prosecuting in absentia, "the way he did. You saw he was throwing good money after bad, I saw it—how did he get to be the only Scotchman who doesn't know how to keep his hand around a dollar?"

"He's Hugh Duff," Meg said. "He takes slowly to persuasion."

"He'd better take the chance here," Owen said reflectively, eyes on the chinks of daylight through that back wall, "or he'll find himself sweeping out whorehouses, the damned old—"

"Don't!"

She was giving him a look that peeled him back to boy, the scold that seemed to hurt her twice as much as him. He felt his face flush. Then his mother seemed to come to herself, and smiled the apology. "I'm never going to like hearing you take on against your father, even when I feel like knocking his ears down myself."

"All right, I guess we better keep our priorities straight," Owen resorted to. "Nailing his hide to the wall isn't nearly enough to help this place any." He figured he knew just the thing that would, though.

The Blue Room, it came to be called, after Owen snuck back the next day with an armful of discarded blueprints and a pot of wallpaper paste. Paperhanging was not his strong point and the room's corners ran every way but square, but the heavy plan paper covered over the cracks and knotholes.

When Hugh came home that night, he stood for a long minute looking at the white-on-blue lines of the cross section of the dam, the elevations and dimensions of Owen's engineering world.

Watching him, Meg bit her lip, wondering which way this would go.

It somehow went more than one. Hugh first of all said with savage satisfaction, "Have him perform a few more hundred domestic miracles around here, and we'll almost be living like people again." But then he passed a hand over his face, a downcast expression following it.

"Hugh, wash for supper," Meg quickly urged.

He shook his head. "I'm going downtown. I may be a while."

"I wish you wouldn't." They both paused, and when he made no answer, she said with familiar anger, "But don't let that stop you, I suppose."

"It never yet has," he dropped over his shoulder as he went out the door.

Two days later.

Neil and Bruce were in their cinematic period. A Wheeler entrepreneur had deduced that people could not drink and dance 100 percent of the time, and opened a moviehouse; the two Duff brothers became instant addicts. For days after seeing George Arliss and Reed Beddow in *Squadron from the Clouds*, they piled into the crew truck with the cry, "Pilots, to your machines!" They yowled for a week after Charlotta Hoving, playing the advertising agency secretary in *Stupendous*, attained the halibut magnate's hand by thinking up the winning slogan "Lutefisk, the hominy of the sea." Night after night the pair of them goggled in the dark of the movie theater, in the congregation of hundreds like them, and swaggered out as if they'd been to harems and casinos. When they piled into their parents' house on their way home and retold that night's movie, Hugh and Meg had something to agree on—that their twin sons had not behaved this way since they were five-year-olds.

This particular end of an afternoon, Bruce and Neil were a bit ahead of themselves, as they generally were in trying to burn up their leisure time, and so decided to sample the latest sights along the main street of Wheeler until the sacred moviehouse opened. As usual the town reeked of newly cut lumber and fresh pitch, as if the community perfume were turpentine. Construction would flare up in one spot, then seem to change its mind and hop across town. This was one of the things about Wheeler, it built and built and changed and changed but wasn't nearly all in working order yet. Directly in front of them down the block, a top-heavy man in a suit and vest shot out from a vacant slapboard building, turned, and gave the fresh construction a kick. He seemed to think it over briefly, then kicked the structure twice as hard.

"I felt that from here," Bruce said aside to Neil. "If that guy keeps on, he'll be in the market for assistant kickers."

"Wait a minute," Neil said. "Let's just see." He went over to the edifice assailant. "You putting up this building, mister?"

"No," the man said with supreme disgust, "I'm just throwing money at the goddamn place for exercise."

"What's left to do?" Neil peeked into the walled-in shell of building, atop bluish Fort Peck clay. "Only the flooring? My brother and I can handle a hammer."

"Look, junior, the last jackleg sonofabitch of a carpenter left me in the lurch here. I need the real item. Every minute this place isn't making me money it's costing me money. Fort Peck's got carpenters up the gigi, and they're all out there"—he waved toward the dam site—"on Franklin D.'s payroll, God bless him."

By now Bruce had his head in the structure beside Neil's. Off behind

the stack of floorboards stood a pile of cardboard boxes that advertised Mighty Mac bib overalls and Peerless worksocks and so on. "Opening a line of dry goods, huh?"

