

Good grief, Darius thought to himself, does the drink run so deep here they're prepared to wade in it?

~~He~~ Darius did not yet know his way around town thoroughly, but Hugh could have guided the blind through his accustomed route. With much regret he was avoiding the Blue Eagle these nights because Tom Harry had shown a tendency to waylay him while Owen or Neil or sometimes even Bruce was sent for. Thus Hugh's current port of call during a binge was the Wheeler Inn, which ~~now~~ met the two Duffs with a noise level that would have taken the skin off lesser men.

No sooner were they inside the door, Darius already somewhat uneasy in the press of flesh, than a hawknosed little man popped from the crowd, piping out in ~~what sounded to Darius like~~ a high squawk, "Hey, Hugh! And, uh, Hugh's brother! Need a lifesaver? I got extras." He reached down to the large sidepockets of his bib overalls, where the necks of several beer bottles protruded, and drew out two.

"Church key, too, Birdie?" Hugh inquired as if topping off the transaction.

"You betcha. Never go without." Birdie Hinch found the bottle

opener in another pocket and pried the caps off the beers for them.

"Here's mud in your eye," Hugh began to thank him with a toast, but Birdie was already veering out the door, clanking glassily as he went.

"These'll maybe hold us until we can fight our way to the bar anyway," Hugh evaluated, taking a healthy swig and starting to writhe his way through the crowd, Darius more or less in his wake. Nobody took exception to their progress, elbows evidently a part of the commerce here, and Darius managed to put some attention to the sprinkle of taxi-dancers and their partners carouseling within the general mob. He and Hugh passed within an inch of one couple so snugly together he would have sworn they were lodged in each other. Next came two women dancing together while they awaited customers; Hugh and therefore ^{he} ~~Darius~~ resolutely ignored their wisecracks about being in the market for a tall matched set, and passed on by. As to the Wheeler Inn's other item of business, Darius had seen savage drinking in his time, at least ^{fabled} by ~~Glaswegian~~ standards, but this was bacchanalia.

When ^{they} ~~the two Duffs~~ were finally at the bar, Hugh had forged a spot

and was finishing his beer by the time Darius ~~had~~ squeezed a place to put both feet down.

"Cozy pub, this," Darius tried to enter the common mood.

Hugh seemed intent elsewhere. He unpocketed a silver dollar and tapped it indicatively on the bar until a bartender put up two more beers in front of him. Positioning one of the bottles squarely in front of his brother, Hugh with tipsy dignity insisted: "Here, have another lift of this."

Crawfurd, that fool Crawfurd, spun up unexpectedly in Darius from those words. Something like sickness filled him as he stared at the dark glass shape. ~~Whyever did he... Why had he...~~

"Darius?"

He was summoned back by Hugh's swooping tone of curiosity. "Are you going to drink that," he heard the prod sharpen in Hugh's voice, "or admire it to death?"

rattled off a toast of "Confusion to our enemies,"
 "Sorry, drifted a bit, there." He grabbed up the bottle and tipped a sizable quantity of beer into himself, while Hugh blinked. Within himself Darius raced for the safety of a conversational topic.

"None the neverless," he brought out sonorously. "Hugh, do you remember and how can you not?"

Hugh laughed so helplessly beer went up his nose.

"The great pulpiteer! The unstillable Reverend Milne!" The High Street church in Inverley, not to mention the extent of the town within his vocal range, had famously resounded with the Reverend's paragraphic alternations of ~~X~~Nonetheless~~X~~ and ~~X~~Nevertheless~~X~~ until the inevitable Sunday when the phrases amalgamated.

"And the time," Darius was in fine roar now, "he caught you and Meg in the darkened room and you ~~claimed~~ to him 'This isn't what you think it is' and he drew himself up and said, 'It's going to continue not to be what I think it is, too.'"

They both had to set down their bottles in this quake of laughter, Darius managing to chortle out as a finale: "The man could have put in a patent on jabberwocky!"

"Eh," Hugh said after they ran out of snorts of mirth. "I miss the old goat."

"Your Owen," Darius hazarded, "resembles him. Facially."

"As long as that's all." Hugh was lurching a little, but seemed reflective. "Oh well, our Owen. I must have been reading Greek the night before." ~~#~~ Darius stood patiently to see if there would be more, and Hugh provided it. "Brains by the pound, Owen has. The ration of sense in him is another matter."

"He's on his way to being a worldbeater," Darius decided to contribute, "at this dam."

"He's always been on his way to five places at once." And that Charlene wife of his has twice as many in mind for him. Hugh, confused, stopped to sort out what he'd said ^{aloud} ~~and~~ hadn't.

"They're quite a set," he heard Darius offering, "your flock of sons."

"Neil, now," Hugh seemed to be counting carefully from a list, "he'd have held our name to the farm. Whereas Bruce--"

"That one bears watching, Hugh, or he'll die facing the monument."

With sharp puzzlement, Hugh stared at Darius. Then the saying came back to him, from Inverley ~~as well~~. It had to do with the instructive way public hangings, when there were such, were performed in the town

square, with the miscreant facing the ~~state of~~ ^{statue of} Queen Victoria, and it tripped readily off an Inverley tongue any time anyone was observed behaving like a scamp.

"He's young and full of himself, is all," Hugh claimed, although there were times when he himself wanted to read the riot act to Bruce. Determinedly he turned the matter, along with a fresh bottle of beer, toward Darius. "And when are you ever going to get yourself some posterity?"

"I'm still apprenticing at it," Darius joked smoothly, and Hugh had to laugh. As quickly as he could recover, though, he gibed:

"Palmistry, at your age?"

"Now, now. Doing the nasty by oneself isn't necessarily in the picture around here, is it," Darius amplified, making ~~obvious~~ reference to the Wheeler Inn's commercial tinctures of blond^e, brunette, redhead, and jet-black, although truth be known his own gambits had been in the straightforward brothels of Happy Hollow. Next he intoned, "As the Bible says, 'Better to put your seed in the belly of a whore than to spill it on the ground.'"

Hugh took a deep thinking drink. "Where exactly does it say that?"

Darius gave a shrug. "On the flyleaf?"

Hugh roared a laugh. "That's where your mind has always been at, all right, your fly!"

Do I owe him this much of a listen? wondered Darius. Do I owe him a damned thing?

"Hugh, do you suppose we could find some other burning topic than my--"

"Serious, though," Hugh ~~now~~ plunged on to. "There's much to be said for the married state. You ought to give it ~~some~~ consideration sometime." Darius. "For one thing, being married saves on all the beforehand--"

Hugh woozily searched for the word he wanted "--kitchy-coo. And it holds up well. The fucky part, if you take my meaning. Darius, you know, they say even a mouse grows tired of going in and out of the same hole. But I never have."

In the hard moment that followed, the contempt that swelled up in Darius stoppered him from saying anything. His huge first impulse was to smash Hugh, which he fought down to an urge to hurl something viciously vulgar in return; but finally, swallowing with difficulty, he made himself confine to:

"That's maybe enough of your bedroom secrets for one night. Thanks

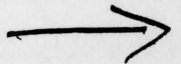
ever so much for the pond of beer and now if you don't mind, I'll head back--"

"Drew your attention, didn't it."

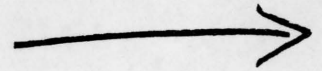
Hugh's tone made Darius swing around and take a fresh look at him.

~~He~~
~~Hugh~~ appeared appreciably less drunk than half a minute before.

"I wondered if you couldn't stand some reminding," he was going on, "that we're man and woman, myself and Meg, and not the ~~young~~ spring greens you were nibbling at in Inverley." ~~#~~ As Darius eyed him, Hugh put a hand on the bar and pushed himself a bit straighter. ~~#~~ "Darius, this isn't then. It hasn't been some interlude you can whistle just like that, since I cleared out of Scotland with Meg. I've done considerable, and maybe failed at more. Hard to keep count, when something of this sort"--he gestured in a way to indicate the saloon, Wheeler, the dam project--



"comes down on you. But I made a place. I made crops. I made three sons. Meg and I, we made our life, out of not much more than a ~~steamboat~~⁹ ticket. And I won't have you parading over here to undo that, if that's what you have in mind."



Bottled courage, Darius registered, or is it more?

Tactics. Always the great question, those.

In the paynight millrace of the Wheeler Inn, the brothers faced each other closely, one putting his huff to strongest use, the other waiting for him to abate.

"I'm not out to, Hugh," Darius gustily refuted undo. "The same years have gone by for me as for you, there's a pile of life I've had since Inverley. My matrimony was with the Clydeside, my work there. You've never credited that in me, Hugh, have you, how much I loved those bloody bedammed ships." He paused. "Everything I was-- involved in there went on its back like a beetle. But I still had a brother, didn't I. You're what's left." He chose to pivot the matter on that. "We both know there was a moment when I'd have gone around the world on my knees to gain Meg. No sense denying that. But she went with you, didn't she. So, you won, then and there."

"Went with?" Hugh seemed to be tasting the words. "She was my wife. She is my wife."

"I can grasp that," Darius concluded levelly. "If our parents

~~dim child,~~
raised a ~~raffie~~, it wasn't on my side of the mirror."

—

Owen had not much more than come home from work and closed the door when there was a strenuous rapping on it.

He opened it to Bruce.

"Didn't hear you roar in," Owen said, taking a peek past Bruce toward the street. "Where's your motor-sickle?"

