

Thomas B. O'Grady

Glorious, Pious and Immortal Memory (1958)

Behind his back, even Ambrose Wilson's sons referred to him as The Goat. He was a twisted man, his arms and shoulders warped with sinew like knotted rope, his face skewed permanently into a reproving scowl. His skull was girdled by a patchy halo of curls the color of stained porcelain, and despite his solemn efforts with scissors and a razor each night, his chin stubbornly produced furzy tufts of whisker by the next morning. When he worked in the back woods away from his wife and daughters, he would sometimes allow his shirt to open to the waist, revealing a scrappy tangle of hair from his navel to his throat matching that above his collar. Ambrose Wilson was mean-tempered, and for his age he was still nimble on his feet. His sons always called him Sir to his face.

The eldest son Sumner was a sheepish likeness of his father. He had left school when he was fourteen years old and gone to work in the fields and the woods under the old man's tutelage. Eight years later he was still obediently taking orders and receiving instructions on how to use a crosscut saw properly or how to rig out the harrow for breaking up the thick clods that seemed to sprout like bushes as soon as the plow had dug through the spring clay.

"If you could market those, you'd be a rich man," the second son Sinclair had thought out loud one April, the sharp nasal pitch of his voice carrying like the rasp of a crow over the sorry furrows. His father had cuffed him across the side of the head for that observation. Though he pretended not to notice exchanges such as this, Sumner was always privately pleased with his brother's lack of prudence. As much as he feared that his father could turn on him at any time with the same violent expression of displeasure, he worried even more that one of his younger brothers might somehow ingratiate himself to the old man and thus grab the land that was his as birthright. As the eldest son, he

jealously protected his claim of inheritance by meekly accepting whatever reproach his father chose to hurl in his direction. He was sustained by the ambition of one day showing his brothers and sisters the gate at the end of the lane and sending them on their way.

The two younger boys were no immediate threat to Sumner's designs. They had been conceived and born as an afterthought, he had overheard his mother tell her sister. He hoped that the old goat would be long dead and buried before either of them would be grown-up enough to make any sort of impression. The girls were harmless enough, too. They were as homely as a pair of stuffed weasels, but they would no doubt marry someday and leave their father's farm without a backward glance. Sinclair alone could contend with his older brother for the old man's approval.

Sinclair was two years younger than his brother, and had managed to stay in school two years longer. Finally, he too had found the lure of long hours and small rewards more appealing than the luxury of book learning and had joined his father and Sumner in trying to make a living off sixty acres of rocks and bog. Like his brother, Sinclair felt no great attachment to their father, but over the years he had cultivated an imperviousness to the old man's humors which made toiling beside him at least bearable. Where Sumner would cringe and stutter whenever the old goat cast his critical eye over the day's labors, Sinclair would simply ignore the caustic remarks intended for him. He had never given much thought to the future, and certainly not to the chance of someday inheriting his father's farm, so he had no motive to pay particular heed to the old man's complaints and accusations.

At first this attitude of his second son had exasperated Ambrose Wilson. From the day the boy was born, Wilson had known that he would be independent and stubborn, hard as the dickens to keep in line: the child had a certain look in his eye. Despite this premonition, the old goat had never found the cure for young Sinclair's indifference to working the land and was always flustered by his son's knack for completing his chores without much apparent effort at all: *In all labour there is profit*, Wilson would admonish him, even when he had no real call to chastise the boy. When he wanted to, Sinclair could shame both his father and Sumner with his work in the fields, and he was a natural with the stock, clucking and cooing to the cows like a biddy with newborn chicks; most days, though, he would pass hours chewing on straw like a rabbit and staring off down the road as if there were another world altogether just over the hill. Only the sound of his father unbuckling his belt as he peered darkly around the corner of an

outbuilding could prompt Sinclair to look any busier than he had to be. "Ye're not your father's son!" Ambrose Wilson would bleat after the boy, holding up his trousers with one hand while he pursued him through the dung-filled yard and across rows of scrubby spuds.

As Sinclair grew bigger, even the threat of a thrashing failed to impress him the way his father intended; at times, in fact, he seemed almost to court the old goat's ire, seemed almost to goad the old man to take a swipe at him. Eventually Ambrose Wilson had to admit to himself that whatever the boy's manner, he was at least the equal of Sumner in getting his share of the work done. Still, his son's attitude perplexed him. "That boy Sinclair gets more like his mother every day," he would complain to his brother-in-law after church service each Sunday. "He's like a pig. The more you talk to him the less he understands. And the more you kick him the slower he moves."

Although Ambrose Wilson came almost to accept his son's obstinate character, he still could not reckon the reason for it. He had reared his children as he himself had been reared—to fear and respect their sire, and to fear and respect their Lord: *Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*, he would sternly remind them. But Sinclair was different from the others. He had a mind of his own—a mind like his mother's—and the best that old Wilson could hope to do was to bridle him as he did his wife. From the day he married her she had been as uncooperative as the land they lived on: with the help of God above, Ambrose Wilson had finally sworn to her on their first wedding anniversary, he would tame both the land and herself before he died.