"Wet," came the sarcastic correction. "Buddyboy, you're looking at the Blue Eagle Tavern. Or would be, if it had a sonofabitching floor in it."

"We can lay your floor for you," Neil asserted. "Give us a crack at it, Mr.—?"

"Harry. Tom Harry." The man in the suit looked at the pair of them as skeptically as if checking the sex on new puppies. "This'd need to be done on a strict contract basis. Meet the deadline, or no pay—I can't be forking out to jacklegs who don't come through on the job. You two ever worked that way before?"

"All our lives," Bruce tried to testify, Neil cutting him off with:

"Say we do contract it, what'd be the pay?"

Tom Harry named his price.

"You're on!" Neil and Bruce told him in chorus.

It was Neil who cast a second look at the stack of floorboards and thought to ask:

"How long have we got to do this flooring?"

"Tonight," said Tom Harry.

Neil and Bruce hammered while Hugh hefted lengths of floorboards and Tom Harry sat and smoked cigarettes.

The hammer sounds racketed into the Wheeler night. *Wham wham wham,* Neil's was a steady three-beat delivery onto each nailhead; Bruce's tended to surround the matter, *WHAM wham-am WHAM-am.* While the hammers hit those higher notes, a pile driver gave bass *whumps* beside the river. The bluffs of the Missouri here had heard din before—the bawling rumble of buffalo herds, the last-stand discourse of Sitting Bull's winter camp before the summer of the Little Big Horn, the axes of steamboat woodhawks—but there had been half a century of comparative silence since any of those. Now and for years to come, a river of sound waited to drown down onto the site of Fort Peck—the opera shrieks of shale saws, the incessant comings and goings of locomotives and bulldozers and trucks, the falsetto of steam whistles, the attacks of jackhammers. Tonight the Duffs began their accompaniment of that full clamor of work. Tonight the true first pinions of the Fort Peck project were being driven: the pilings of the railroad trestle, the nails of the Blue Eagle's floor.

To the great surprise of the Duffs, the flooring proved to be hardwood, high-grade. Nice seasoned tightgrained tongue-and-groove oak; lovely, really, if you weren't trying to drive nails into it or lugging twelve-foot boards of it all night long. Hugh, at the lumber pile, had a bit of perspective that Bruce and Neil, kneeling in arm-earnest exertion on the fresh flooring, lacked. "You could dance on this stuff."

Tom Harry blew a cumulus of blue smoke and said, "What the hell did you think the point of this is? Civic beautification?"

"Taxi dancing," Hugh identified, as if he knew the boulevards of the world. "Hate to be the one to tell you, but the Wheeler Inn has beat you to it. Half the women west of Chicago are already working that dive."

"Check out the arithmetic," Tom Harry said, unperturbed. "Soon as this dam project really gets geared up, there'll be three shifts a day—one gang working, one sleeping, and that will still leave about thirty-five hundred men off shift, any hour of the day or night. Not going to be any shortage of guys hanging around hot to trot, don't worry."

Neil tried to take the floor-laying task in little seasons. He would fit his end of a board into place, immediately drive the nails to snug it, catch his breath while Bruce whaled away at the far end, then start down the length of the wood, nailing it at every joist while Bruce similarly worked toward the middle.

Before tonight, Neil was exulting to himself, he wouldn't have said his prospect of becoming a contractor at Fort Peck was anything to write home about. He still wondered whether a handshake with Tom Harry constituted the full basis of a contract. But only as long ago as this morning, he hadn't known enough about it to even wonder, had he. One major fact stood out clearly to him: this flooring deal wasn't any so-much-per-hour as decided by somebody else, it was going to be a lump-sum payoff for Duffs working like Duffs. And wasn't that something?

Either his hammer or Bruce's consistently drowned out parts of the conversation between Hugh and Tom Harry, so that they seemed to be carrying on a grave discussion in addled shorthand:

"You really—*blam*—there'll be—*bang*—thousand people in this—*whamblam*—excuse for a town?"

"Twice that. Simple arithmetic—*blam*—thousand making a living from the dam and—*bang*—thousand making a—*whammedy-blam*—living off them."