~~Kate~~
"Rhonda made me give it up," Bruce reported sheepishly. "She says if I'm going to be a father, I can't go around with bug smushes on my incisors."

"Cramps your style, all right, I can see that." Owen made a pretense of inspecting Bruce's mouth area. "Well, now that you're afoot, better come in and rest."

Inside the house, though, Bruce stayed on the balls of his feet, rambling from one side of the living room to the other as if he was there to visit the walls.

"Bruce, not to put too fine a point on this or anything--but what in pluperfect hell is on your mind now?"

"Owrie, I've got a shot at being the government diver."

"No fooling." Owen's tone escalated as he grew sure that his chronically fooling-around kid brother for once wasn't. "That's pretty good going, buddy. It really is. Congratu-"

"First I need to buy Bonestiel's outfit." Bruce came up close to Owen. "See, Ownie, the diver has to have his own equipment. The government furnishes the, uh, air."

"What are we looking at here then, just a diving suit, right?"

"And the airhose."

"Well, sure, otherwise you'd have to practice holding your breath for some long time, wouldn't you."

"And the beltweights and the diving shoes and the telephone gear and the lifelines and the underwater lamp^S and the helmet."

"Bruce. Let's hear the total."

Bruce named the figure as coolly as he could, but his Adam's apple bobbed significantly afterward.

Owen also did a gulp. Then said:

"About as much as a Ford ^{Triple} Double A truck happens to cost, you're telling me."

"Owne, I hate like blazes to have to ask you for it. I'd--"

Bruce fidgeted but kept his eyes straight into those of Owen "--I'd rather take a beating. But with the kid coming and everything, I can't swing this myself. You'll get it all back, I guarandamntee you. You have my word and you can have my hide after that, if you want. See, though, it takes money to make money, don't they say? So if you'll back me on this, then the quicker I can start diving, the faster you can get re--"

"Don't hemorrhage yourself trying to convince me here," Owen shut down that spate. The strength of conviction. Hard labor or a sizable sum, said the judge. Owen had already visited his choices in this, turn this hitherto harum-scarum brother down or give him a possible leg up. He was not sure how it would have come out if this were a case of Bruce solo, but with ~~Rhonda~~ ^{Kate} and the impending ~~kid~~ ^{baby} in the picture too, that wasn't nearly the question, was it.

"All right. You win. I'll put up the do-re-mi, and we'll work out how you fork it back to me."

Bruce all but tattooed his thanks onto Owen, then left. In the

quiet house, Owen did a very rare thing, pulling down from the canned goods cabinet the pint of Four Roses that he and Charlene kept on hand for a hot toddy whenever one of them had a cold, and pouring himself a short swift drink.

He could already hear it with Charlene. Owen, how long can you keep laying out money to them this way?

Nothing I intend to make a habit of, he'd say.

Then why do you keep doing it, she'd say.

And she'd be right.

—
DROP CAP

"Something new has been added. You look like glory in its Sunday best."

Meg spun around at the sound of him. The cookhouse kitchen, empty at this time of night except for her, and now him, suddenly seemed central to everything.

"Aren't those pretty words." She caught her breath a little. "You always could embroider with your tongue."

to go with the rest of you,
"It is pretty hair," Darius said as if sincerely explaining. "My

compliments to the imaginative Charlene." By now he had ^{covered} ~~some~~ most of

the length of the kitchen and was lounging against a meatblock not far from her. "Not that my imagination has ever needed any adding to, Meggie, where you're concerned."

Now that this had come, after all the years, she found she still did not know her own mind. Or did she. At first she said nothing. Then:

"Darius, I have to scoot on home."

"On payday night? When the rest of the citizenry is on the town?"

"I only dropped back by because I'd forgotten to take these for

~~Rhonda~~ ^{Kate}." Meg showed him the Mason jar and couldn't help smiling a bit.

"She's at the stage of crazy cravings, and nothing ~~else~~ compares with Mr. Jaraala's pickled crab apples."

Darius's own smile came on instantly, and the half-laugh that was the same as Hugh's. "We'll hope her tyke isn't born puckered up."

Meg was looking steadily at him. ~~His sustained smile showed the~~

short square tooth, bottom right, that had been chipped off in an early accident at the Clydeside shipyard. ~~She'd~~ ^{She'd} thought at the time that nicked part somehow made this smile of his even more appealing, gave him a

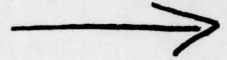
~~dimple in his mouth, and she thought it again now.~~ "And why are you

in this particular vicinity, Darius, this particular night?"

"I was hanging about, is all. And am rewarded with this wonderful coincidence."

"Really," she held to her decision, "I have to be going home."

"And what's there for you?" he asked, all reason. He had been



storing up for this since the stand-off with Hugh the previous payday.

'It holds up well,' does it. So does what I feel for her, you drifting

toss-pot. "Unless I miss my guess, Hugh beetled downtown as soon as he

was off-shift. He'll be some while yet, drinking the town dry."

"I'm surprised you're not at it with him."

"I'm surprised that you don't see Hugh's only my brother, while you're you."

"Darius, we're not those peppered-up youngsters any more."

"We're not down in our graves yet, either."

"We may be if Hugh ever finds us like this."

"He's elsewhere, though, isn't he. Meg, heart, let's look at this matter afresh. We don't have an ocean and the family you were raising and considerations of any other sort between us now."

"That's your idea of a fresh look? Going back to the bind we were in, before Hugh and I left Scotland?"

the
noise of a door in
The ~~door noise from~~ the dining room made them both jump. Whoever

had come in was still out of sight around the corner from the serving window.

Meg looked wildly around. The next thing she knew, Darius's arm was around her and ~~by mutual volition~~^g they were ducking into the pantry, out of the wide-open ~~acres~~^{area} of the kitchen.

She had to listen over the drum of her heart for the sounds out in the kitchen. Meanwhile Darius's arm had not gone away.

There was some clumping, which came nearer and nearer, then stopped.

Then she could hear the almost soundless whistling, the blown air of the only tune ~~Tom~~^g Jaraala seemed to know.

"It's the cook," she let Darius know in the barest whisper, unsure whether to feel relieved or twice as alarmed.

Darius speculatively kissed her forehead.

~~Jaraala~~^g rummaged in the breadbox. Next he could be heard sliding, twice.

By now Darius had moved his hands under her arms and around onto her back and, having met resistance at her lips, was kissing through the neighborhood of her hairline along the side of her head, occasionally ranging his tongue into the delicate grooves of her ear. She tried not to think about how many other teases he could employ on her. She

could feel the most definite one at the front of him.

Pasteboard carton being opened, gummi^er slicing. Velveeta cheese.

Jar lid coming off, tink of knife against its mouth. Slathered with mayonnaise.

She willed Jaraala to go eat his sandwich snack somewhere else, but no. He could be heard chewing, and he was a thorough chewer. That meant they had to be utterly still in the pantry, and Meg hung there in Darius's clasp of arms, cheek to cheek and much else to much else.

At last came the sounds of Jaraala washing up his plate and breadknife, then the whump of the dining-room door as he went out. Meg put her hands flat on Darius's chest and pushed herself back far enough to see squarely into his face. She thought she felt commendably calm, considering.

"That was unfair," she said when she had the breath for it.

"I wonder if it was." He put the tip of a finger into one of the curls coiling at the corner of neck and ear.

Meg surprised him. She put her own index finger against his ^Sbreastbone like a small but substantial pointer and pushed herself away more effectively. ^H"If I ever do walk off from Hugh," she said, "it

will have to be in the open." She gave him that look as if she were taking God's inventory. "Not, Darius, in the pantry."

#

She wished she knew how much the names mattered. It was a harder part than she had thought, making those up. But if she were to call the woman 'Blondina' and him...

ital

Call them Ishmael, Heathcliff, Hester Prynne, Swann and the Duchess de Guermantes, Huck and Tom, Antonia Shimerda, Molly Bloom, Puck, ~~Pertie~~, ^{Hamlet,} ~~Regan,~~ ^{Cordelia,} ~~Flem Snopes,~~ ^{Goneril,} ~~Hamlet,~~ ^{Temple Drake,} Lord Jim, Anna Karenina, Eugene Gant, Mrs. Dalloway: they answer, faultlessly, each time by making us a gift of all their wordly possessions.

Flaubert sends notes tinkling from Emma Bovary's piano and at the other end of the village the bailiff's clerk, "passing along the highroad, bareheaded and in list slippers, stopped to listen, his sheet of paper in his hand" and we listen there with him ever after.

Cather prompts an anxious young Santa Fe seminarian to say, "One does not die of a cold," and the Archbishop in the winter of age responds, "I shall not die of a cold, my son, I shall die of having lived," and we accept that as true for us, too.

itals

Mayakovsky, Russia's cloud in trousers, jots to Lili Brik from his Crimean tour, "Lilik, I go off in all the directions there are!" and from London she postcards to him "Volosik, I kiss you right in the Parliament!" and we believe with them, there in those everlasting ^{fevers} ~~instants~~ of correspondence, their ~~fevered~~ ^g creed that love is the heart of everything.

Writers and their ^g written, they haunt us as we most want to be haunted, in fogs of ink.

end
itals

Rosellen knew ^{little enough} ~~next to none~~ of this ~~(anyone with high school has~~

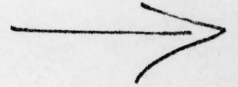
~~received whiffs of Shakespeare)~~ yet she was on an updraft of it all.