Ambrose Wilson had purchased the land sight unseen a dozen years after the Great War with money from a disability pension paid to him for his service with the Royal Inniskillings. Bedridden in a field hospital in the south of France, he had become acquainted with a Canadian named Stewart who had showed him a photograph of his sister on Prince Edward Island and told him with a wink about the fertile territory that could be his on the other side of the Atlantic. A decade later, back in the north of Ireland, Ambrose Wilson had remembered Stewart's talk of the land and of his sister and had written that he was interested in both. He still had not forgiven Stewart for either.

In her photograph, Sadie Stewart had seemed a sensible sort of woman, and her brother had described her as a great hand around the house. In person she was the sort of woman most men would avoid looking in the eye in a dance hall. She was an armful—Ambrose Wilson had noticed that about her in her brother's photo—but her talk filled a room even more than her bosom, and as far as anyone could

determine, she really made very little sense at all. For Wilson, whose mother had been as scolding as a jackdaw, a high-spirited woman like Sadie Stewart was as strange as a foreign language: there was something off-putting about her, but there was something curiously exotic about her as well. Ignoring his inbred aversion to the unfamiliar, Ambrose Wilson had gone ahead and taken her for his wife.

Like the land, Sadie Wilson had, from the start, resisted most of her husband's earnest attempts at domination. Certainly she talked less constantly now than she had when she first met Wilson: twenty-eight years of marriage had taught her the futility of conversation with a man as severe as that old goat. He had no interest in the news of the day, no interest in his own family, no interest even in the goings-on of the neighbors. He seemed to care only for his accursed fields, and as his wife watched him strip to his underclothes to shave each night after sending the children to bed, she thought that he looked more and more like one of the hoary tree roots that seemed to spawn like eels on his property, strangling the life out of even the most hardy of crops. He had become so obsessed with his need to master the land that even as he gathered his brood around him each evening to read aloud from Scripture, Sadie Wilson could hear in her husband's voice a catch of resentment for that which he most staunchly professed to believe: *The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.*

Of the children only Sinclair showed any sign of his mother's outgoing nature. Preston and Sterling, the younger boys, were as dull and as sullen as Sumner, and the girls seemed downright stupid at times. Even with pretty names like Olive and Hazel they showed little sign of their mother's spirit. So Sadie Wilson had come to depend upon her sister and her brother's wife for companionship. The latter was a Catholic, though, and her sister had married one, so they were never made to feel welcome by her husband. Ambrose Wilson had brought with him from the crooked green hills of Fermanagh the crossroads spite for those of "the other persuasion," and over the years he had attempted neither to temper nor to conceal his suspicion of his wife's turncoat relations. Whenever they visited, Sadie Wilson could hear her husband muttering outside the window, and after supper he would collect the children in the parlor and have the boys read from the book of Revelation: *I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters.*

For Ambrose Wilson these words were like an incantation used to ward off the evils of idolatry: they were the creed of the faith he had

been born into, of the faith he had sworn to uphold before the pulpit of a narrow square-steepled church on the road to Lisbellaw, of the faith imprinted on him by the cold and calloused hands of a black-browed father. For his family they held little significance at all. The girls would stare numbly into the fire as their brothers took turns with the big book, stumbling over the verses as if they were tree stumps waiting to be dug up and burned. After he had read, Sinclair would try hard not to look toward the doorway and the coolness of the night outside.

Only Sumner could find in these words any meaning for his own life and world: he could hear in their forbidding tone, could feel in their unforgiving rhythms the righteous bark of his own father's voice. These words consoled him that he would one day be rewarded grandly for his submission to the old man's unyielding authority. Knowing that his father's home and acreage could someday be his alone, Sumner could pass up the odd temptation he might have to defy the old goat the way that Rita Kelly's cousin had at a sale of used and broken farm equipment at Poole's Corner one Saturday: "Billy! Billy! Billy!" the upstart had whinnied at old Wilson from the high seat of a tractor after outbidding him for a worn-out, rusted baler. Sumner had looked away, pretending not to hear this insult but secretly delighted to see his father humiliated both by the young man's mockery and by his own miserly failure to get the bargain he had hoped for. Returning home that evening, old Wilson had sermonized to his son on the ignorance of the papish rabble that swarmed over the countryside like a plague of locusts: *That which the palmerworm hath left hath the locust eaten*, he had spat with the fervency of the preachers who in his youth had roamed the rutted roads of Ulster, testifying by the word of God that only the elect would be saved from eternal damnation.

Although Sumner could hope to find in his father's steadfast convictions the fibre by which he might bind himself more tightly to the old man's property, he had little cause for confidence until the morning Sinclair announced that he had taken a job trucking produce to Toronto and would make his first run up the line the next week. "Ye'll do no such nonsense," old Wilson had declared, his voice cracking across the breakfast table like a plate thrown against the wall. He did not even bother to look at his son as he spoke.