"Where's—*bang*—good in that?"

lay under one of the rejection notices: *Due to the numerous submissions we receive, we cannot return any manuscript unaccompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope.*

Rosellen felt herself blush, probably to the roots of her toenails. So these were the ground rules of being a writer. Her carefully typed stories had been thrown in wastebaskets in Philadelphia, Boston and New York. Thank heaven she still had the notebook pages.

Nothing fazed Neil. When he came home and found her red-eyed and blurty with the triple bad news, he kissed her enough to start taking her mind off Philadelphia etcetera, then sat her down.

"You keep at it," he instructed as Rosellen hung on his every word. "That's the only advantage, with people like us. Just keeping at it, until the other ones drop."

Bide.

Most definitely, Darius was biding.

He could perform the Missouri River boatyard tasks with whatever the mental equivalent of a little finger was, and devote the rest of his thinking to the other matters.

Tactics.

At the moment, there did not seem any exertion great enough to bring Meg his way, but he was willing to wait and see whether the leverage ever changed, there.

As to the politics at Plentywood, well, that passion couldn't be requited instantly either; Mott himself had told him as much.

Meanwhile the time had to be passed some way. There was always that about biding.

He persevered in the taverns of Wheeler, impossible though it was to become accustomed to the glorified water that Americans called beer. Taking care not to cross payday paths with Hugh, he favored the Buckhorn, one of the smaller and more orderly drinkeries, until the evening when he was on his way there and a human form flying out of the Blue Eagle nearly bowled him over.

The figure, one of the tunnel gang from the look of his mucky overalls, ended up woozily on hands and knees in the gutter after hurtling past Darius. In the doorway of the Blue Eagle stood Tom Harry, the majority of his white shirt torn off but his bow tie still in place.

"This ain't Butte," Tom Harry stated to the ejected customer. "You don't hop up on my bandstand any time you feel like it and sing 'Mother Machree.'"

Doctrine always interested Darius. He headed into Tom Harry's realm.

A three-instrument band called the Melodeons was blasting away, behind a contributions box with a sign reading prominently FEED THE KITTY. Dancing was epidemic. Darius secured a beer from a hamhanded man behind the bar and settled in to watch.

His attention went at once to a white-blonde head of hair; or rather, his attention glanced off that of the woman, who gazed around the Blue Eagle as if judging donkeys.

Darius watched her as she danced snugly with a young damworker, smiled her way out of his paid-for grasp as the dancetune wound down, then went back to her stool at the far end of the bar. She wore trousers, or whatever silly thing were they called in this country—slacks? Darius saw nothing slack about the way her form molded out the fabric. Upward, her breasts were silkily held by a blouse with a midnight sheen to it.

Darius headed down to the end of the bar to work out the rules.

Just then the saloonkeeper appeared, fresh white shirt on.

"The real money here is in being your haberdasher, Tom," the woman was saying to him. "When you bounce a guy like that, maybe you ought to just do it in your undershirt."

"Shannon, you concentrate on peeling the shirts off these—" Tom Harry broke off as Darius materialized at her side. "Customer for you, looks like. Another beer to wet the other end of your whistle too, chum?"

"Assuredly," Darius said.

Tom Harry thrust him a bottle, then vacated to a short distance down the bar.

American propositioning tactics still were none too clear to Darius. The lewd old music hall joke—*The Honorable Member from Groinwich . . . is rising . . . to a point of order*—by now was pertinent, but he wasn't sure that was the best approach here.

The woman had been looking him over in quick, crisp glances. "Care to dance?" she recited. Warm as an ice pick, thus far, but everything else about her was attractive enough.

"No, dancing isn't my field."

"Whichever, you're supposed to be buying me a drink first."

"Ah." Darius called out to Tom Harry, "A dram for the lady, please, Prime Minister."

The drink came and more of Darius's money went. "Are you his?" Darius indicated Tom Harry, now stationed at the cash register, with the slightest nod of his head.

shivering hard now, made himself position dry sticks of wood atop it all so the flame would draw. He struck a match and lit the paper and hovered miserably until the kindling at last caught fire too. Then he lunged back to bed. Meg rewarded him with a clasp of warm arms. At that moment, the thermometer outside the Fort Peck Administration Building read 61 degrees below zero.