Her writing hand agonized, and ^{cherished} ~~liked~~ the agony. Time escaped, and she minded not at all.

It first came to her in the Ad Building, one of the times when she was turning out those reams of paychecks. The names, all these. If a person could know... She had sat up even straighter in her typing chair, posture of the thoughts suddenly pushing at her. And what the money will let them do, make them do... The idea went home with her and produced a tablet and a pencil, and she had been slaving away in stints ever since. Searching her imagination for grist. Lately she had been reading Now in November, and she thought Josephine W. Johnson had it

ever so right: "Words and days and things seen that lie in the mind like stone."

This was an evening when Neil's trucking run had been only to Glasgow



and back, and so when she came out of her haze of concentration over her pages and heard him cut the engine, she thought now was as good a time as any to let him in on her endeavor.

"Writing? You mean--like what, that penmanship they made us do in school?"

"No, stories. The kind in magazines."

"No kidding? You been doing that? Let's see one."

Heart knocking on her breastbone, she handed him the little set of pages.

Neil slowly read of the people named Blondina and Merritt. He wasn't sure whether he had heard the precise story before or not, but it was the type that practically stood in the air at Fort Peck: a High Line farm couple who had been grasshoppered out, the man desperately going halfway across the state the next spring to a wage job on a road project, the woman having to do the farming on her own, climbing off the tractor after each round of the field to go over to the pickup and check on their baby in a fruitbox cradle on the seat; the story ended as soon as they heard there was hiring at a place where a great dam

was to be built.

"'Shod in weary leather.' You thought that up yourself, huh?"

"Nhn."

"Well, I think it's the greatest thing ever. You got any more?"

"I will have, the next time you're away."

She saw ^a ~~the~~ look on Neil which said Is that what it takes? and

hurriedly told him, "I fill the time with it when you're off trucking, is all, Nellie. When you're here, so much the better. The writing can go hang, then."

"Okay, sure, you seem to be going strong on it."

"It's hard, though. ~~It is really something, Neil, how much it takes~~

~~everything,~~

when you're trying to put... ~~life,~~ I guess you'd have to call it, down on

paper. ^{Keep wishing} I ~~always wish~~ I knew more about, oh, situations. ^{People's behavior and} ~~what people do~~

^{that,} all ~~the~~ times when I can't be around them. ^{To see}

^{when you can and use your imagination a little,} "Well, you watch ~~and think about it,~~ and don't you get to know

more?"

^{Neil} "I don't just mean more, ~~Everything~~ ^{guess you'd have to call it.} I ~~keep saying that, don't I.~~

"Rosellen, honey, I'm all for you, on this writing of yours. But you maybe don't want to set your sights that high."

"No, no. I won't, I promise. I knew even while that was coming out of my mouth it was going to sound batty." (And that made twice, already, tonight. Her tongue needed to hear from her, she resolved.) "What I meant was, trying to do these stories makes me think things over, in a way that I didn't even know things had to be figured out before I put them down on--oh, fudge, Neil, that's right back to batty in a hurry, isn't it. But don't you ever have that?" She put her hand on top of his, hoping he would follow suit. "Wanting to see on through the everyday run of stuff?"

To her relief, after a moment his broad hand came up and rested on hers. She chuckled and rapidly put her other on top of his. "Sure," she heard him say as they grinned at each other and slappily piled hand on hand, "a hundred percent of the time."

————— transferred
Hugh and Birdie were on the dredgeline drain-traps now, ~~assigned~~
there by some Ad Building wiseacre whose initials Hugh was quite sure
were O-w-e-n. The drain-traps were mucky work, ~~of~~ ^{cuds of} digging out ~~clay balls~~
and other obstructions, but Hugh Duff had dug into Missouri River earth
plenty of times before, and Birdie came to each of these openable pockets
of the pipeline with the interest of a weasel approaching a nest of eggs.

Some of the dammedest items were being dredged up from the bottom of the river. They'd opened one trap to find it clogged with rusted barrel hoops and a very battered chamber pot, and lately there had been a chunk of the nameplate ~~off~~ of the old sunken steamboat Far West. And ~~every so~~ ^{fairly} often the pipeline still would cough out a buffalo skull. Hugh cleaned those up and Birdie lugged them into Glasgow and peddled them. Hugh would then ~~tuck~~ ^{ed} away his share of the split as drinking money, while Birdie untucked dress shirt with the horseshoe embroidered on the back his along with his ~~pants~~ in Wheeler's temples of temptation.

"Tell you, Hugh," Birdie was confiding at high pitch as they unbolted the next drain-trap, "I've done it with all nationalities and some from Texas, but this blonde number last night, she just makes you want to die and leave it in there forever. You know the one I mean? That kind of milk-haired one, there in the Blue Eagle--"

"Snow White there in the Wheeler Inn, you mean," Hugh responded, grunting as he opened the catchment in the pipeline and began breaking out the clay clog with a shovel. "I've laid eyes on her, yes." Birdie's bedtime history had to contend for attention with his own, lately. After the night there in the saloon where he had told Darius in no uncertain

terms how things stood, he ~~did~~ ^{felt he had to do} his part at home, too. ~~He'd~~ ^{Made up with Meg,}
~~and~~ ^{cozied} her under the covers these nights in a kind of second honeymoon.

~~(Given their past, perhaps more like a fifth or sixth.)~~ Strut in here

from Scotland as though he were God's gift to Meg, did Darius think.

Hugh Duff would show him, how a man and a woman weathered the little jangles between them. "Eyes only, mind you, Birdie," he went on in this new spirit of things. "I'm severely married, you know."

"Uh uh, not that Snow White one, this's another--what's those there, Hugh?"

Both men got down on their knees on the muddy riverbank.

Hugh meticulously scooped the small round objects out of the scum of sediment in the trap bottom, spat on them and rubbed them between his palm and his fingers. Tiny planets of glassy blue.

"Beads." Hugh fondled them, thinking. "From the fort, wouldn't you think? When they were trading with the Indians here?"

Birdie too was looking speculative. "Wonder if they'll work on that blonde number."

—————

cut to
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DROP CAP "Tim, a whippet!"

For the first time, Jaraala looked surprised. "You know your cars."

Actually Darius had only spoken his own startlement at spying the radiator-cap figurine, exquisite lean dog in full running extension, both chrome front legs racing on air in front of the radiator cap: automotive figurehead of the canine speed which every workman in Scotland,

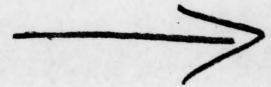
~~including~~ ^{not excepted} Darius Duff, had been known to bet his very heart on. But

the automobile indeed was an Overland Whippet roadster, or at least had rolled out of the factory as one. The cloth top had been replaced by a rounded, riveted cab, like the ^{cocoon} ~~cabin~~ of a racing plane installed on an elegant carriage. The whole car, old and new, was freshly painted a rich butter color.

The half-luxurious, half-homemade yellow ^{vehicle} ~~automobile~~, poised like a royal machine amid the shacks of Wheeler: Darius knew for sure he was in deepest America.

^{car} ~~vehicle~~ belonged to a young catskinner who was hopelessly behind to Jaraala in the payday-night poker games in their barracks, and Jaraala drove the borrowed contraption as if afraid it was going to bolt away

with him. He had warned Darius, "It's going to be some distance," and Darius had airily answered that he had grown accustomed to Montana's long-legged miles. But the journey in fact was going on and on, methodically, doggedly, hypnotically. Darius caught himself drowsing, snapped awake and checked on Jaarala; the pouch-faced man was peering ahead over the steering wheel the same as ever, owl in a yellow speedboat.



~~2~~ miles, about."

Time upon time now, the roadster topped a rise and the two men were gazing down at lustreless expanses. There had been a distressed air to farms all along the way, the houses and outbuildings brown howls of dry wood, but ^{here} ~~now~~ the fields ~~themselves~~ ^{even more} looked stricken. Through his sweat, Darius blinked and stared. To every horizon, the earth had been plowed and anemic grain was trying to grow, but its stalks would barely tickle ^{a person's} ~~your~~ ankles.

And the weather, good God, could this be the usual summer weather?

Darius felt himself turning into hot salt soup in the stifling car.

"What do you think, ^{Tim} ~~Tom~~ mightn't this bring rain?"

"Could," Jaraala agreed, as though anything was theoretically possible.

"The air's a funny kind of dry, though."

Even though the road ran straight as a rail for a dozen miles ahead, Jaraala never shifted his eyes from it. Darius, gawking, was the one who puzzled at the smudged sky to the west. The horizon there had gradually roughened with hills, breaks, coulees, and now that banked horizon of hills was dimming away into the sky's haze. He knew it had to be cloud, but the formation was strangely edgeless, almost more a

tint than anything else. "Does rain always have that much trouble making up its mind in this country?"

Jaraala sneaked a ^{glance} look, then jerked his foot off the accelerator and all but stood on the clutch and brake pedals until the car slewed to a halt. He rolled down his window and stared west to be sure.

"Dust," Jaraala said as if afraid of the word. "We better get ourselves there before it does."

The butter-bright Whippet sped on the dimming road for the next five minutes, ten, fifteen, with Jaraala ~~pursed and~~ hunched over the large steering wheel while Darius tried to ~~simultaneously~~ watch both the road and the phenomenon to the west. A half-light, yellow-green, descended, perceptibly darkening as if a shadow-dye from the dust storm was flowing ahead into it.