"I'll do it, sir, and more," Sinclair had replied, trying not to whine. "I've had twenty years of this life and this land. I leave it to you and to Sumner to find a living here. To the young lads, too."

Before his father could strike out at him, Sinclair had pushed away his food as if he were going to be sick to his stomach and run off to the

farthest fields where he worked apart from the others all day. Old Wilson had returned to his cup of bitter tea as if his son had merely passed a remark on the weather. Sumner had excused himself and gone out into the yard to survey the world that he now knew for sure would come to him when the old goat died.

For his part, until Sinclair failed to show up in the kitchen on the following Monday morning, Ambrose Wilson had given not even a moment of thought to the future disposal of his property. He was as fit as a workhorse himself and had simply assumed that his boys would carry on by his side until kingdom come, persevering with their father in his determined struggle with the land. Such vanity! the old goat would have pronounced this same notion in his neighbors: *Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names.* But when Sinclair turned his back on the farm and on the family, Ambrose Wilson learned in just a few days that even the loyalty of a son to his father had its price.

It would be difficult to keep the farm going without Sinclair, he soon realized: as unreliable as the boy was by times, he would be hard to replace, and Preston and Sterling would not be of much use for another few years. For the first time, the old man was aware that without all hands laboring as one, his hold on these cursed acres was no more secure than a frayed cable slipping on a pulley: his own vanity was piqued by the betrayal of his second son. Of all his sons, old Wilson knew, Sumner was the only one that he could count on—he had no worry that his eldest boy would up and leave him the way that his brother had. It might not be entirely wise, Ambrose Wilson thus told himself, but for the sake of the land he would make Sinclair an offer: if he would give up his trucking and return to the fields where he belonged, then the whole farm would be his in a matter of years.

When Sumner heard his father's plan he was too upset even to defend his own claim on the farm: he could not believe that all that he had slaved for all these years was to be bartered away so cheaply, like a box lot at an auction. For days he felt dizzy and confused every time he remembered the old goat's decision: "I'll not pay hired help to work the Wilson land," he had stated soberly to his family as they rose from reading the fifteenth chapter of Luke. "No one knows the land like your brother Sinclair. The land will belong to Sinclair."

When Sinclair was told the plan he just said that he would need a while to think about it. In the meantime he continued to make two trips a week to Toronto or Montreal, returning home on the weekends

to help out around the barns, crooning songs he heard on the radio along the road: *If I had the wings of an angel, over these prison walls I'd fly*, he would warble, his tuneless voice annoying to everyone but his mother. When he thought that his sisters were watching he would sometimes do a little dance step to see if they would smile.

Sinclair continued this pattern of work into late August, revelling like a spring colt in the new freedom of the big cities and basking in the new respect given him by the old goat at home. But as harvest time approached, Ambrose Wilson became desperate. He wanted his son to make a decision; he wanted him to come home to stay. If only he would agree, old Wilson told himself, he might let Sinclair have the farm even sooner than he had been promised it, provided that the boy minded himself. The lad might even take a wife and settle down, perhaps one of the Buchanan girls his mother had seen Sumner eyeing at the Orange Lodge picnic in July.

For an instant, then, Ambrose Wilson was almost pleased when Sinclair arrived at the back door one Friday evening with a woman on his arm and announced: "This is Gabrielle, my wife."

But as his son continued, old Wilson felt that as one burden was being lifted from him, another was descending like a hundredweight of grain. He could see now the folly of his plan: he could see now the falseness of his second son.

"She's French," Sinclair explained to his brothers and sisters. "We got married last night in a chapel in Quebec. We've come home to the Island to live."

Sinclair stood in the door with his bride, waiting for his family to welcome her, hoping that they would not laugh at her accent and her poor English. Ambrose Wilson rose from his chair by the stove, his face as dark as the scorched bottom of a kettle. The other children moved away as he tried to speak.

"*I will tell thee the mystery of the woman*," he began. The words seemed to stick in the back of his mouth like a piece of gristle, and he had to sit down again.

"About that offer you made me, sir," Sinclair said, glancing at his wife with a smile. He put his arm around her and looked toward his mother.

"There is no offer to you and your kind," his father replied from across the room. "Sumner, lead your brother to the road where he belongs: *He shall return no more to his house, neither shall his place know him any more.*"

Sumner heeded his father's command as if it were the gospel of the Lord itself. Taking his brother by the arm, he guided him and his wife down the lane like they were blind. When they reached the ditch that surrounded their father's property, Sumner opened the gate for his brother, then shook his hand. "I'm sorry," he said. "The old goat is an intolerant and ignorant man."

But Sumner was not sorry at all, and as he watched Sinclair help his bride into the cab of his truck he himself felt like a goat, one that had just had its tether removed: now, for sure, the farm would be left to him. Still, he felt fenced-in knowing that before long he would have to tell his father about Rita Kelly and the condition he had put her in. Her family would disown her. Sumner knew that she could be persuaded to leave her church behind.