

Evening Star

1924

"The evening brings all home," the last ringleted girl had finished off the ballad on a hopeful note--she would have given her ears for a praising word from Miss Duff--and night and quiet came again to the house on Highland Street. Regular as the curtain of nightfall was Susan Duff's routine in closing away her teaching day. Shoulders back, her tall frame straightening expectantly even though there was no one in the house to meet for the evening but herself, she shuffled sheet music into its rightful order, tallied the hours of lessons in the secondhand mercantile ledger she kept handy atop the piano and cast an eye over the schedule of impending pupils, then the balky old doors of the music parlor were slid shut. Next a quick stop in the hallway bath to

freshen her face with a rinse of cold water; one adjusting glance into the mirror, never two; hairpins taken out, and her chestnut hair shaken down. Onward to her stovetop supper, which she raced through as though still making up for her father's interminable graces over expiring food. Now, with a pat to the kitchen and a cursory locking of doors and windows, she was ready to ascend.

As fixed as a star, the telltale glow of her gable window appeared over Helena at the last of dusk and burned on past respectable bedtime. You might think a woman of her early climb in life, singled out by her father's God for a soaring voice to lift His hymns and then casting away choirsong for the anthems of a harsh young century, would find it a hard comedown to be faced with a nightly audience of only herself. You'd be as wrong as you could be, Susan would have you know in a fingersnap. The hours beyond dark she counted as her own, free and clear of beginner lessons and quavery approximations of high C.

This night, however, no sooner was she upstairs than she whipped to a halt in front of the alcove of window, her gaze drawn down the hillside to the state capitol dome, resting as it did on the center of the government of Montana like a giant's copper helmet. The dome still was alight with the festoon of bulbs that had greeted 1924 three months ago, which seemed to her uncalled for.

"Blaze," Susan addressed the civic constellation in the coarse-ground Fifeshire burr she was born to, "see if I care."

She gave a throaty chuckle at herself and wended her way toward her desk. The attic-like room extended the full length of the house--loft quarters for a married pair of servants, this must have originally been--and Susan used the expanse like a rambler cottage perched above the formal quarters of downstairs. The rolltop desk, a divan, a ^{phonograph} gramophone, what had been her father's Morris chair and footstool, onyx-topped sidetables, a blue-and-black knitted comforter on the sill seat of the strategically aimed gable window, sets of bookshelves, a spinet piano, the whopping Duff family Bible on a reading stand of its own, all populated what was in actual fact her bedroom.

This mob of comforts drew her up out of public day as if lifting her into a lifeboat, and Susan tallied the necessity of this each time, too. Liberal with the night, resourceful as she probably ever was going to be in her fortieth year under heaven, she held to the belief that she was most herself in these upstairs hours, at this elevation where the minute hand did not count. The time of footlights and the song-led marches for the right of women to vote were tucked into the past as firmly as could be, and as to the tongues of the town down there beyond the base

a phonograph,
a highly
unreliable
new thing
called a
radio set,
contraption?

her new
self

of the stairs, she could do nothing about those. But up here, she at once got busy at life's amended version of Susan Duff. There were encouraging letters to be written to favorite former pupils. (Tonight's, which took lip-biting concentration, to the breathy young soprano whose recent *lieder* recital in Milwaukee had not found favor there.) ^{This political city's} The afternoon's newspapers to be devoured, the *Herald* for spite and the *Independent* for sustenance. Books in plenitude; currently she was trying to make her way through E.M. Forster and the murky doings in the Malabar Caves. Music, of course; her half-finished operetta *Prairie Tide* always awaited, always unnavigable, but the gramophone sang the songs of others perfectly on command, restorative in itself to a teacher of voice. And she still was secretary of the Montana chapter of the Over There Memorial Committee, which took her to a drafty meeting hall once a month and obliged her to see to official correspondence, clerical enough to cross the eyes, in between. Tonight, as always, she shifted scene every so often, her tall solo figure suddenly on the move as if she were a living chess piece. Time did not lag here in her industrious garret; it was not permitted to.

+ radio
 music tuner and
 clock not
 cabled out. static
 interfering
 then too
 sec-treasurer

When it was nearing midnight and she had just begun to salt away another day between diary covers, she faintly heard the turn of a key in the front door and then the rhythm of him coming up the stairs to her for the first time in four years.

“Susan? You might have changed the lock.”

He arrived on the wings of that commanding smile. *The very model of a modern genteel Major*, a line of hers teased somewhere back in that diary.

Behind Wes, men would have charged Hell; in fact, men had.