Abruptly six antelope, blazewhite at throat and rump, fled across the road, flickers of Africa in the dust eclipse.

"Your headlamps, Tim!" Darius advised in a shout.

Jaraala glanced helplessly at the arcane dashboard of the Whippet and refastened his gaze to the road. "See if you can find the button.

For Christ's sake don't yank out the choke instead."

Darius leaned over toward the steering column, reaching past Jaarala's knees to finger around among the connections under the dashboard. By feel he rejected the thin cable housings of the choke and the throttle and the speedometer until he felt electrical wire, and pulled the button-switch in front of it.

Wind had begun buffeting the car, and as Darius sat up he saw in the headlight beams dust blowing across the surface of the road like wisps of brown snow. Within a minute, the storm of grit blanketed the sky.

They were in past the city limits before they could discern any of the buildings of their destination.

Before Jaarala could see it coming, a rolling washtub met the Whippet's radiator grill and bounced away.

He managed to steer into an alley where a ⁹big false-front store sat broadside between them and the dust storm. The dust fury went on for an hour, the air seeming thick enough to chew even in their alley haven. They could hear the dust stinging wherever it could find wood, scouring off the paint of the buildings around them. Tumbleweeds spun tirelessly through town, and every so often a stovepipe flew by. The two men watched, astounded, out the mouth of the alley as not just dirt but gravel,

actual small stones, blew into thin drifts in the street.

Ever so gradually the hurricane of murk seemed to lessen. Jaarala peered out and said, "I think we can give her a try, now."

Darius at last could see something of the situation of the town.

Pair of towering grain elevators, creek-fed farming valley beyond.

Neighborhoods of decent-looking houses. Downtown corner buildings of

actual brick and stone, Plentywood this and Plentywood that on their

plate glass windows. Compared with Wheeler, high civilization.

An aftergust of the storm caught them as they tried to ~~get out~~ ^{make it} from ~~of the car and go into~~ ^{to} the meeting hall where the sign read Temple of Labor. The ~~blowing brown~~ ^{blowing brown} grit could be heard doing no favors to the glossy

finish on the Whippet, and they could feel the dust collecting on them

as deep as their teeth. Jaarala tied his handkerchief over his face

like a bandanna, and Darius followed suit. Others from the trucks and

pickups parked around the hall had done the same or were holding scarves

or sleeves across their faces against the dust--two dozen or so people

trying to recognize each other by their eyes as they pressed in to

the porch of the meeting hall. Darius told himself no Clydesider would ever believe this--the masked Bolsheviks of the prairie.

#

itals

Comets attend the death of kings. Naturally so, Darius Duff would have you know; they no doubt want to gloat over the abruptly mortal bastards in their filigreed caskets as much as any of us. In 1910 when Halley's fireball licked across heaven while the portly royal remains of Edward VII lay in state below in London, the young riveter Darius was already immersing in the everlasting scrimmage between the unders and the overs. Clydesiders spooned the politics of the left into themselves along with their oatmeal, it was said, and Darius hungrily sat up to that table.

and
itals

#

"The duded-up one is Plimpton, the newspaper guy," Jaraala ^{whispered} identified

~~In a murmur to Darius~~ ^{STET} as people milled into ~~the~~ ^{Plentywood's} clapboard Temple of Labor.

Darius mentally marked the plumpish editor, in a pearl-gray suit and vest, there at the end of the front row. From issues slipped to him by Jaraala in the barracks, Darius knew that The Producers News was a wordslinging fiesta,

Pick up
from
P. 325

4 Clydesiders were said to spoon the politics of the left into themselves along with their oatmeal, and the young riveter Darius Duff hungrily sat up to that table.

333

ph' copied

even by radical standards. "He gets against somebody in that newspaper of his and he tears them a new asshole," Jaraala favorably critiqued Plimpton's journalism now. "Him and Mott have worked together a long time."

^{grew, and}
The crowd ~~still not large but growing, swatted dust off itself~~

~~and kept shaking its collective head at this latest bad turn of events,~~

~~looked on,~~
~~as Darius unlocked.~~ Jaraala kept on naming off the ones he knew, abundantly
as Darius tried to make himself at home in the Red Corner of Montana.
Scandinavian from the sound of it;

INSERT
ital's

~~there~~ ~~political action~~
His first feast of the ~~Clyde's politics~~ was in the rent strike, of

~~city~~
1915, when the ~~streets of Glasgow~~ boiled with marching people; Scotland

had found its feet at last, Darius exulted. The columns from the factories
and the shipyards poured into ~~George Square,~~ ^{Glasgow,} passing a column of soldiers
embarking for the war in France. "Down your tools, boys!" shouted the
civilian army to the uniformed one.

Then Darius, tall in the human swell, could see the lines of the
tenement women who had fomented the strike, and the great crowd that
packed the streets around the Sheriff's Court. Faces by the thousands
and thousands, a maw of mouths and eyes for the powers-that-be to look
out upon, festival and class war feeding each other as they disbelievingly

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ital

watched. Each new minute of the massing forces brought a bolt of excitement to Darius. By then he had been in attendance at a hundred meetings, a dozen committees, a thousand arguments over Georges Sorel's doctrine of the general strike ("to render the maintenance of socialism compatible with the minimum of brutality," Darius could reel off by heart) versus parliamentary gradualism ("Having been preyed on does not entitle one to prey back," Ramsay MacDonald kept scolding them from Westminster). And now here it was, exactly as Sorel, in the densest of the arguing Bibles of the left, had prophesied: mass belief, passion, mania, whatever you cared to term it, the ingredient that forged the early Christians against the Romans and that turned Paris upside ~~down~~ street by street in the French revolution was working in this epic strike of 1915. Chapter and verse, the workers triumphing with the weight of their numbers.

→

~~watched.~~ ^{now} ~~Now~~ with the city clouded up this way, the crowd crystals ~~went~~
into action, the precipitators. Darius saw men grab up a posterboard
from in front of a newspaper shop; a band of burly ones shouldered it
between them, and then others hoisted a man up onto the sheet of wood.
It was the leader of the Brassfounders union, Willie Gallacher himself,
the Red brassie. Balancing himself on the impromptu platform as if
riding a hutch door in a flood, Gallacher looked antic but roared against
the rent-squeezers and the war-makers.

"You'll have heard of the old woman of Paisley, where I happen
to ~~come~~ ^{spring} from," Gallacher confided to the throng at the top of his
considerable voice. "Down to the shop she goes now, same as every
month, to buy her candles. They cost twice what they had the month
before, she finds.

'Why have the candles gone up?' she asks.

'Why, madam, because of the war,' the shopkeeper says.

'Oh,' she says, 'I didn't know they're fighting this one by
candlelight.'

The crowd laughed eagerly and raucously, Gallacher had them by

the ears now. He quickly went to work on his main theme.

"The fields of death are hungry, and the lords of war-making feed our boys to them....There's profit in blood, that is their despicable creed..."

The crowd roared back at Gallacher. Not far from Darius, a woman cried out a music-hall line but fiercely: "Our Wullie'll nae be far wrong!"

Pick up from P. 334
^{Duff}
 Waken Darius ~~from~~ a coma at the age of one hundred and he still

would remember the taking of Glasgow, those few high hours. In ^{street after} ~~other~~ streets, bobbing atop ~~other~~ ^{Red Willie' Gallacher} rafts of posterboard, John MacLean and

other speakers held forth, held the moment, held poised the human mass

that could pull down the city stone by stone if it took the notion.

The ruling powers buckled. The Sheriff's Court session was called off,

the government in London promised a law against rent-gouging.

But from that day, Darius ^g~~Duff~~ was to see more and like it less.

Periodically the Clydeside would writhe and rise, and nothing lasting

would come of it. Like a stick driven into the beach of history, the

rent strike marked a high tide of worker power. ^{next two} The ~~tries~~ at ~~other~~

^{a major} ~~strikes~~ in 1915 and 1916 were met with barrings and arrests, and when

the "forty-hour strike" was called in 1919, machine-gun nests were waiting at Glasgow's strategic street corners.

So, were you Darius, you learned to await the next chance, and the one after that.

As if having saved the most for last, Jaraala inclined his head toward the front and center of the meeting room and said: "The highpockets one, that's Mott."

Darius and Jaraala both were tallish men. Mott overtopped them and everyone else in sight by at least six inches.

At first Darius thought Lawrence Mott was the most awkward specimen he ^{had} ever seen. Hands the size of stallion hooves, big flat feet, that towering body as knobbly as if made up out of pipe fittings; the face, otherwise uneventful, shocking for its eyeglasses, lensed thick as milkbottle bottoms. Mott's world, as a boy, had amounted to an unedged blur and he had been put into a school for the blind until it was discovered he was hardskulled enough to get by in life, blurred or not. Ultimately a grinder of optical lenses was reached in Germany who could accomplish the thick goggles Mott's eyes required, and with that weakness corrected

he behaved as if no other was conceivable. ^{Mott's} ~~His~~ term as sheriff of Sheridan County, along with the slate of other barely concealed radicals he pulled along with him into other offices, was rough and tumble even by Montana political standards. ~~Mott~~, ^{he} according to widespread whisper, had funded his left-wing political machine on the gratitude of bootleggers whom he let traverse ^{his jurisdiction} ~~Sheridan County~~ into the liquid riches of Canada.

