

June 1947

Chapter 11

MENAGE A WILDLAND TROIS

I've wandered this wide world over,
And I'll tell you if man ever found
A place to be peaceful and quiet,
It's here on Puget Sound.

No longer a slave of ambition,
I laugh at the world and its shams,
As I think of my happy condition
Surrounded by acres of clams.

Eden is ever in the past, never the present. When hard times hit frontier villages the Old Settler of the ballad went down to the beaches and dug away alongside the Indians. In 1947 Seattle, though, man could not live by clams alone. There was gas to buy, there was beer, there was rent. And what ~~was~~ ^{little} cash Betty and I had, savings and parental handouts, was shot to hell by the ~~postwar~~ shriveling of the dollar.

All winter we'd ameliorated poverty ^{by} stealing books, restaurant suppers, and such pocketable supermarket items as cubes of butter and cans of tuna fish. With the loss of my monthly \$42_x we became big-time Raskalnikovs. Briefly, ~~very~~ briefly. Occasional raids add spice to life. ~~Everyday~~ ^{Daily} check-beating and shoplifting give ~~me~~ stomach ulcers. Especially with a confederate who in case of pursuit would be sure to stumble and be captured and dragged off to prison. (They caught Rodion Ramanovitch, didn't they?)

I worried about Betty. I worried about me, too, the day I was almost trapped in the A&P with a pocketful of sardines. The criminal life was too bloody hectic. The world owed me a living but I was ready to get it honestly.

That raised an interesting question: What does an English major do if he doesn't professorize? What does he know? Words. Who in Seattle buys words?

At only one radio station was I let past the reception desk. A sympathetic ~~man~~ executive explained I was a couple years too late. The unions had moved in and forbidden the ^{traditional} ~~ancient~~ practice of hiring trainees at skimpy apprentice wages.

One of the three daily newspapers didn't chase me out the door. At the Seattle Star, a starveling sheet left alone by the Newspaper Guild because paying union scale would force its closure, the city editor offered me a trial as a copyboy-cub reporter. When could I start? "Oh, come in tomorrow morning." But by one of those coincidences that makes one believe there really is a Malignancy in the Sky, tomorrow never came for the Star, bought overnight by the other afternoon newspaper, the Times, and summarily ^{extinguished.} ~~put to~~ ~~death.~~

Okay, America, you had a chance to buy my brain and told me to screw off. ~~Same to you, buddy.~~ Henceforth all you can have is my body.

Throughout the war I'd peddled my flesh and never lacked eager bidders. Those were the good old days. Now defense plants had been dismantled, leaving Seattle with the population of a city and the industry of a town. The mobs of laid-off Boeing workers refused to go home to Montana and Oklahoma where

they belonged. More and more vets were quitting the "52-20 Club," having run out the string on their 52 weeks of \$20 unemployment checks. Competition was fierce.

The lumber mill didn't want me back. Or the cannery. Or the Post Office. Or any other place I'd ever worked. I even returned to the railroad ~~freight~~ freight shads, during the war the reeking hangout of Skidroad winos desperate enough to put in a day's labor to buy a week's oblivion, but always a cinch for ~~a day's work~~ ^{6 bucks} if you could tolerate ^{8 hours of} wading in sour barf. To be sure of making the gang of two or three dozen required to load and unload the day's boxcars, I got there an hour before the 8 o'clock shape-up -- and a hundred guys, dead sober, were already in line.

I roamed the industrial district hitting up foremen -- scornful laughter. I visited union hiring halls -- no vacancies in the proletariat. I studied want ads -- nothing but selling real estate and insurance, and I'd vowed to give up crime. I filled out forms at employment agencies -- we'll call if we get anything.

Then, luck. By paying the required bribe (the money borrowed from my folks) to a hole-in-the-wall agency (run, as I later learned, by the mother of one of the company's big bosses and serving no client but the company) I was hired by Ernst Hardware to push a handtruck in a warehouse. Ernst was a scab outfit, doubtless allowed by the Teamsters' Union to remain such through some corrupt deal between company bosses and union bosses. The pay was a scabby \$35 a week. Who was complaining? ~~To us that was riches.~~

One thing more we needed for perfect happiness. My Northlake room was a splendid cell for an anchorite, a crummy love nest. Betty's basement

cave was restricted to single females; ~~The~~ landlady slept with ear to floor and at any suspicious sound, such as a male voice after 10 p.m., tip-toed downstairs, ~~and~~ and busted in.