Surprised no end to be confronting him again after all this time, Susan still could not help but marvel at the presence with which Wes did most anything, as though the shadow under him were the thrust of a stage. Poised there at the top of her stairs, wearing a fortune on his back--or more aptly, on the swath of chest where General Pershing himself had pinned a medal--he looked ready to do a white-glove inspection; civilian life, now that he was tailored to it again, was a continuation of duty by other means. Even his way of standing, the weight taken on his left leg to spare the right knee peppered by shrapnel at St. Mihiel, proclaimed the reliance that the world had wanted to place on him. Brave and

wounded at the same time: the story of Wesley Williamson's life, as she was plentifully aware, on more than one kind of battlefield.

Voice training had unforeseen benefits. She thought she managed to sound in possession of herself--or at least within her own custody--as she spoke back to the immaculate invader:

"Evidently I saved you some shinnying, by not."

"Oh oh," Wes said, his smile dented but still there, "I guess I've been told."

He picked his way through the long room, interested as a museum-goer, to the perch nearest her, which happened to be the edge of her bed. "May I?"

You and your Williamson manners. Walk uninvited into a woman's bedroom, then be solicitous about seating yourself too near. This time Susan's words would have cut through bone:

"Sit yourself down, Wes, please do. I haven't had a good look at a family man in a while."

Wes ducked his head slightly in acknowledgment. At least she had not put the run on him, quite yet. He settled to the bed and wordlessly looked over at her before trying to make his case. The woman there just beyond reach had an

enlarged sense of justice, which had been one of the first passions that drew them together. The snip and snap of talk with Susan, their political mustard plasters for the world if they could have had their way; Lord, how he missed that, and her laugh which started somewhere down in the Scotch gravel of her family footing, and the abandon with which she performed the comical burning of her corset in the fireplace of that Edinburgh hotel room to prove to him she could be modern in that way too, and her cinnamon eyes that put you in your place and made you like it--in the midst of their love-making those eyes had stayed open, reflective even then--and the always intriguing extent of Susan, down to her industrious fingers which, it amazed him to find during some early clasp of love, were appreciably longer than his. The right length, by rare luck of nature, to caress music from piano keys or to coax it from the air when she sang. The heaven-given lilt of her voice he missed most of all, even when she was furious with him, as now. Everything was there to be missed, as he contemplated Susan across the frozen distance between bed and desk.

“Lost, are you?” she inquired. “I thought this was still your New York time of year.”

“You make me sound like a migratory bird.”

"Wes?" She put down her pen as if pinning something beneath it. "Do I get to know why you're here?"

"I'm working on that." Reluctantly giving up his inspection of her, he let his eyes slide over the motley keepsakes in attendance around her, the brass paperweight shaped like a treble clef, the tiny mock strongbox which held pen nibs, the soldier photograph with its tint going drab, the silver letter-opener with the French maiden of liberty, one breast bare and glinting, in bas relief on its handle. His gaze lit on the open pages in front of Susan. The voices of paper were one of his specialties. Thinking out loud, not ^a his usual habit, he said: "A woman armed with a diary. Not the best company for me to be keeping, I suppose."

Susan simply looked at him across the small white field of ^{pages} paper. Just looked at him. When you have cost a man a governorship, what further scandal does he think you are apt to inflict on him?

The silence stretched. At last Wes brought out:

"You know I couldn't."

"I know you wouldn't," she said as if correcting his spelling. They had been through this and through this. A proven hero who could not or would not

undergo a tug-of-war with his church. *"Wes, the Pope has no need of the divorce law. But you do."* Who had broken his vows six ways from Sunday in half the countries of Europe and in this very room and then would not break his misbegotten marriage. *"She's not a well woman, Susan. That on top of the faith-- I can't face leaving her when she's like this, it's against everything in me."*

Susan, from a family that had the stamina of wolfhounds, held no patience for the delicate constitution and strategic indispositions of Wes's wife. She couldn't resist asking:

"How is the tender Merrinell?"

For a start, his wife was under the impression he was in Minneapolis at this moment, buying grain consignments. Wes shifted a bit on the bed and reeled off that she was holding her own, at the place up the Hudson now for Easter break with the gold-dust twins, although they weren't especially twins any more, only grudgingly even sisters... Susan half-listened, fascinated as of old with the change of atmosphere Wes brought into a room with him. In the period before him one of her beaux at musical evenings, a tippler, smelled of cloves. She could swear Wes always smelled of silk.

He broke off what he was saying and again regarded Susan as though taking the opportunity to stock up on her. "How is the Lord's gift to the musically inclined?"

"Enough how's, the two of us are starting to sound like a powwow, for heaven's sake. This isn't like you, Wes. At least your word was always good. When we stopped throwing ourselves at each other--"

"--When you dropped me like a bushel of hot peppers--"

"--When we were this close to being the flavor on every gossip's tongue and I said I'd have no more of it if I couldn't have you, we agreed that was that."