If Mott as a tactician sounded promising, on a speaking platform the ~~men~~ was an absolute revelation, Darius now found. ~~From Willie Gallacher~~ on, he had heard scorching orators in his time, but none ~~any~~ more cagey than this. Mott was an unerring picker at society's scabs. In a pitiless brass voice, one you would not want to hear if you had your hand in the cookie jar, he gave the audience the faces and figures of their enemies.

The Wall Streeters, as fatuous as they were fat.

The copper kings of Butte, the muscle-mined wealth of Montana engorged in them as unmistakably as a pig going through a python.

The lumber barons--

Abruptly ~~Jaraala~~ was up out of his chair beside Darius.

"In the woods during the war, the goddamn bastards wouldn't even

let us have living conditions the same as what was called for in prisoner-of-war camps."

It was the longest sentence anyone had heard out of Jaraala in ages.

and it's

Darius stared at his companion traveler, realizing that Jaraala

down to bedrock.

hated the world's bosses all the way back to first principles: bone,

blood, breath, everything of their existence he hated. Hard to think

of Timmo Jaraala ever having been young, or of the century's issues not

rolling off his round shoulders, but the lumberjack camps of his early

years had turned many, like him, into fervents of the Industrial Workers

of the World, the argufying street-fighting song-writing Wobblies, the

I-Won't-Work agitators who preached one big union and the downfall of

capitalist bosses that would flow from that. Usually silent Jaraala

putting himself up for political adoption of this sort? Bedbugs, lice,

maggoty bacon, murderously indifferent new machinery, unstable wages

and hours, and long evenings in drafty bunkhouses to talk it over might

and it's

do that to a person.

Jaraala sat down, looking shy and mute again. Mott gave him a

long, slow, dramatic approving nod, then tore on into the rest of his

list of oppressors,¹ The grain cartel, the railroad nabobs, the whole Rockefeller Morganatic gang. A few minutes of Mott at his hottest and you could absolutely see into their mansions, viciously luxurious.

And this audience did at least half his work for him;² *Darius saw* As they

listened to Mott, their faces wore the hard set of righteousness: of those who worked the land and could not understand why they had to sell a truckload of wheat to be able to buy a barrel of gasoline. *To one*

degree or another, every overalled or scarved listener in this meeting hall had the angry confusion of the peasant--which is to say any of us, at some rural eternal eddy of our bloodline--and how the invisible machines *of economics, market forces, interposed.* Work your fields and yourself

and your family until all were played out, and then some capitalist gut-robber took the gains? And grasshopper infestations on top of that?

And blizzards of dust on top of those? Things shouldn't add up that way,

it wasn't right, this audience of seared-out farm people believed. *said with their set faces* And

~~Mott was on hand to tell them to raise lasting hell about it.~~

too, Mott *to them next*
The New Deal was a raw deal, ~~he~~ thundered on. There could be no true new deal under capitalism, any honest shuffle of the deck had to have some of the reforms that the Wall Street ruling class *yipped about* ~~denounced as~~

photocopied

socialism. And that's where he, Lawrence Mott, and the Fusion ticket

came in. Fusion, taking ideas from the left but holding to the pocketbook

interests of workers and farmers, was the only sane route, he told them

(The man knows how to play these people like the pipes,
Darius marveled at the audience's raptness and his own.)

as if giving directions to Eden. Roosevelt was not going far enough,

Mott now reached.

None of them in Washington or Helena or for that matter the county

courthouse right next door here in Plentywood, by Mott's unsparing, ^{lefthanded}

yardstick not a one of them was going far enough.

Far enough, echoed in Darius.

There's ever the question, isn't it.

How far is that, the famous 'far enough.'

Doctrinally he could agree with Mott in a trice, almost by reflex;
there had to be a better way to run the world than letting the big bugs
of finance do it. But the other measure, out from yourself to what you
let yourself be capable of, the far enough...

Darius drove that from mind, shifting savagely in his chair until
he realized Jansala was sliding him uneasy glances. He stilled himself
always agitatorial
as he had in that prior lifetime of meetings—he'd realized early in
his Clydeside career of listening to the comrades go on that heart and

cut top. 344

cut

~~mind could be of various timber, but an oak bottom was utterly essential--~~

~~and appeared to attend to what Mott was saying. But~~ while Mott trotted

his audience through crop controls ~~and parity~~ and other mincing efforts

of the New Deal, Darius took stock of ^{matters} ~~Plentywood, Sheridan County, Montana,~~

~~U.S.A., the world~~ according to the leftward slant of light here.

Plimpton, over there assiduously scribbling down Mott's tirade.

The next front page of The Producers News would geyser it across the entire county.

As to the Sheridan County populace, at least ^{the} ~~this~~ Danish and Norwegian sample of it in this hall, the word socialism did not scare these Scandinavians into a tizzy. Nor could it hurt, could it, that Lawrence Mott had married into their community. His wife Aagot adoringly watched him in action from the front row; beside her, Bolshevism rolling over him like Sunday school scripture, sat their eight-year-old Harald.

(With two a's, specified Jaraala, proficient on that vowel.) Mott knew how to play these people like the pipes, Darius could tell. One of his political adversaries was a local lawyer who had tried to drum up trade among these descendants of Norway by painting Norsk advokat in gilt

from caps

on his office window; Mott invariably referred to him as the ~~apekatt~~^{apekatt,} ~~apekatt~~^{apekatt,} which was Norwegian for monkey, and the crowd loved it every time. A

man who can slander in more than one language was not to be dismissed lightly, Darius thought. Small wonder that Mott was managing to camouflage a redder -ism than socialism by polka-dotting it with the term Fusion ⁽¹²⁾ ₍₁₁₎

Darius knew he still had to feel his way. So far, America seemed to be a country where they allowed you to fly any kite ^{so} ~~as~~ long as it did not have a shred of ~~an~~ ^{a real} idea attached. But there might be a useful paradox there. Precisely because nobody in America seemed to care damn-all about political doctrine, that left room for those few who do, now didn't it. And that was interesting about this country. You could maybe get at the political roots here, locally. March in to a Plentywood and operate things. Mott had run this country ~~by~~ ^{by} an open election. Far different, that, from always having to wrestle London. Far different from the Clydeside experience of putting a bit of aggravation into the streets, trying to claim your own turf for yourself, and out would come troops, slap like that.

Here, then. A sharp-toothed newspaper. The golden mouth of Mott.

A following fed up with half-measures. They had the apparatus, here.

—

Darius stayed at Jaraala's elbow afterward, waiting for their chance at Mott. As the crowd filed by to shake hands with the peering bone-rack figure, Darius put the thought of the moment out loud:

"The man is as clever with his tongue as a hummingbird, Tim.

How the devil did he ever lose office?"

"They pattycaked him in '32," Jaraala stated, elaborating that the Democrats had not run candidates for a number of county offices in exchange for the Republicans not putting up anyone for sheriff, throwing the combined voting strength of both parties against Mott and his slate.

"But those buggers don't trust each other enough to cut that kind of deal every time."

"Mister Jaraala," Mott greeted when the others were gone, clapping him Jaraala on the shoulder with a hand that whopped like a skillet. The gargantuan eyeglasses found Darius's face and took it in, whether in sheriff style or comradely appraisal Darius wasn't sure. "And you've brought us help from across the pond, you say."

Plentywood Temple of Labor or not, this was oddly like a tea-time ^{visit} introduction, Darius being ceremoniously introduced to Aagot Mott next

344A--insert

and then the ^{is} bright-eyed eight-year-old son, Harald, who had sat quietly next to his mother in the front row while Bolshevism rolled over him like Sunday school scripture. It could not hurt the cause, Darius thought, that Lawrence Mott had married into this community of Danes and Norwegians; the word socialism was not likely to scare these Scandinavians into a tizzy. Darius knew he still had to feel his way in America, but so far so good, here. A sharp-toothed newspaper. The golden mouth of Mott. A following fed up with half-measures. They had the apparatus, here.

pick up from
meat p. 344A

and then the bright-eyed boy, Harald. ⁴ Mott's hand cradled the lad's head against his leg as he talked with Darius and Jaraala of timing and tactics. "Next year is election year again," Mott led to, as if telling them the grain would be gold. He leaned back beside a windowframe shorter than he was and goggled down at Darius. "Mister Duff, are you a veteran of election battles?" Mott somehow crooned it with the unspoken but resonant note of too?

"I have nothing against elections," Darius said, "so long as we win them."

"That's the stunt," Mott agreed, grimacing. "That winning." Then, as if it was all part and parcel, he asked Darius the outlook for organizing on the quiet among the damworkers. The Communist Party of the U.S.A., a perfectly legal organization but frowned upon when it worked in the open, would be keenly interested in anything that could be done with a workforce such as Fort Peck's, Mott hardly had to tell him.

"Right now it would be worse than herding cats," Darius estimated. Nor do I dare take on that sort of attention to myself just yet, do I.

Thanks to Crawford. I've pitched in with the ^{Bolshies} ~~comrades~~ times before,

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they won their scars along with us on the Clydeside, but thanks to damnable

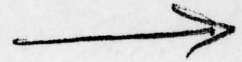
Crawfurd I need time before-- "Wouldn't you say so, Tim, Fort Peck

quite and the best we can do for the cause is to stay available?"
is not ripe ~~quiet~~ yet Jaarala provided a sad affirming bob of his

at the dam
head. "Everyone ~~there~~ is in one kind of a scamper or another," Darius

elaborated. "They're up nights, trying to spend their wages fast enough."

