARP, BILLY, let's go!"
Billy was slow to respond so he barked, "BILLY, git your damn ass in the saddle, NOW!"

Minutes later, the McCunes were gone.

Thereafter, amid a flurry of apologies, so were the rest of Mother's guests.

Her party was over.

Later that evening after Notnot had been tended to and put to bed in the cabin with the rest of his family, Geoff sat alone on the porch trying to sort things out. Stephen was not about let sleeping dogs lie. He'd be back with the law. Sighing, he leaned back with his feet settled comfortably on Mother's rocker and watched shooting stars streak across the

night sky. He imagined Valentine sitting there with him, shrugging his shoulders and attempting to console him. He nodded to the imagined specter.

About to retire himself he noticed out the corner of one eye a curious something. Blackbirds, a pair of them perched atop the family smokehouse. It wasn't the birds so much as how they were positioned that gave him pause. One sat exactly on either end of the roof peak, their backs to each other, staring off in opposite directions. It was like as if they was bookends with no books just an old brick chimney between them.

Symmetry. Geoff recalled how he once asked Valentine about a new word he'd heard Becca use, *symmetry*. Never one to pass up an opportunity to school him, Valentine latched onto the subject like a starving dog worrying a bone. He pointed out leaves and pine cones, birds and dogs and human beings. He indicated the general shape of trees. He even pointed out the structure of their cabin and how it presented two windows one either side t'he door. Valentine impressed on him how symmetry was just a fancy word for natural balance. It made things easy on the eye and easy on the mind. Symmetry was balance and balance was peace He said it was all tied together somehow.

The blackbird to the south suddenly flapped off. The one to the north remained.

Dusk settled in.

Geoff sighed, heaved himself up and retired for the night.

The Garrets and McCunes will return with their many far-flung friends and enemies. To face the rising tensions of their disunited states in 1861. Join us in the next novel. Their adventure has only just begun.