Actually, he recalled, she had handed him his walking papers with words more stinging than those. "*If I'm going to be alone in life, Wes, it might as well be with myself.*"

"You're not doing either of us any good by barging in here in the middle of the night, are you," Susan was at now. "If I know anything about it, you were always quite concerned with 'appearances.'"

Wes waved that off. "No one much is up at this hour. I had Monty leave me off at the capitol grounds and came up around the back blocks. Here, come

see the new Doozy.” With the aimed quickness which had always reminded her of a catapult going off, he launched up on his good leg and was over to the gable.

In spite of herself, curiosity drew her over to the window by him. In the diffused glow of the strings of bulbs on the capitol dome, the butter-yellow Dusenburg could be seen parked down the hill from dozing Highland Street. Wes’s Negro chauffeur, Monty, was caressing the hood of the automobile with a polishing rag. The lanky form leaned into the already burnished surface as if magnetized to the machine. “Monty would sleep in it if I’d let him,” Wes was saying.

Susan stood there transfixed. The Williamsons. Their wealth and their fortunes, which were two different things. She closed her eyes for an instant, overcome by the fresh weight of memory. But when she opened them again it was all still there: the penny-colored dome that should have been Wes’s by civic right, her reflected outline on the pane of night beside his, the chauffeur stroking the flanks of the costly plaything.

Wes turned from the window, a smile of a different sort lingering on him. Susan created more distance between them. She did wonder why she hadn’t changed that door lock.

Physical
sense of Wes.
herself
is
him

He surveyed the room's furnishings again. "I'm glad I wasn't the one to heft all this up those stairs. Susan, do you know what I think?"

"Not without a Ouija board."

"You're treed, up here. No, let me finish. You've treed yourself. Chased the Susan Duff that was, right up into this upholstered perch." He walked back the length of the room to seat himself on the edge of the bed again, letting drop a phrase at a time as he came. "I see makework. I see pastimes. I believe I see the unfinished musical masterpiece. I see the man-eating diary. What I don't see is you taking the world on as you always did." When she made no answer, he shifted to the affectionate mock burr he had never been able to master: "Tis a waste of a bonny woman."

"It's late, is what it is," she left it at, making a show of checking the clock.

"Wes, please. Have your say and take yourself home."

"I have the pupil of a lifetime for you."

"I don't lack for pupils, they're coming out my ears." Which was not as true as it once would have been.

"This one, I want you to put all your time to, for however long it takes.

I'll pay double for everything--your hours, whatever you need to arrange in the

way of accompaniment, all the sheet music you can stand, name it.” Watching to see how she was taking this, he immediately upped the ante: “All right then, triple.”

“Where does this come from all of a sudden? I have never wanted your--”

“There’s no charity to this, Susan. You’ll earn your keep with this pupil, don’t ever worry about that. It’s a voice I’d say is--different. Unformed, maybe you’ll say rough as a cob, but intriguing in its way. It stays on in the ear, is that any kind of musical term? You’d take ^{this} it on, if it fell on you from a clear blue sky, I’m sure you would.”

His cadences of persuasion tested the walls of the room, as if this familiar floor were a speaking platform over the night-held capital city. Wes himself had a voice the size of a dictionary. Susan knew by heart every gruff note and passionate coax he was capable of, and how effectively the mixture worked. “*The copper kings of this state think they are immune to fair taxation,*” she had heard him send crowds into a rising roar as he uncoiled his campaign tagline, “*I promise them an epidemic of it!*” No other politician in the state had stung back as fiercely at the KKK as it crept west and its flaming crosses began to flare on the bald hills above Catholic towns and railheads bringing immigrants to Montana

emphatic
intriguing
captivating
hard to
resist
something

land: *"This cuckoo Klan, they seem to be scared the Pope will descend on them in their beds, else why do they go around wearing their nighties over their heads?"*

In his other great campaign, in the bloody mud of France, Wes's words were known to have made the difference between life and death. Susan carefully chose her way around his entreaty now:

"For a singing teacher, hearing is believing. All I ever ask is to be amazed."

So I remember, his expression said. Then he went right on. "Opera, vaudeville, I don't know what we're talking, with this. I honestly don't, Susan. That will be for you to decide. I'm like the fellow who only knew two tunes: 'One is *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*, and the other isn't, I think.' But you, New York and Europe and all, you've heard the best and you'll know where this voice can be made to fit. Oh, and we'll need to do this at the ranch, not here. It's a shame, but we can't--well, you'll see..." He frowned. "I'll work the idea into Whit's skull, but we may need to make arrangements around him."