Mott looked both unsurprised and disapproving. "Roosevelt and his



crowd can't shovel money to them forever. When the makework runs out and people see that nothing has gotten better, then is when they will listen. Bide your time, Mister Duff. In this calling, we have to do a lot of bidding." With a big knuckle, Mott traced a considerable line into the film of stormdirt ^{that} which coated the windowsill. "Even the dust is with us."

#

~~DROP CAP~~

"I dummo, Bruce, do I have to watch this? My money going to the bottom of the river, with you wrapped inside?"

"Come on, Ownie. Do you good to see how we do things here at the business end of the river."

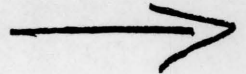
Uh huh. I've seen disasters in the making before, Owen thought, but went onto the diving barge with Bruce.

Taine, the ~~diving~~ ^{barge} boss, obviously wasn't any too thrilled to have a new diver, the fillmaster looking over his shoulder as he broke in Bruce, but Owen took care to tell him, "Nothing official about this, Al. I'm not even here, okay?"

Bruce already had started soaping up. The vulcanized rubber cuffs of the diving suit had to fit so tightly onto his wrists that water could

not work its way under. Watching, Owen began to savvy that he had
been wrong in a major way about Bruce ~~wanting~~^{needing} him here as an audience.
Bruce ~~here at this~~ was his own audience.

Before the eyes of the barge crew and Owen, ~~Bruce~~^{he} began turning
both rubbery and metallic. The diving suit was sheet rubber sandwiched
between tough layers of twill, but over the top half of that went



the corselet, the metal breast plate. A good deal of fuss surrounded the corselet; it had to be bolted to a strap arrangement around the neck of the suit, clamping the rubber collar against the corselet rim to make a watertight joint. Or you're liable to get a drink of water you didn't ask for, huh, Bruce? Owen was intrigued in spite of himself with the daring that this took.

When the tender and Taine himself finished ~~the~~ grunting and tugging and bolting and backed away, there sat Bruce, or rather his head, wearing a leather cap with telephone receivers embedded to fit down over his ears, looking like a pilot in a huge Katinka doll.

I wonder just how many dollars a pound this comes out to, Owen brooded as he scanned the bulky diving suit. He and Charlene had had words over his loan to Bruce. Hers were: I'm not sure, Owen, I can rake the money in as fast as you can shovel it out ~~to them.~~

Now the tender gingerly lifted the copper helmet in both hands and stepped directly behind Bruce.

Owen realized he was watching a crowning.

The entire atmosphere on the diving barge had changed. From Taine's more attentive regard, to the tender's softer tone of voice, the figure in the diving suit was drawing something out of the barge crew that had

not been there before. No one joked now. No one moved unnecessarily.

Owen uneasily wondered whether this brother of his ~~Bruce~~ could carry off all that seemed to be expected of him. Wouldn't it be just like ~~him~~ ^{Bruce} to get under ~~twenty~~ ^{forty} feet of water and call upstairs, Hey, I thought I was signing up for the balloon corps!

The tender put the helmet over Bruce's head, the front glass turned eerily a bit toward Owen as if a Cyclops was eyeing him askance. Then the helmet was turned an eighth of a turn in the corselet joint. My God, is that all? rose in Owen. It just snicks into place, against all the water in the Missouri?

Through it all Bruce had behaved as though Owen was nowhere around. But the amphibian apparition turned now and gave Owen a stubby thumb's up.

Owen stayed for the descent into the river, nervously watching the barge crew nervously handle Bruce's [#]airhose, and found himself still staying, gazing down into the river, even after the water darkness hid Bruce from sight and the only sign that he was down there was Taine's constant telephone conversation.

"Can I?" Owen asked, gesturing.

Taine squirmed, caught between the unwelcome request and Owen's status as fillmaster. "Generally not a good idea to break the diver's concentration in any way. But this ^{is} more of a tryout run. So, okay, this once."

Owen went over to Taine and was handed the telephone headpiece.

"Bruce? Can you hear me?"

"Yeah, I'm right here, Ownie."

— "Now I know we've got this river whipped. Top to bottom."

But the river fought him on the arithmetic every day of every month, on through that spring and summer.

The number that Owen Duff lived by, and regularly wondered if he was going to perish by, was three with six zeroes after it. Three million cubic yards of earthfill a month had to be dredged, piped, and poured out into the core pool atop the dam, and by the sacred writ of Fort Peck, the schedule ²—it needed to be done for seven months out of the year, winter or no winter, high spring runoff or no high spring runoff, breakdowns or no breakdowns.

"Marchette, I wonder if you could get right at my monthly report for me. The ³Colonel's going to have kittens if I don't hand him--"

"Owen, I'm so sorry," the gray-haired secretary indicated the heap of paperwork she was typing up, "but he already was by here and had a batch."

April, that horrid half-assed half-month of startup, had been as close to a write-off as Owen ever wanted to come in this business of dredging. April of '35 he just wanted to kick under the bed of the river and forget.

"BJ, I'm kind of up against it here, I need this monthly report typed up for the--"

"It's lunchtime, Owen," Betty Jane of the henna hair told him serenely. ~~sweetly.~~ "And then I have to take dictation from Major Santee."

The month of May gave him hope. The dredging still had a hiccup now and then, but they ~~had~~ met the 3,000,000 cubic-yards goal. In June, he'd thought he had the job knocked, absolute easy stuff around-the-clock this dredging: the ~~monthly~~ total of cubic yards moved was a fat 10% above goal. But now July, here in his hand, made bad reading; at the bottom of his compilation of daily dredging averages the number was three-million, but ~~damn~~ just barely. Owen Duff did not like to scrape by that way, and with August-September-October-November yet to come in his dredging year, and

right now when he should be out there on the dredgeline trying to figure out how to boost the flow of fill, he was having to stomp around here in the Ad Building trying to find somebody, just anybody, to type--

"Rosellen, hey, glad I caught you before--uhm, you went to lunch."

Her fingers had jumped off the keys when she heard his voice behind her, and she swung her head around toward him and swooped blank paper onto the top of whatever she'd been typing all at the same time.

Experienced as he was with Charlene, who never liked a surprise unless she was delivering it, Owen hurried to say:

"Excuse me all over the place. It's just that I'm in dire need on my monthly report, and saw you sitting in here, and so--"

"No, no, that's all right. I eat in, these days. I'm--" she vaguely indicated toward her typewriter and its hidden contents "--practicing my speed."

Owen didn't buy that at all. Christ, woman, you get any faster,
^{stet But}
they'll have to invent an asbestos typewriter. ~~But he didn't say as~~

much, and while he was standing there trying to keep his face straight,

Rosellen crinkled her caught-kid grin at him and gave him the joshing turn

of words that Charlene sometimes did; ~~that probably Tebbets back to~~

~~time immemorial had liked to play with:~~

"What can I do you for?"

Pesky just that quick, was she. Owen stuck tightly to business instead of repartee. "This blasted report, that has to go in to the Colonel half an hour ago. Can you whiz through it for me this once?"

Rosellen plucked it from him and told him she'd see what she could do. Owen walked off to the ~~clatter~~ ~~pat-a-tat-tat~~ of her typewriter resuming behind him, still wondering about her noonhour secret pages. Neil had better-
to-Christ hope they're not love letters.

—

Three envelopes, long and white.

~~Independence~~

~~28 Penn Square in Philadelphia, the first return address.~~

~~8 Arlington Street~~

~~2 Sedgwick Place in Boston.~~

~~250 Park~~

~~309 Third Avenue in New York, New York.~~

Rosellen wildly wanted to rip them open right there in the post office, but thought no, take them home. Tingly suspense. Then giddy triumph. She could use this, in another story.

At the kitchen table, she slit open the envelopes and the worst

messages of her life fell out. The Saturday Evening Post regretted it had no use for "The Steel Daisy," the Atlantic Monthly was rejecting "Janie's Doll," and ~~Collier's~~ ~~Liberty~~ had turned down "Expectations."

The rejection slips stunned her, but under her mortification there was a greater panic: what had they done with her stories? A second slip 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 waste baskets in ~~New York~~ ^{Philadelphia,} Boston and New York. ~~Philadelphia.~~ 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} ~~hard~~ 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.

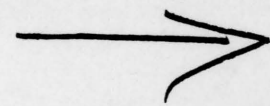
The figure, one of the tunnel gang from the look of his mucky overalls, ended up woozily on hands and knees in the gutter after hurtling past Darius. In the doorway of the Blue Eagle stood Tom Harry, the majority of his white shirt torn off but his bow tie still in place.

"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.'" ~~"Macree."~~

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.

Am
caps



His attention went at once to a white-blond 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 ~~although what~~ 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 of

~~this.~~

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."

"Sharmon, 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} beer, 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... ^{of order--} ~~is rising...to a point--~~ by now was pertinent, but he wasn't sure that was the best approach here ^{in public.}

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.

"No." She gave Darius a dead-level stare. "I'm mine."

"You're luckier in your ownership than most, then," he said drily.

"What I meant was, how does this transaction work? Does he"--Darius did the slight nod toward Tom Harry again--"provide the premises?"

"I use his car, out back," she said. "Packard DeLuxe. It's got a back seat the size of an ambulance."