She was not unique. One would ~~imagine~~ ^{expect} freedom ~~would~~ ^{to} flourish in ~~the~~ environs of the University, but the District was tyrannized by salacious old crones forever sniffing the wind for heterosexual sin (innocently oblivious to homosexual sport!), ~~slinging to their~~ miserable existences in hopes of catching boy-girl in the Act. There seemed no choice but to pay the man the \$2, or whatever a marriage license cost.

However, though a legal document would ~~make~~ ^{open} the door, first the door must be found, and that was no easier than finding a job. The damn vets crudding up my tranquil campus and robbing me of ~~gainful work~~ all my ~~old~~ jobs also were polluting my District, jamming ^{every inhabitable cranny.} ~~every basement, attic, garage, and~~ ~~houseboat.~~ While I pushed the handtruck, ~~between~~ between classes Betty prowled the streets watching for people carrying belongings out of houses onto sidewalks. But whenever people were carrying out, others were carrying in.

Then, luck. Tipped off by a classmate that due to a family emergency an acquaintance was abruptly leaving town, Betty took off from campus on the run and won the race. Three blocks west of the Avenue, in the garret of a decrepit three-story house minutely subdivided into a student warren, was our home, a minimally-furnished bedroom plus a closet ^{crammed} ~~equipped~~ with gas plates, sink, and ~~a~~ tiny kitchen table, ~~and~~ ~~etc.~~ In the hall were the refrigerator and bathroom shared with two other garret "apartments." Rent was a ~~staggering~~ ^{staggering} \$35 a month; we accepted the gouge unmurmuring.

Betty moved in. Not I. Never-sleeping landlady kept perpetual vigil at the bottom of the ladder-like, infernally-squeaky staircase. Therefore, the evening of Wednesday, May 28, Betty and I giggled through a 5-minute session in a preacher's study and he signed the document demanded by the landlady.

Friday morning, Memorial Day, the three of us left on our honeymoon.

Three?

Who was the third? Not the landlady. Monie.

Monie?

Let them titter. Let her fracture Mountaineer freaks. ("What you climbing Memorial Day, Monie?" ^{they ask.} Cackles she, "Oh, I'll be too busy to climb. The Mannings and I are going on our honeymoon!") It was a perfectly square affair, she had no designs on either of our bodies, was (except for climbing) a straight. Despite learning at her father's knee that femalehood was a disaster to be overcome by willpower, despite adolescent Christmases blighted by boots and ~~perks~~ ^{wool shirts} when young heart yearned for a frilly party dress, her sexuality hadn't been distorted (except for the climbing). Her marriage had fallen apart last year. Within the realm of the normal. She hadn't yet hooked up with another man. Also normal. She found Betty and me amusing. Nothing perverse in that, surely.

Though ~~in our self-absorption~~ ^{had mostly been too busy for} Betty and I ~~lost touch with most~~ friends, we weren't always grabbing at each other; Monie had continued to be a frequent tavern companion. Never on weekends, though, because she then was off with the freaks, instructing at Climbing Course rock practices and snow practices.

But she gave up trying to ~~convince~~^{lure} us into that lunacy, and, if still ever-bubbling with tales of acrophilia, ~~seemed almost to enjoy hearing~~^{listened with interest to} stories of our modest Olympic adventures -- the Graywolf forest walk of March, an April snow-plow up the Soleduck River nearly to the High Divide. The witch wasn't really dangerous, not if you were alert for pranks.

What brought us together for our first joint hike since Cruiser was economics. Forget the honeymoon ~~vacation~~ crap. For me, ~~warehouse~~ warehouse-pent, Memorial Day would be one of only three long weekends the whole summer and was not to be frittered away in bed, ~~must yield a bounty of highland memories to keep my back straight under the burden of lowlands.~~ But our family treasury hadn't recovered from bribing the employment agency, we were too broke to pay tribute to Mr. Black Ball, couldn't afford the Olympics. What food for the soul was available in the cheap substitute, the Cascades? Monie knew. And she volunteered to be our guide. Never mind that she preferred to call it being our "chaperone."

"Any particular place you'd like to go?" she asked.

My knowledge of the range was next to nil. One spot, though, had nagged me since 1942, when Arild and I twice tried to reach it and twice bogged down in soft spring snow. Had Monie ever been to Monte Cristo?

"Oh, lots of times."

Any good hiking ~~there~~?

"Oh, plenty. We could take the trail to Silver Lake and fool around. Nice little peak ~~above it~~^{there} -- we could climb Silvertip in a couple hours."

Hold it.