Susan shook her head no and then some.

"Your old place, then," he regrouped. Not for nothing, he reminded himself, was this prideful woman the daughter of Ninian Duff. Ninian the

msg/page
refce, to
help hide
Klan angle?

Calvinian. "You could stay there, why not? I'll see that it's outfitted for you, groceries, bedding, cat and canary if you want." He paused as if to make sure each of his words was registering. "I'm asking you to do everything you know how for this pupil. The works."

"Wes?" Honest bewilderment broke through in her voice. "Wes, who in this world means that much to you?"

He appeared stunned at hearing it put that way. Sitting there glazed, pale as porcelain.

When Wes at last rose from the bed edge, was it her imagination or did he lurch more than a misbehaving knee would account for? She watched him stiffly navigate the length of the room, biting her tongue against calling out to him. Let him march down her stairs and out of her carefully compartmented existence (*Treed!*), let him leave that key in the door, let that be the natural end of it.

But he paused at the gable window and stood there facing out into the night. Over his shoulder he told her: "Monty."

set up
 ship
 what way of it
 Swan, 2000 is
 name not in book
 but worked up
 to me in it.
 Swan

Whiteface

1914

The sound always gave him a bad time, the slobbery breathing at the lip of the barrel. Then the bawl of fury six inches from his ear. *Who said this is easy money?* Panting, he stayed jackknifed in the barrel, chest against his knees and chin tucked down, clutching the handgrips next to his ankles. "Hyah, bull!" he could hear Dolph Kuhn, the pickup man, shouting from somewhere in the arena, but Dolph couldn't ride anywhere close while the animal still was on the prod. A horn tip scraped the metal of the barrel, inches from his other ear; he flinched every time that happened, even though he knew you could go over Niagara in one of these. When the serious butting began and the barrel tipped over and started to roll, the jolt delivered by the bull came as almost a relief; now he could at least

concentrate on holding on. *You don't want to let yourself shake loose in there,* the wizened rodeo clown up in Calgary who had given him a couple of lessons in this had warned, *or you'll know what a pair of dice feels like.* Nor, he had found out the hard way, did you want to keep your eyes open during this or you'd end up dizzy as a cat in a churn. His ears told him enough about it anyway: how the crowd loved to be scared at this stunt, the human ball in the barrel and the bull determined to butt the infuriating object until it presented something to gore.

When the barrel at last seemed to have quit rolling and he opened one eye and cautiously raised his head, he saw the ornery whiteface Hereford paw the ground one last time, and then its departing rear end, the tail switching slowly back and forth as the bull lost interest. Even so, he waited to hear the whap of lariat on rump as Dolph galloped in to haze the bucking bull out the far end of the arena. "He's on the run, Snowball," Dolph called, "better get yourself out of there."

Monty gulped air and unkinked himself. A little groggy, but he remembered the routine and tossed his hat out first. Reliably the crowd guffawed. When no harm came to the hat, he stuck his head out the end of the barrel like an inquisitive turtle, gawking this way and that. The rhythm of the laughter built,

orchestral, mass chortles of anticipation as the audience waited for his next maneuver; he'd been right about this, rodeo-goers could handle the idea of him fooling around. He clambered out, spun around and peeked back into the barrel, as if the bull might be in there. Thunder of laughter at that, any more and they'd shake the grandstand to pieces. He quit while he was ahead and picked up his dusty hat, bowing to the announcer with the megaphone who was whipping up a nice round of applause for "our artiste of the barrel after that dosie-doe he just did with the gentleman cow." Then back to business, kicking the big barrel along until it was in the vicinity of the bucking chutes again and he was standing ready for the next bull rider who needed his neck saved.

'Artiste' now, am I. Hope they didn't hear that across town. He drew another deep breath and concentrated on the gate where the bull would rampage out. Only one more rider in this go-round, and wouldn't you know, there was a hang-up in the chute. He watched the rider scramble up off the bull's back as if it was suddenly too hot a place to sit, while the chute men shoved at the recalcitrant bull. Forced to wait out there center-stage in the arena with only the barrel for company, Monty took the opportunity to mop the back of his neck and under his chin with the red handkerchief. That was another of the jokes, using the red

hanky like a matador's cape when he had to draw the bull away from a bucked-off rider. It occurred to him that it was actually pretty funny to be swabbing at himself this way with the hard-used piece of cloth, because at this point of the rodeo he was an irredeemable mess. The bib overalls six sizes too big drooped on him, and the screaming-red long underwear that was the other part of the costume was darkly wet with sweat. He had fresh green manure up one pantleg. *Angel Momma ought to see me now. Used to worry about me playing in the mud, she'd have kittens over this.* But that seemed to be how life generally went, any way but straight, at least since she passed on. Keeping watch on the chute situation--the bull had jammed a horn under one of the fence planks and was resisting the profane persuasion of the chute crew--he checked around on himself to make sure his props were at the ready. Out of his hip pocket dangled the head of the rubber chicken that came into use when he and the announcer had to resort to chicken thief jokes, and handy in the bib pocket was the hairwork braid for the other surefire gag where he grabbed onto a bull's tail and it appeared to come off in his hand.