Bruce was goddamned if he was going to walk anywhere in this kind of weather. Before getting the stove going, he dumped the cold ashes in an empty lardpail, then used the kerosene can to sop them. In his cap and mackinaw, he ran out to the car, knelt in the snow, shoved the pail under the oilpan, leaned back as far as he could and tossed in a match. When he was reasonably sure the flaming kerosene was settling down enough not to burn up the car, he jumped back in the house to wait for the crankcase oil to thaw enough so he could start the engine and drive down to the winter harbor.

Owen was goddamned if he was going to fool around with a car in this kind of weather. He put on dress socks, then worksocks, then wool socks; piled on two pair of pants over long underwear, and a flannel shirt over his work one. He molded some newspaper into his overshoes for insulation, put them on, wrestled into the buffalo hunter coat he'd bought for just this eventuality, clapped his cap on with the earflaps down, bandannaed a scarf across his nose and mouth, stuck one of his office oxfords in each side pocket, pulled on thick mittens and walked to work at the winter harbor.

"'19, that was another cold bastard of a winter," Tom Harry reflected. Proxy had not been in the sin business long enough to have other big winters for comparison, so it seemed to be up to him to forecast the economic climate accompanying such cold. "On the one hand, this kind of weather, you'd think guys wouldn't have anything better to do than drink and diddle," he set out. "Hell, people even manage to do it up north in igloos, after all." He paused, then asked with a rare note of uncertainty: "Don't they?"

"How the frig do I know? This place"—Proxy indicated the frosted-over front windows of the empty Blue Eagle—"is the only igloo I've been in."

"I about went bust, though, there in '19," Tom Harry recounted.

"Guys holed up, wouldn't come downtown just because it was a little cold. A lot like now, Shannon." He still called her that, even though she regularly pointed out that she had a married name now.

"Things are tough all over, Tom," she gave him with her mildest mocking smile. "Even the birds are walking."

"Shannon, what would you think about a buddy night at your end of things, maybe once a week—What're you looking at me like that for? The moviehouse does it every so often, has one guy pay and lets his buddy in free. Builds up the trade."

"Speaking for myself, I'll go take up choirwork before I ever let two guys have a poke for the price of one."

"Okay, okay, just an idea, all it was. Jesus Christ, though, you're getting awfully particular since you had your knot tied." He gave her a sidelong look. "How is married life anyway?"

"Not half bad."

"Holy state of maddermoany." He shook his head. "I could never see it, myself."

"That's sure frigging astonishing to find out."

"Sarcasm never got anybody past St. Peter. Now come on, give me a hand with the thinking here."

"How would hot toddies go?"

"They wouldn't. The only time a Montanan will sip a toddy is when he's halfway to pneumonia."

"Rum, then?" Proxy began to take on a faraway look. "Did I ever tell you about my uncle who raised St. Bernard dogs and the time there was this coyote in heat and—"

"No, you didn't and you're not going to. This is a goddamned business meeting, Shannon. Besides, where the hell would I get rum? Half the time I can't even get the Great Falls beer trucks to come up here, the way the roads've been." He shook his head. "You call that thinking?"

"O-*kay*, Tom," Proxy intoned, "you show me what real thinking is."

Tom Harry passed a hand over his face, turned around, dusted off his cash register, turned around toward Proxy again, and studied off into the empty barroom and dance floor. Finally he said:

"I don't think it looks good, until spring."

"So should we close up shop?"

"Hell, no." He looked as if she had insulted him down to his shorts. "What kind of a way is that to run a saloon?"

years or the end of the war, whichever comes first.' Well? Did she?"

"Ben, will you kindly quit? Unlike you, your mother and I are a bit grateful you're not stationed somewhere getting shot to pieces." His father took off his glasses and polished the lenses clean with the page of a torn *Gleaner*; only window-washers and newspapermen knew that stunt. "To answer you for once and all, though—we know better than to pull strings for you, even if we had any. You made that clear to us long ago." Bill Reinking went on in a milder tone. "I hate to bring up a remote possibility, but just maybe you were picked out for this because you're the natural person for it."

"You don't know how the military works," Ben scoffed. But there was no future in arguing his TPWP servitude with his father, not tonight. "Speaking of that." He reeled off what he needed for his trip out of town in the morning.

"I wish we'd known," dismay took over his father's voice. "Your mother has been putting on the miles, these rehearsals—"

"Dad, don't look like that, it's all right. I know where I can always get it."