"Well gosh, it's actually just a slog. Some steep snow but nothing worse than you did last month in the Soleduck. A little bit of exposed rock at the top but if you don't like it we don't have to do it. Heck, if you want to we can camp at the lake and stay in my tent the whole 3 days!" Cackle.

She swore on our concession to God, the Government, and the ~~XXXXX~~ landlady her innocence of another Cruiser-like plot. After all, it was our honeymoon. Cackle.

She seemed sincere. What if she weren't? Settling the score with Monte Cristo was worth a risk. And oddly, I sort of hankered to feel once more, just once, ~~the~~ rope around waist, ax in hand. Who could predict? I might settle other old scores, might arrive at the "little bit of exposed rock" and become suddenly brave. If not, my escape hatch was open. The groom's place was with the bride. Betty could be trusted to chicken out for us both.

Through darkening forest, under thickening clouds, we drove beside the South Fork Stillaguamish River to Big Four Inn, empty, paint-flaking, two-story relic of a scheme to build a Cascades rival to Canada's Banff, and Arild's and my far point on the first of our 1942 attempts. Here rough road narrowed to a track recently bulldozed along the bed of the old railway that carried its last ore from the mines early in the century and its last sightseers to the ghost town in the ~~2~~³30s. The Model A rattle-banged, bounced-and-jounced over Barlow Pass and up the South Fork Sauk River to the road-end.

Switch off. ~~This is it.~~ At an elevation of 3000 feet in a dank hole ringed by cloud-lost peaks were rickety shacks and rusty machinery ~~and~~ ~~more gnawed buildings~~ half-swallowed by a jungle of alder and second-growth fir. Monte Cristo at last. Ghostly indeed in drizzling gloom. The trip was already a success, Memorial Day ~~at last~~ memorable.

Packs on backs we trudged up the trail, meeting a parade of descending fishermen complaining there wasn't a drop of water showing in Silver Lake. No whining fishermen we. Atop my Trapper Nelson ^{rode} ~~perched~~ the coil of manila rope. In my hand was an ice ax, rented for the weekend from the Co-op -- but how could trail strangers guess that? I struck poses, accepted their awe -- marred, to be sure, by ^{its} being indiscriminately extended to Betty and her ax.

Switchbacks vanished in snow, forest faded in fog. The hill^{side} rounded over to Poodledog Pass, dropped a bit to the 4200-foot basin of the lake. What lake? A plain of snow beneath white cirque cliffs leaping into white cloud. On a knoll-top patch of soggy, snow-surrounded duff under dripping hemlocks we heaped up boughs for a mattress and Monie pitched her pup-like tent. ~~my~~ Squaw wood flamed bright, melting snow in Ten Cans for cooking supper. But there was no campfire evening; ~~we'd no reason to~~ ~~take~~ a deluge of rain drove us to the tent and a 12-hour sleep.

In ~~the~~ morning the rattling of rain on tent slackened to the splatting of tree-drips. Out into mists we crawled, impelled not by ambition but ^{bursting} ~~fast~~ bladders. Too sluggish to build a fire we ate a ~~cooked~~ breakfast of canned ~~fruit~~ peaches and candybars, Monie quoting the climbers' maxim, "Though the food is cold, the inner man is hot!" Lewd cackle.

We stared morosely over snow into fog. In Puget Sound lowlands the year consists of two seasons --/cold rain and/cool rain. The highlands have four true seasons; three, however, are compressed into the ^{dozen weeks} ~~3-months~~ from late June to early October. All the rest is winter, and we were in it, shivering.

"Well," said cheerful Monie, "What is your pleasure, Mr. and Mrs. Manning? Back to the sack or take a walk?"

Who but a climber would leave ^{an icebox} ~~a frozen~~ camp smothered in clouds to go ^{thinking of ~~some~~ cozy garet,} ~~up?~~ But Monie was our leader and as yet had done us no harm. Glumly, we [^] plodded after her across the frozen lake, up a wooded ridge.

The snow steepened to an angle I'd never attempted except in a state of hysteria. The ridge skinned to an airy cleaver. The forest dwindled to scattered clumps of stubby alpine trees, leaving us exposed to the oppressive ^{all around.} infinity of cloud^x. But I wasn't scared. I felt amazingly comfortable, solidly connected to slippery whiteness by ice ax stabbed deep into ~~the~~ ~~skin~~ guts of the mountain. Far different would've been the Graywolf Ramble had Arild and I possessed axes! ~~^~~ We'd have dared the pass through The Needles to Royal Basin, sauntered over ridges to Deception Basin, Heather Basin. Nothing mysterious about the tool. Monie said climbers use it now and then for chopping ~~spooky~~ ladderways up ice cliffs, occasionally for a variety of arcane techniques, but mainly as a simple cane, a third leg.