Weary and filthy as he was, while the action was suspended this way Monty felt almost like he was back at one of the Sunday picnics along Noon

Creek, standing around at the edge of the chute crowd like this. When he and his mother would go to those church picnics, they would pause as soon as they were in sight of everybody but just out of hearing. "*Well, Montgomery, the two colored people are here,*" his mother would say solemnly. He would giggle, without entirely knowing why, and Angel Momma would laugh way down in her throat, and then the two of them would take their dark faces amid all the white ones. Well, *that* hadn't changed. The backs of Monty's hands as he comically put up his dukes in challenge to the reluctant bull in the chute were a burnished dark brown that resembled the oiled saddle leather all around him in this rodeo arena, but he was as aware as ever that his color was not repeated on any face within sight.

Including his own. From brow to jaw, and ear to ear, Monty's face was white with theatrical makeup. This of course was the main joke, that he was scared white.

By now Whit Williamson was parting the sea of riders and hangers-on who were milling around in front of the chutes, on his way to see why three men could not deal with one bull, and Monty straightened up to his full height. It never hurt to be on your toes when the boss was around. That was how he had

cozied into this, when word went around the ranch that Whit Williamson had bought up a string of bucking stock. The very next morning, quick as he was done with the milking chores, Monty stuck his head in the boss's office off the kitchen and mentioned that he'd heard Mister Whit was turning into a rodeo producer and if he happened to be hard up for someone to do that clown job, here stood a person fool enough to try. Whit looked him up and down--young and built on springs; a bit of a cut-up on payday since he was off his mother's apron strings, but it didn't matter to the ranch how a man behaved in town--and saw no particular reason why the Double W choreboy couldn't give it a whirl, on rodeo weekends; somebody had to put on the clown get-up.

That had been a dozen rodeos ago and here they were at the last and biggest of them all, in the fairgrounds of the capitol of Montana. As was their custom, the Williamsons were using the occasion to play both ends against the middle. Somewhere up there in the shaded side of the stands would be Wesley Williamson with Helena society and the money men from as far away as Boston and New York, while Whit ramrodded the show down here at the level of hooves and horns. Like the other Double W hands who'd been chosen to try their luck at

putting on rodeos, such as Dolph and the stock handlers and the unfortunates trying to pry that bull loose, Monty was along for the ride, so to speak.

Right about now he could have used a little of that grandstand shade. He mopped himself some more, taking care not to touch the mask of makeup. It was Mister Whit, who had traveled and knew about these things, who decreed the whiteface cosmetic. *"Those minstrel shows, they put on blackening. Be kind of funny if you did the opposite, wouldn't it?"* Monty saw the point.

At last there was hope at the chute; the horn was grating out from between the planks after great contortions by all involved. A minute or so more, and he'd be matching wits with a bull again.

"Hard to wash all that off, ain't it?"

There is no known cure for what the human voice can carry. Sickened at the insinuating tone, at having to calculate how to deal with that, even out here with the crowd sunny and contented, Monty turned his head not too fast and not too slow to find where the remark had come from. ⁴ The telltale expression was on one of the calf ropers lounging around the end of the chutes, he and a pal putting rosin on their lariats. *Explains it some.* Calf ropers didn't have enough on their minds, their event wasn't any harder than tying their shoes. He never heard much

from the bull riders; they didn't care what color the man was who let the bull chase him instead of them. With a practiced eye Monty tried to read the frogmouth grins on this pair of lasso twirlers. If he was lucky, the show-off one was joshing about the whiteface makeup.

"Oh, I shine up pretty good when I want to," Monty put to him past the greasepaint smile.

"I'm kind of curious about what you use on yourself," the first roper persisted, the other one looking uneasy. "Stove black?"

"Lie," the sound rolled from the depths of Monty's lungs, surprising him as much as the two of them. Both of the ropers were staring at him now, hard.

"Lye soap," Monty sang out, no boom to his voice this time. "Us boys who've still got the bark on us, we can scrub up good with that and it doesn't hurt a bit."

The one who'd started this gave him a last narrow look, then grunted and sauntered away. The other roper tagged after him and Monty overheard:

"You maybe ought to let up on him. He's the Williamsons' pet pup."