"I'm not much one for doing it in vehicles," Darius said. "It sounds a bit rushed, for what I have in mind."

"Isn't this my lucky night, the only man at Fort Peck who's proud to be a slowpoke," she mocked. "I suppose you can come up with someplace more leisurely?"

"I was counting on you to. After you finish business for the evening."

#

Until two that morning, quitting time, Proxy Shannon couldn't help wondering what she had waiting for her in this odd duck of a Scotchman. Most men hated the idea of any other man being with her. This one simply sat there and watched as she worked, a little amused look flitting across his face once when a tunnel mucker, still in his rubber boots, arrived in what was obviously a flaming hurry and sped out back with her. Hardest thing about the business, as far as she was concerned,

was the male conviction that they were all something rare; but this specimen waiting patiently for her didn't seem to mind the rest of the parade.

Just before two, she caught his eye and indicated he should meet her in back of the saloon. Darius went out the front and around the building, and she was waiting beside the car. "Borrowed it from Tom to go home in," she said, and held out the car key to him.

Darius hesitated. "Is it far? Can't we ~~just~~^{simply} foot it?"

"Everything's far here," Proxy informed him. He still didn't take the key. "You really aren't one for cars, are you. What's the matter now?"

"I don't know the driving."

"Fella," Proxy told him as she opened the door on the driver's side and climbed behind the steering wheel, "sometime tonight, you're going to have to contribute something."

The Packard sped out of Wheeler, across into ~~a~~^{the} smaller scatter of buildings called Delano Heights and on through ~~an~~^{the} even more scattered and sarcastically named neighborhood called Lakeview, ~~the~~^{on} downward toward

the river. Proxy parked the car on the riverbank above a strew of boxy forms. As Darius's eyes adjusted to the dark, he realized they were houseboats. ⁴"The one on the far end," she told him, and led the way, her slacks and hair moonlit against the dark of the river.

When she turned up the wick on the kerosene lamp, Darius saw that the inside of the houseboat was as mussy as a daw's nest. Amid the clutter, he had to search twice to spy the bed. The houseboat rocked slightly as the Missouri roiled past.

Darius chortled. "I didn't know seamanship was going to be a requirement, too."

Proxy had made no move toward the bed, and that wisecrack or whatever it was caused her to look sharply at him. Gaunt handsome joker, but that didn't count. Business did. She said only: "More than that's required, you know."

"Yes. Well, now," he studied her. "What is the tariff?"

Out back of the Blue Eagle it was two dollars a go, plus extra for French and on up the menu; but here, her own premises and all and this cluck fresh off a boat of a different kind, she took a calculated chance and announced:

"Five dollars."

He
~~Darius~~ pulled out a pursy kind of wallet she had never seen before and took his own good time about fingering through the American money which all looked greenly identical to him. At last he sorted out a ten-dollar bill and a five, holding them up to her carefully before putting the money on the table by the lamp. "Here's for three goes."

#

"You're a perfectly dreadful housekeeper," he observed from amid the tussle of bedcovers the next morning.

"Houseboatkeeper," she corrected him in that mocking way. "Whole different deal, when you can just throw stuff over the side when it piles up and gets too rank. And anyway since when does somebody like me have to come with doilies."

"I like it that you're on the river, though," he said as if thinking out loud. He turned and gave her a studying gaze. "It commends your taste."

"My taste in men," she figured she'd better begin letting him know, "never lasts ^{until} ~~beyond~~ breakfast."

"That probably commends your taste too," he gave her a surprisingly attractive thin-faced ^{smile.} ~~grin.~~

"No 'probably' about it," she notified him. "Okay, Bosephus. The circus is over. Everybody up, out, we all had our money's worth--"

"Wait. One formality." He put a businesslike arm across her as she started to roll out of bed. "What's your name, then?" He'd heard the publican call her Shannon, but even in America a last name must be a last name.

"Proxy."

Darius stared at her, unsettled. I hope to God I heard an r in that.

"That's a new one on me," he ventured. "What, was your father a legal scholar?"

She hooted. "Him? Neither one!"

"What's it from, then?" Darius persisted. "I mean, it's perfectly fine by me, whatever you ^{wish} ~~want~~ to dub yourself. Society oughtn't be permitted to put a person in lifelong irons by fastening onto you some name that you utterly don't--"

Wherever that was headed, she cut it off with:

"It's a nickname I picked up, is all. Short for peroxide."

She saw he still didn't have a clue, and wondered what century Scotland was back in. "My hair, stupe. How do you think I get this blond?"

"Ah!" ~~He~~ ~~Darius~~ nodded and nodded as if he savvied everything about her now, which Proxy entirely doubted.

"You're one to talk," she pointed out sharply. ~~"Dah~~ ~~"Dah-RYE-us.~~
Where's that kind of fandoodle come from?"

"My father was in his Persian period," Darius said. "He went nights, ancient history classes at the Mechanics' Institution. I've always told my brother Hugh he was lucky that was over with by the time he came along, or he'd have ended up Xerxes."

He turned back to her. "What's your real one, though?"

"Oh," she mulled a moment and with a skewed smile brought out:
"Susannah."

"Susannah Shannon?" He looked inordinately pleased. Men will always go for anything sappy enough, Proxy ~~was~~ ^{found} confirmed in for the hundredth time. "But that's utter music, woman!" ~~he~~ ~~Darius~~ enthused.

"Person could dance a reel to that."

"Proxy," she said uncategorically, "is what I go by."

Two nights later, he was back for more.

—

Something for you, Meg, Hugh had been meaning to say. Hand her his share of the trade beads, make a joke about having gone all the way back to old Fort Peck to shop for jewelry for his wife. But he didn't, not quite yet. He knotted the azure trove of beads in a corner of one of the oil rags Neil kept behind the truck seat, then tied the little bundle to one of the coil springs up under the seat, out of sight. Save them, he could just hear that fancy tongue of Darius saying, for when the time is propitious.

In bed is the only way he knows how to make up, Meg mused. The Hugh Duff definition of everything, is that? For that matter, is it going to be mine?

—

"You work too hard," Charlene was telling Owen.

"That's how hard it takes," Owen told her tiredly.

—

"Gotta be your carburetor." Bruce had his head under the hood of the truck alongside Neil's. "That or your gas line. Probably both need blowing out."

"Wasn't I born lucky," Neil said, "to know somebody who's full of government air."

—
"How you doing now?"

"I feel big as a house."

~~But Rhonda~~ ^{Kate}, does it feel like there's an honest-to-goodness person there inside of you, or some kind of other thing that'll, you know, turn out to be a person?"

"You ask stuff that most people don't even want to think about, anybody ever tell you that?"

"Oh, are you back in that awful mood? Does that come and go, or do you generally just feel stinko?"

"Rosellen, I'm so pregnant I could bust. If I'm lucky, I'll bust.

So, okay, then? That satisfy your curiosity?"

—
"Let me borrow your office, Tom."

"Shannon, what you haven't thought of to borrow from me hasn't been invented yet." Nonetheless he waved her toward the back of the saloon and turned his attention to the bar commerce again.

Proxy locked the door behind her, then stepped to the office's sole

window and yanked down the greenblind shade. [#] Privacy thus insured, with
 one hand on Tom Harry's desk ^{to balance} ~~balancing~~ herself she whipped off one shoe
 and then the other, then took down her slacks and in a practiced quick
 unbuttoning was out of her blouse as well. Underwear and stockings she
 didn't wear on the job, they ^{only} ~~just~~ complicated matters and besides, the
 joes fell for that in a big way, naked lady under a ^{couple of pearl} ~~few~~ buttons.

Barefoot all over, she dipped water into Tom Harry's washbasin
 and began using his washcloth on herself. Ran the chilly soppy cloth
 over her breasts first, there was always some reassurance in how quick
 her nipples stood up and saluted. (Another thing the joes fell for.)
 She scrubbed on downward, flinching but thorough. Told herself what
 she had to keep telling herself in this line of work: Take care of the
merchandise, Prox. Don't let it show wear and tear. Wurr and turr,
 would be Darius's version. She wondered whether all Scotchmen had their
 voiceboxes in their noses.

She didn't often do this, take a spit bath before going home with
 an overnighter. But there was no real chance to ^{herself} ~~clean~~ up at the houseboat,
 these nights, before the bed went into gear--this ^{nightly tomcat} ~~Darius~~ was no different

from the rest of men on that, naturally inclined toward the horizontal--
 and besides, sacktime with this one ~~was~~ ^{counted for a lot,} ~~lucrative~~ Darius Duff unhesitatingly
 paid for extra stuff, and extras onto the extras. Whatever--more likely
 whoever--this joe was trying to get over, he had it bad. ~~Only~~ [#] problem was,
 he was running through his money as if he had haystacks of it, which
 Proxy doubted. She hated to slow up on him. Beneath that bed in the
 houseboat was a suitcase which held neat rows of the pocket sacks Bull
 Durham tobacco came in. A used Durham sack would hold exactly twenty
 silver dollars, and Proxy was filling them assiduously; the only bank
 she trusted was the bank of the Missouri River. Yet how much good would
 it do her to pump money out of Darius so fast that even he would catch
 on; a John D. of this sort didn't often crop up. So, string him along,
 or grab it off as it comes? Come on, Prox, make up your mind, this
shouldn't take a frigging Act of Congress.