Betty needed more legs than that, ideally as many as a spider. As we paused on a bench for rest and squirrel food, she, with fear-dry mouth, heard meltwater trickling and went for a drink -- and stumbled, flopped on stomach, and ever so slowly began sliding.

Monie and I watched incredulous. Gravity wasn't to blame. The snow was flat. Betty was sliding by sheer force of virtuoso incompetence.

Plaintively she wailed, "Help me! Help me!"

I didn't laugh. Now she was mine I was less amused by her clumsiness. Monie didn't cackle. Who cackles at my wife cackles at me. I tried to ignore the shameful scene but there was no denying that if she maintained the pace -- and I wouldn't put it past her -- in a half-hour she'd slide over the cliff a dozen feet distant. I gave her a hand, saved her life, ~~and~~ warned her to be more careful when the honeymoon was over.

Higher and higher we climbed, and I ~~began~~^{started} taking turns step-kicking -- one of the fundamental climbing techniques, Monie said. Nothing to it, not with an ax to keep feet from getting nervous and breaking out steps. Our ridge merged into the summit ridge and we clambered up a frost-riven jumble of rocks to the 6000-foot crest.

My God! We were perched on a flagpole amid a bewilderment of gray walls and white snows slipping in and out of black clouds, spotlighted now and then by come-and-go shafts of startling sun. We were in Whympers world, Mallory's world. No mere hiker ever sees so grimly lovely a wilderness.

But wild on high alone. Below was Silver Creek, the route of Arild's and my second attempt to reach Monte Cristo. We'd hiked through virgin forest beside a shadowed stream. Just 5 years ago. Now I looked down horrified to a desolation of raw brown clearcuts, to a naked creek choked with logging slash. Hidden Lake had been vandalized. Now Silver Creek.

We were in a National Forest. I'd thought National Forests were the same as National Parks, the sole differences that guns were allowed and rangers didn't wear fancy hats. Not so. National Forests are National

Tree Farms where 500-year-old patriarchs are reaped like wheat. In a National Forest you can't be sure of ^{ever} ~~the chance to go~~ ^{going} home again. Home is safe only in National Parks. And above timberline. A hiker must envy a climber, whose logger-free home is so much vaster.

The summit of Silvertip lay several hundred yards away and a hundred feet higher. "Easy half-hour," said Monie. But confronted by the "little bit of exposed rock" floating in a sea of ^{clouds} ~~air~~ I was no Whymper, no Mallory. As for Betty, she'd progressed from tears to catatonia; when time came to descend, Monie had to rope us up ~~so~~ ^{the invalid} so we could drag ~~my bride~~ off the rocks.

Down the sparkling crest. Monie showed us the "plunge step." Do not lean timidly ^{toward the} ~~backward toward~~ Earth. Face the sky and boldly step right out into the middle of it. When boot ~~hits~~ strikes snow the stiff leg pushes ^{the hoo} ~~me~~ into a skid that compacts a solid platform, take-off for the next plunge. Afraid of a toboggan ride? Never fear. Hold ax in both hands across chest and if a platform ^{fails} ~~breaks away~~ just stab the snow, regain balance, and plunge on, plunge on.

Down down down we plunged through boiling clouds and sunshine flares. Betty began to smile. I paused often to take pictures featuring rope and axes, photo-album proof I'd been, if only for a few hours, ^{almost} a climber. The ridge broadened and ^{the slope gentled and} we glissaded on our rumps, ax ever available ^{for} ~~to~~ quickly ~~put on~~ brakes. This was a whole other sport from ^{the} glissading I'd known, this was pure exhilaration unblemished by terror. Betty began to laugh.

We ~~stopped~~^{paused} while Monie ~~called out the~~^{identified} peaks dodging in and out of clouds -- Gothic, Del Campo, Vesper, Big Four, Foggy, Cadet, Monte Cristo, Wilmon Spires, Columbia -- wonderful names, wonderful to be ^{high} among them, almost their equal.

Glissade-crazed Betty grew impatient. She jumped. One moment Monie and I were enraptured by scenery. The next ~~moment~~^{we were} flying through the air, ~~and a moment later~~^{we were} ~~Monie~~ Betty had forgotten we were roped.

Well, thought I, tumbling head over heels, hearing squeals of delight below, at least my idiot bride is getting some fun from the honeymoon.