"Aw, hell, I was just funnin'."

“You find your check in your plate in the morning and a walk to town with your bedroll, you won’t think fun.”

“Jesus, what’s life comin’ to.”

The megaphone of the announcer heralded readiness in the chute at last, and Monty went back to a bullfighter frame of mind.

This bull erupted practically sideways from the chute, a side of beef writhing eerily in the air the instant before it struck the ground with all four hooves extended, the rider clinging on but in trouble. *Damn. This one would have to be a twister.* Monty danced from one foot to the other behind the upright barrel, the red handkerchief held ready behind his back. He wasn’t to make his move until the whistle blew at the end of the ride or the rider was bucked off. This bull’s third jump, the man on his back went flying. Instantly Monty scampered in to draw the animal’s attention before it could wheel around and find the figure pancaked into the arena dirt.

The bull turned toward Monty faster than he wanted, and he backed off a step.

Some bulls just stood there in confusion at the sight of the clown, some tamely turned away. This animal lowered its head and looked like it meant

business. "If you like the look of my tracks so much, I'll make you some more," Monty chanted to the animal for the crowd's benefit, then backpedaled until he had the barrel between him and the bull. When the bull charged one way, Monty dodged to the other side of the barrel. Back and forth, beast and man, like drunks trying to navigate past one another in a narrow space. This was another part the crowd ate up.

Monty knew the time had come to hop into the barrel, the bull was getting good and mad. He hesitated a moment. He'd had enough rides in the barrel for one day. He bolted for the fence at the far side of the arena, sprinting as hard as he could.

The bull blinked once at this turn of events and took off after him.

Running for his life, Monty had the presence of mind to hold the red handkerchief out at arm's length and daintily drop it, as if the bull were a suitor. The crowd howled. The arena fence was getting nearer. According to the bawling, so was the bull. *Best advice I can give you is not to fall*, the Calgary oldtimer was cackling in Monty's head.

Monty aimed for a stout corral post--if you made your jump onto the middle of a section of plank fence and the bull plowed it out from under you, then

you were in a hell of a fix--and leaped, grabbing for the post with both arms and pulling his legs up under him. The fence shuddered below him as the bull slammed into it, but he was high and dry, and at that moment full of complete joy at having pulled off the stunt.

Dolph rode up to encourage the bull to the exit gate, then reined around to check on the puff-cheeked clown as he slid down off the fence. Hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath, Monty admitted: "This is getting to be a long day."

"One more go-round and you can quit teasing the livestock," Dolph commiserated.

There was a break in the action now while the chutes were being reloaded, this time with broncs. Dolph dismounted and Monty swung up into the saddle and slumped there like the end-of-the-trail Indian while Dolph led the horse across the arena, another part of the act. The dried-up little cowboy walked as if his feet hated to touch the ground, which was not an act at all.

When they got over by the chutes Monty slipped smoothly off the horse and Dolph tied the reins to the arena fence.

critique
line?
Bullseye!
Ace High!
Bingo

"Monty?" The pickup man inclined his head in the direction of the bull pen. "You don't want to run too many of them footraces with these bastards."

"I'll have to remember that."

"It makes for quite a show, though," Dolph granted with a chortle, "you lighting out across there with that bull's horns tickling your hip pocket." He sized up the riders and ropers and hangers-on clotted around the chutes. "Now's a good a time as any to pass the hat for our hardworking rodeo clown, don't you think?"

"I been paid," Monty said swiftly. "Mister Whit already--"

"What's that have to do with the price of peas in China?" Dolph looked as if he hadn't heard right. "You got something against extra money?"

"Not so I ever noticed," Monty stalled. He'd known Dolph longer than he could remember; Dolph himself was a stray who was riding the grub line about the same time the Double W took in Monty's mother as washerwoman. Yet he found he didn't want to tell Dolph, right out, that there had been that run-in with the mouthy roper.

"So how about it?" Dolph persisted. "Halvers?"

Monty glanced again at the men along the chute. Everybody looked to be in good cheer, beer-induced or otherwise, but you never knew. He drew out deciding until Dolph started to give him a funny look, then nodded. *Go for broke, why not. Last show of the season, any hoodoos in the bunch will have all winter to get over me.* “If you’re gonna be the one that does it, Dolphus, sure.”

Dolph had already had his Stetson in one hand and was fishing into his jeans pocket with his other. “I’m just the man what can.” He held up a fifty-cent piece as if to fix the specific coin into Monty’s memory. “We split halves *after* I get my four bits back, got that?”

“You drive a hard bargain,” Monty laughed in spite of himself. He watched the little cowboy gimp off on his collecting round.