His father sighed. "We both know that. Why don't you go tend to it before he closes for the night? Then you can give me a lift home so I can ride in style for a change."

BEN WALKED BRISKLY two blocks up the street and stepped into the Medicine Lodge. The saloon was as quiet as if empty, but it was never empty at this time of night. Inert as doorstops, at the far end of the bar sat a bleary pair of sheepherders he recognized—Pat Hoy from the Withrow ranch, and the other had a nickname with a quantity of geography attached. Canada Dan, that was it. Puffy with drink but not falling-down drunk, the two evidently were winding down a usual spree after the lambs were shipped, when there was half a year's wages to blow. Ever

conscious of his uniform, Ben had a flash of thought that except for polar explorers, these befogged old herders off alone in their sheep wagons somewhere would have been about the last people to hear of the war, back in December of 1941. It did not seem to be foremost on their minds now, either, as they and a third occupant expectantly looked down the bar in Ben's direction like connoisseurs of the tints of money.

"Goddamn," Tom Harry spoke from behind the bar. Ben was beginning to wonder why the sight of him made people mention damnation. "You're back again, huh? I thought you'd be up in an aereoplane someplace winning the war single-handed, Reinking."

"Nice to see you again too, Tom." With a ghost of a smile, Ben patted his way along the rich polished wood of the bar as if touching it for luck. The Medicine Lodge was not much changed since his high school Saturdays of wrestling beer kegs and emptying spitoons and swamping the place out with broom and mop. "Saturday night buys the rest of the week, kid," Tom Harry would always say as he paid Ben his dollar or so of wages. Hundreds of such nights produced a saloon that by now had a crust of decor as rigorous as a museum's. Stuffed animal heads punctuated every wall; the one-eyed buffalo in particular was past its prime. The long mirror in back of the bar possessed perhaps a few more age spots of tarnish than when Ben had been in charge of wiping it down, and the immense and intricate oaken breakfront that framed it and legions of whiskey bottles definitely had more dust. Still pasted to the mirror on either side of the cash register were the only bits of notice taken of the twentieth century: a photo of Tom Harry's prior enterprise, the Blue Eagle saloon in one of the Fort Peck Dam project's hard-drinking boomtowns, and a 1940 campaign poster picturing President Franklin Delano Roosevelt so cheerily resolute for a third term that it would have made any Republican cringe.

Taking all this in, for the narrowest of moments Ben could almost feel he had never been away from it. Illusions had to be watched out for. He got down to business, which meant Tom Harry. "Do you still sell beverages in this joint or just stand around insulting the customers?"

The sole proprietor and entire staff of the Medicine Lodge glanced to the far end where the raggedy sheepherders were gaping hopefully in Ben's direction. "Hard to do, on some of them. What can I get you?"

"Whatever's on tap," Ben said before it registered on him that he was home now, he didn't need to nurse away the evening on beer. "No, wait, something with a nip to it—an old-fashioned, how about." *Still in the mood, Cass.* The other night in the roadhouse when they were priming themselves by playing coma cola roulette—each buying the other some unlikely concoction off the mixed drinks list before adjourning to the cabin for the night—she'd wickedly ordered him up one of these, saying it might put him in the mood for an old-fashioned pilot like her. Now he dug into his wallet. "Give the choirboys a round. Catch yourself, too."

"Thanks, I'll take mine in the register. Save you the tip." Schooners of beer flew down the bar, the whiskey and paradoxical bitters and sugar were magically mixed, Ben watching fascinated as ever at the skill in those hands. Tom Harry could never be cast as a bartender, he decided. He overfilled the part. The slicked-back black hair, the blinding white shirt, the constant towel that swabbed the bar to a gleam. The peerless saloonkeeper scowled now in the direction of the sheepherders, which seemed to make them remember their manners. In one voice they quavered a toast to Ben: "Here's at you."

With that tended to, the man behind the bar put his towel to work on the trail of the glass after he slid it to Ben. "Just get in?"

"Hour ago."

"Been places, I hear."

"They ship me around, some."

"Gonna be anybody left on the face of the earth when this war gets done?"

During this the sheepherders conferred in mumbles. Celebrating their largesse of beer, the two were counting out their pooled small change, pushing the coins together with shaky forefingers. "Barkeep?" Canada Dan cleared his throat importantly. "You got any of them jellied eggs?"