She towed off, then reassembled herself into the silklike blouse
 and snug slacks. Doing up her face in Tom Harry's mirror, Proxy Shannon
 was short of beautiful but more than qualified as provocative. She had
 a spoilsport diagonal smile, which, paradoxically, the sharper she slanted

it, the broader its force on the male recipient. Look very closely and there could be found a few battlelines at the corners of her ^{hazel} eyes, but again, these simply confirmed to the male order that she knew what to do with all this arsenal of hers.

~~##~~ ———
This could not be a sound idea, Darius told himself, this amount of Proxy.

Yet could it.

He examined the matter. The other Duffs shared him around at Sunday dinner--once a month for ^{him} ~~he~~ and Hugh to be at the same table seemed to be about the right interval, just now--but otherwise he didn't much cross paths with ^{any of} ~~them~~ except for Owen, busy bee whose overseeing often brought him to the boatyard. Darius was quite sure he was not missed during his traipses to Plentywood with Jaraala every second Saturday, so why would a nightly hour or two, well, all right, several, in somewhat dubious company be noticed either?

Besides, the kind of company he was finding on the houseboat was its own best argument. He still ached for Meg, and Proxy ^{expertly} ~~extracted~~ that ache, at least the physical portion of it.

He stirred himself, back to giving her a listening smile as she was

telling him about--if he was following this correctly--her stint as personal nurse to a bootlegger.

"It was real too bad, but he was one sick pup," Proxy's narrative had reached. "His own homebrew did it to him. Fusel oil poisoning-- see, he didn't get all that junk out of his brew and when he tasted it some, that's all she wrote, Buster. You ever see anybody with fusel oil poisoning?"

He shook his head, rapt.

"They turn blue as a robin's egg," she told him in a confidential tone.

Darius shuddered and decided he was getting off easy with only ill-tasting American beer.

"What became of him, then?" he urged her on.

"I brought him out of it. All I could do. Day and night, I stayed with him, kept making him sweat that stuff out of himself." She rolled her head back and forth on the pillow in evident wonder at the memory.

"You know what? He paid me double what he was supposed to, he was just so hopped up with gratitude."

Incredible woman, really. She had already told him about the time an Indian chief on the Fort Peck Reservation had wanted to make her one of his wives, and the episode of, if he understood it right, an alphabetical elk who had been roped during a cattle gather near her uncle's ranch in one of the Dakotas and branded one end to the other with cattle brands from Lazy A to Flying Z. True, Darius had detected a bit of a tendency for Proxy to be cast large in her own stories, but then aren't we all.

"Proxy, where do you come from?" he suddenly wanted to know.

"Originally, I mean."

~~She~~ Proxy shrugged. # "As much as anywhere, the Twin Cities."

~~He~~ Darius wouldn't even try to bluff on American geography. # "And

those duo are--?"

Proxy raised her eyebrows, then gave him a laugh. "Wheeler and Fort Peck, can't you tell by looking?"

"Enough about nativity, evidently." He cast a glance across her to the alarm clock. "I'll need to be going, won't I. First, though, as the Irishman said on his wedding night, 'Could I trouble ye again, Miss Shannon?' That bit we were doing last night, I could stand another

session of that."

"A sixty-nine?" she asked with professional consideration. "Or the sidewinder?"

"Well, one and then the other, what about." He raised up on an elbow, though, grimacing in the direction of a dog's nightsplitting barks. "Blast that cur. A man can't hear himself function." He climbed out of bed, went over to the window and called out, "Quiet down, pot licker."

"Don't you know anything? Dogs speak German." She padded to the window and let loose at the top of her voice, "Raus!"

The barking stopped.

"Devastating." Darius gave her an appreciative chuckle, then a caress that started high and ended low. "But then, you naturally are, Proxy." He stepped toward the chair where his pants and wallet were. "While I'm up, I'll tend to the pecuniary--"

"Never mind," ^{she} ~~Proxy~~ said, "I'll take it out in trade." She saw his face light up. "Not that kind, pudhead. Do some chores around here for a change. Split some wood, pack out the ashes. Start just about anywhere." She turned her naked back on him and started toward

the bed, then said as if it had just occurred to her: "Make breakfasts."

#

DROP CAP

Charlene was pretty much right about how draining his workdays were, Owen had to admit. The start of October, now, and so far today he had managed to be snappish to Rosellen ("What," she'd asked when he took a look at the freshly typed September dredging total and swore, "did I make a mistake?" "Maybe this whole sonofabitching process is a mistake," he'd said and stomped off, leaving her mystified) and had riled Major Santee by insisting on Sangster for some ~~lift pipe~~^{booster pump} engineering when the Major wanted him on something else ("Glad I married a nurse," Sangster said of the Ad Building atmosphere, "she can help me put my straitjacket on") and he was only now getting to his ostensible ~~labor~~^{task}, troubleshooting the dredging. ~~He~~^{Owen} jounced down the bluff from the Ad Building, digging his heels in a little to keep his balance, toward the wall of soupy earth that was his dam and the temperamental maze of pipes and pontoons and trestles that were his dredgeline. He could not help wondering what the engineers at Grand Coulee and Bonneville and Boulder were doing at this moment. Probably sitting around in carpet slippers, solving crossword puzzles.

But Fort Peck was making monthly average progress of three million

cubic yards, just. They still were atoning for April, ~~that staggering~~
~~start to the dredging season.~~ A strong August had made up for some of
 that early
~~April's lag,~~ but September didn't pick up the monthly average as much,
 which was what had set Owen to cussing earlier this morning.

So now we got October left to go, he put his mind to. October,
November, and whatever December will let us have before snow piles up
to our belly buttons again. One nice sixty-day month out of that, just
maintaining ~~a hundred thousand~~ ~~fifty thousand~~ yards of fill a day, and there it'll be,
sufficient unto the goddamn year. Won't matter what the calendar says,
just see it all as autumn on the Montana Riviera. Take it day by day,
sixty more times out of about the next seventy-five, is what I've got
to do. Move the mud, that's the daily drill, Duff.

Owen was up onto the west half of the dam by now, the broad and brown
 Missouri flowing through between this and the east half, and upstream in
 front of him lay the quadruple sprawl of pipelines and timbering stuck
 in muck and clawed-out pits where the dredges were cutting and sucking.

Yet wasn't it pretty.

The pipeline-trestle strutworks, ~~as built by Neil and the others,~~

strode across the distance like cadets with a palanquin on their backs.

The four pipelines themselves were each two-mile-long thongs,
lacing the river valley to the new bluff of dam.

The white dredges, and their four brown fields where they were
digging away, looked almost ~~like diligent farms.~~
~~agriculturally diligent.~~

And all of it, the long pendants of pipes and machinery, day and
night ~~flickered with~~ ~~had flutters of~~ light where arc welders were rebuilding dredge
pumps and cutterheads; ~~to the tune of three tons of welding rod per~~
~~week.~~ Owen's constellation of blue flashes.

———
At the day's start of business in the Blue Eagle, Tom Harry let
drop: "You've got an admirer."

"I thought I had nations of them," Proxy said warily.

"Judging by the wear and tear on my Packard, that could be. Watch
it, though, ~~Shamen.~~ Don't go tooting that Skywegian's bagpipe for him
so much you forget our arrangement here."

"He's after-hours."

"I can tell. At one minute to two, he straightens his cap, says
to his pecker, 'Hello, down there, ready for another ride on a houseboat?'

and off he goes with you."

"Tom, you don't run me after I pack up out of here for the night."

"Then don't be letting some bughouse lawyer run you either, all I'm saying. That's not like you, Shamon."

Tom Harry turned away from her toward his cash register, but then flinched and uttered, "Jesus, what the--?" Reaching behind himself, he plucked the beer-soaked back of his white shirt away from his hide.

"Sorry about spilling all that perfectly good beer," Proxy was telling him ~~swatting~~⁹ empty glass aslant in her hand. "That's not like me, is it."

—————
Even Darius, ~~chary with~~^{for} ~~covert in~~ any credit to the Fort Peck way of doing things, was taken with the implication of the dredgeline.

"It's an aqueduct, isn't it," he said to Owen ~~now~~⁹ during their daily lunch joust. "For muck, instead of water."

"That's kind of a cockeyed way of looking at it, but yeah, basically,"

Owen granted.

"Does that make your Corps of Engineers the new Romans?"

"I forget, Darius, didn't they kick the crap out of the Persians

once?"

—

The dam was a foolkiller, they never dared forget that.

Hugh and Birdie were clearing a trap in the section of dredgeline nearest the diversion tunnels when ~~commotion~~^{hubbub} broke out at the ~~rail line~~^{railroad bridge} ~~trestle~~ just above them.

The two of them climbed the side of the dam to see what was up.

One of the gravel crew had stepped down into a dumpcar of pea gravel, where his hat had blown off to, just as the dump-doors sprung open. Between the ~~fall~~^{drop} to the ~~tunnel~~^{diversion} portal below and the beating he took from the gravel, the poor sap never had a chance.

A foreman, looking green around the gills, came up from the tunnel portal and told everybody to knock off the gawking, get back to work.

"Them tunnels aren't any too good a luck, are they," said Birdie as the pair of them slowly made their way back down the dam. Hugh knew what he meant. Tunnel pneumonia was ~~customarily~~ rampant among the crews digging the four huge diversion ~~tunnels~~^{boreholes} that the river was destined into. The dynamiter, J.L. Hill, who ~~lived~~ next door to Bruce and ~~Rhonda~~^{Kate}, had