“DOLPH!”

Frozen in his tracks, Dolph cast a look back over his shoulder. That voice on Monty; when he wanted to, he sounded like a church organ letting loose.

“What?”

“Be sure and trade the chicken feed in at the beer booth for silver dollars, would you?” Monty’s tone was shy now.

Dolph snorted. "It all spends, on Clore Street. Don't worry, Snowball, I'll get you dollars."

As Dolph set to work with the hat, Monty stood there loose-jointed and private, the middle of him warming with anticipation of Clore Street. Silver dollars were definitely the ticket. Like in the blues he'd heard the last time he hit town. *Flat to stack and round to roll/ Silver dollar, lift my soul.* Not that he had any use for the blues, but good sound cartwheel money, he most certainly did. Tied in the bottom of his side pocket right now was one of those little cloth sacks that Bull Durham tobacco came in, with the ten silver dollars Mister Whit had paid him. If Dolph did well with the chute crowd, as much as another ten might be added to the sack and that was a full Bull bag. Drop one of those on the wood of a bar and you could start to get somewhere in life. In his head he began parceling out the twenty lovely coins. *across town.* The Zanzibar Club: the trick was to hit it early, not so many to buy drinks for. The trainmen came off shift at eight, the porters and brakemen from Chicago and Kansas City piling in to hear the music and have the company of other dark faces here in the white, white West. Things started happening in the Zanzibar then. Those KC boys made him nervous, though, calling him "Sticks" and "Montan" as though it was his fault he had been born out

here instead of on the corner of Twelfth and Vine. And Montgomery Rathbun had as much name as anybody, if the world would ever use it.

So, hoist a few in the Zanzibar before the KC boys hit town, then try to find that sporting girl from last time, the one who took it slow. Couldn't pray for something that fine to happen every time, but it didn't hurt to hope. When a man came to town all stored up, he didn't want a hurrying woman. Then the fantan game, in the Chinese gambling place. He should have half his money left by the time he drifted into the game, and with a stake like that there was every chance he could win back what he spent at the Zanzibar and the cathouse. Head on home to the ranch with a good stake for next time, even.

He watched Dolph passing the hat and saw with relief that the rodeo contestants were chipping in their four bits, no complaints. Even the loudmouth roper tossed in when Dolph jawed at him. Monty felt like a man whose ship had come in. He hummed a snatch of "Silver Wings and a Golden Harp."

By nightfall the Bull Durham sack was flat empty.

Gates of the Mountains

1924

“You’re awfully quiet, Susan.”

“Such a place, there is everything in the world to be quiet about.” Even her declarative tone was rounded off by the murmur of the Missouri. “I could pinch myself. Half my life I’ve spent in Helena, and I’ve never once been out here.”

Wes yanked down on the brim of his hat one more notch. “We could do without this wind.” A sharper gust through the canyon buffeted the motor launch as he spoke. “I hope it doesn’t snatch Monty’s breath away.”

In the sway of the bow, like a bundled statue being borne into a white-walled port, Susan stood braced as she gazed ahead to the Gates of the Mountains. Half the sky of her younger years had been the arching northern palisades of the Rockies, but here the mountains made fists. Precipice after precipice stood guard over these waters, pale limestone cliffs materializing straight up out of the river and lifting pine forests on their shields of stone and catching on their summits the fresh flags of snow. Every whiff of air held the scent of fresh pitch. Off to starboard--at least she still knew right from left--a stand of snow-flecked jackpines on the nearest cliff top filtered what there was of the early-spring sun through the shade of their branches, and she watched this lattice of the seasons until the river left it behind. As the boat pattered deeper into the corridor of channel, Wes kept himself propped against the deck railing near her, resting his leg and evidently his thoughts as well. Her own mind was a maddening merry-go-round, thanks to him. When she insisted on auditioning Monty in private, but someplace spacious to hear how his voice carried, Wes simply commandeered a mountain range.

#

Williamsons had always owned.

Susan turned her head just enough to study him as he bent to coil a mooring rope that didn't pass muster, seeing in the intent lines of his face the Wes Williamson she had first laid eyes on. At the time she was twelve and snippy and inseparable from her father, particularly on trips to town, and they had gone in to the stockyards at Conrad to settle up with the railroad agent on the shipping of their lambs. Commotion bawled out over the prairie from the loading pens.