"Jesus, gourmets," Tom Harry muttered, carrying the briny crock of preserved boiled eggs down the length of the bar along with his disgust. While the egg transaction dragged on, Ben quietly sipped and gazed past the reflections in the plate glass window to downtown Gros Ventre at night. The civil old trees. His father's newspaper office, still alight down the street, another timeless pillar of the town. On the next block beyond the *Gleaner,* the Odeon theater where teenaged Ben Reinking every Saturday night of his life stayed on through the second show—the "owl show" at nine that repeated the feature movie for a tardy gathering of drunks, late-arriving lovers, and insomniacs—to dissect how the makers of movies made them. Centralities of his growing up here, those, along with the one where he sat now. He knew there was no denying the influence of bloodline, but by quite a number of the readings he could take on his life so far, Gros Ventre and the Two Medicine country, out there in the dark, served as a kind of parentage too. Whatever he amounted to, this was where it came from.

The keeper of the bar returned, still wagging his head over the jellied egg binge. Ben twirled his glass indicatively on the dark wood. "Any more of this in the well?"

"The war must be teaching you bad habits," Tom Harry grumbled as he mixed the refill.

"Speaking of those." Ben watched for a reaction, but could see none. Standing there swishing the towel, the saloonman showed

no sign he had ever been acquainted with practices such as providing working quarters for prostitutes, bootlegging, and, now with the war, operating in at least gray margins of the black market. "Here's what it is. I need a car and a bible of gas coupons."

"Where you think you're gonna drive to with those—Paris, France, to get laid?"

"You ought to know. Probably all over hell, but I'll start at the Two Medicine."

The uncomprehending look on his listener was a reminder that not all of the world knew about Vic, at least yet. He again told what the minefield had done.

"What a hell of a thing to go through life like that." Eyes reflective, Tom Harry wiped slowly at the bar wood after Ben told him. "Known that kid since he was a pup." He flicked a look at Ben. "Weren't you here for funerals the last couple of times?"

Ben gulped more of his drink than he'd intended, unsteadied by having something like that attached to him. O'Fallon's and Havel's, those were. The mouthy mick left guard and the taciturn baby-faced center. Tepee Weepy wanted every drop of drama from the Supreme Team; it had sent the Pulitzer judges his piece about the Butte slum wake held for O'Fallon. He hadn't even liked O'Fallon.

How much does history rehearse? he had to wonder. The first funeral of all was Purcell's. The entire team in that tumbleweed hometown cemetery. Coach Bruno piously delivering the eulogy into the radio microphone at graveside. Didn't it set the pattern, the team's every movement on the airwaves and in the headlines from then until—

All at once he realized Tom Harry still was eyeing him speculatively.

"There's a war on," he managed to say evenly. "Things happen to people."

"Must get kind of old, is all I'm saying." The bartender slung the towel aside. "Drink up. The Packard is out back."

The long black car, its grandeur a bit faded from ten years of imaginative use, seemed to fill half the alley behind the saloon. Ben circled the streamlined old thing as Tom Harry stood by, proprietorially. "How are the tires?"

"What do you think?" the Packard's beset guardian barked. "Thin as condom skin. Here, throw these in the trunk." He rummaged in the shed room piled high with amazing items that Medicine Lodge customers with more thirst than cash had put up as collateral, and rolled two spare tires toward Ben.

"Reinking." Tom Harry tossed him the keys to the car, then the packet of gas ration coupons. "Tell Toussaint for me I'm sorry his grandkid got it that way. If you can find the old coyote."

E'burgh: ½hr in rare book dealers, Wes fondling 1st editions of Sir Walter Scott--finally bought a scrap from Asphodel(?), Scott's own handwriting in contretemps with an editor.

--At her insistence (she wanted to watch him at it) they go into the rare book dealers? She teased him into it, and he passed an eager half hour fondling

--prostitute in a close calls out to them, "He could eat dinner off the front of me and i wouldn't mind, dearie." W's face went hot, but S only laughed, in what sounded like anticipation.

There were times when Proxy just wanted to (give Francine)...

Maybe Maria had the ~~right~~ wise formula in ~~that~~ that kiss-off she'd given Kevin Frew, a smile and the finger. You don't do that to your own kid, though, even when you sometimes feel like it.