"Ninian Duff! And Ninian's likeness!" the shout came from on high, the ringmaster of cattle himself, old Warren Williamson in the catbird perch above the cutting chute. *"Come to see what real livestock looks like?"* Susan's father had begun with cattle and advanced to sheep, and along the way contended for every spear of grass with Warren Williamson and his bony-hipped Double W specimens. From day one Ninian Duff knew when to stand his ground, and now he barked a laugh and shouted back: *"Livestock are those, Williamson? Here I thought the flea circus had come to town."* Taking their time about it, the two Duffs approached the corral, bearded scarecrow of a man and gangly girl in overalls, and climbed up to inspect the mooing mess. The cattle were being chuted into railroad cars: dogs worked at their heels, dismounted riders stamped around trying to look useful, the stockbuyer slapped the corral boards with a

tasselled whip thin as a wand. The herd of brown-red backs was wound tight against the end of the corral, a rivulet of steers banging up the high-walled ramp into the rail car. Down there in the muck hazing his crew as they hazed the cattle was the next of the Williamson breed, ^{white} Wendell, installed by his father to run the Double W ranch in the next valley over from the Duff homestead. "*It is like perpetually neighboring with Jonah's whale,*" Ninian Duff had been known to say.

OK
-Chowant

At her father's side above the milling cattle Susan fiercely took it all in, allotting grudge where she knew it was due--to the grabby Williamsons, high and low--and something like hunger toward every other face around her. The poor riders, unfit on foot. The stockbuyer, like a big gray jay in his suit of gabardine. The familiar thicket of dark whiskers that marked her father's presence, at the ^{near} corner of her vision. *A story wants to be told a certain way, or it is merely the alphabet badly recited,* the king's remembrancer told the king who had no patience, in the book of stories that they closed each week with at the one-room school on the South Fork of English Creek. Faces, Susan had decided, were the first letters of those stories all around a person. So, she was at the stage of

ravenous wondering about anyone she laid eyes on, and lately that included the father whom everybody said she was such a tracing of.

"Ay, *Williamson*," her father hooted across the corral to Warren as a steer broke back past his swearing son, "*any cows ever I had could knit socks with their horns. These seem to be wanting in mentality, not to mention poundage.*"

It was then that she caught sight of Wes, his expression minted into her memory the way a likeness is stamped onto a fresh coin. He had been half-hidden next to the stockbuyer, flipping through the shipping papers, but her father's gibe brought him immediately hand over hand to the top of the corral, still clutching the paperwork like a crumpled bouquet. She knew him without ever having laid eyes on him before: ^{Wendell} ~~Wendell~~'s brother, the citified member of the family, the one everyone said was the brains of the litter. She kept her gaze glued to him as he poised atop the corral across from her father and her. It had been drilled into Susan, as only recitative Scotch parents could drill, that it was rude to stare. But to really see you had to keep looking. To this day she could bring back that sight of Wes studying her father as he would a wild creature: with fascination and apprehension and something more--pity? For her age Susan knew a substantial amount about life. She had grasped almost as soon as he did that her teacher at

S Fork school

dreadfully in love with the new schoolma'am over on Noon Creek. She had deduced for herself that Banker Potter's "vacations" to Minneapolis were to dry out from whiskey. She had the Scotch Heaven neighbors down cold--the Speddersons would exert themselves only to avoid work, the Frews were tight as ticks where money was involved, the Erskines would lend you the elbows out of their sleeves, the Barclays kept everything *up* their sleeves--and accepted the principle that each family had some exception that proved the rule. But whatever this look on Wesley Williamson's face represented was beyond her; she had never known anyone to be sorry for her father.

They were near enough to Warren Williamson on his cutting-chute throne that he didn't need to shout, but he shouted anyway:

"I'll tell you again, Ninian, I want you Scotch Heaven lamb lickers off that Roman Reef range. We've always grazed up in through there."

Her father leveled a stare across the backs of the cattle to the elder Williamson. Then said in his Biblical timbre:

"You can want."

← We find it hard to hear when you talk thru yr hat.

hat in hand
pass. hat
tell it to
your hat.

keep wanting?
always want
entire hat?
no your hat?

In that exchange of thunders Susan had seen something, and if she had, the young man so intent across the corral surely must have: in the contest of the fathers there at the stockyard, Warren Williamson looked away first.

Aboard the motor launch, the ancient impatience of water moving them steadily into the mountains, she scrutinized Wes as he placed the coil of rope where it belonged. A quarter of a century and then some, on the visage across that corral; the same Wes but more so, if that was possible. The boxer's jawline. The philosophical eyes. Jack Dempsey met the jack of spades in that face. After all her trying, in love and its opposite, this was still the greatest of puzzles to her, the different ways of adding up Wes.

He met her gaze for a moment, smiled but kept the silence, then they both turned again to the Gates of the Mountains.

"Have I got it right, that we're out here freezing our tails just so's you can sing to us?" the boatman, Harris, was asking Monty.