

"Shannon, what the bejesus is going on over there, Latin lessons?

You're supposed to be out on the floor--" ^T_m

"He's a little riled up, Tom. I'll--" ^T_m

"--dancing, not gassing the sonofabitching--" ^T_m

"--make up the difference on the dance take and--" ^T_m

"--night away with some ^{yayhoo}~~yahoo~~ crying in his--" ^T_m

"Tom, I have to!" Proxy divulged at not quite the top of her voice,

but near enough. She stared nearby customers back ^{to}~~to~~ whatever they'd

been doing, then leaned across the bar toward Tom Harry and said into

his face:

~~Q~~ "Tom, ^II'm the one who got him going on--what he's going on. So,

I'll buy out my frigging dance take tonight, and I'll tell frigging Darius

not to show his ^{mug}~~face~~ around here tomorrow night, and you won't have a

thing in the frigging world to howl about, now will you."

Muttering, Tom Harry headed back to his cash register. Proxy sipped the double whiskey down to where it wouldn't spill, carried the glass across the room and deposited it in front of Darius. "Here. Nerve medicine."

Darius looked as if he was about to pop out of his skin. Leave
~~the bag of flesh behind, break into the air as pure wild fume of the soul.~~

"Drink it," Proxy tapped ~~the back of~~ a fingernail indicatively
against the oversize shotglass, "or I'm going to rub it in your hair."

Not seeming to see, Darius automatically closed a hand around the
glass and drew it up for a gulping drink.

"Here." She frisked him until she found a handkerchief in one of
his hip pockets, planted it in his hand, then lifted his hand to the
wet trail down his cheek.

"You shouldn't look at a crying man," he managed to say as he
dabbed, "it's seven years' bad luck."

"They'll just have to stand in line with the rest of my luck."

She folded her arms beneath her breasts in the I'm waiting, stupe gesture
recognized by Tom Harry across the entire length of the Blue Eagle. (ital.)

Darius took some time at it before words were found.

"Jafala knows some persons somewhere who're interested in changing
matters," he started in.

"The Red Corner," she said impatiently. "Puh-lenty-wood."

Her short-circuit of the apparatus of explanation he was building up to knocked him speechless for a minute. ~~This time~~ his voice, once he found it, strained out:

"I thought you didn't give a fiddle about political matters."

"Never bothered to ask, though, did you. Anyway, I don't."

Darius studied her, ~~meanwhile~~ wiping his cheeks with a sleeve.

"Proxy, can we ^m—this is a bit public for political elucidation."

"Everything sounds ^{better} ~~less stupid~~ on a houseboat, I suppose you think."

————— ^{sneak}
"So how come you have to ~~go~~ out of town for these politics?"

"That's where they are, that's the damned point! Don't you see?"

"Darius, there's some stuff I know that would curl your toes, okay?"

More by habit than intention they had ^{rushed} ~~gone~~ to bed as soon as they reached

the houseboat, and the ^enow-familiar touch of their bodies along each

other was simply part of the atmosphere there. But Darius realized

that tonight Proxy was heating up in not the accustomed sense. "Maybe

I don't give a flip about these politics of yours," her words struck

him like pebbles of warning, "but you better not ever think you can

write me off with 'Don't you see?' I see quite a frigging lot when I want to, Scotchpotch."

"I've no doubt of that now," he could say with sincerity.

"Keep it in mind then," she recommended. "So what's all this with you dipping your wick in politics?"

"Back in Scotland I was in the movement..."

"What'd you ever move?"

"Proxy, if Marx'd had to answer to you, he'd still be sorting his umlauts from his apostrophes."

"Sor-ry," she said derisively, but snuggled a little closer to him.

Wary, he waited a minute. Then the long struggle began unspooling out of him, litany of trying to find the political moment, the pivot of rule.

all but
"We had the bastards in 'll," he bitterly arrived at. "Proxy,

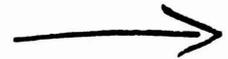
I tell you, we had them like this." Above where she lay, she could just discern in the darkness that Darius had lifted his left hand and closed it into a fist. It was a good guess that fist was clenched so

tightly the knuckles had gone pale. "The Triple Alliance," his voice journeyed on. "The railwaymen, the miners, and the dockworkers," he named them off like bellpeals. "They were readying to shut down the country, and that would have brought out enough of the rest of us in support. We'd have changed the face of history, turnable where that she is." Proxy went tense as a cat at a fur show, but ~~decided to mean~~

~~nothing personal by that when~~ Darius shot on: "But the war came. And before you could say Tommy, men lined up in ranks to kill men just like themselves."

She made no pronouncement about the world's majority of stupes, but almost.

"We nearly had them again in '26, the General strike." Darius lightly pounded his fists together, knuckles against knuckles, like rams' heads meeting. "That was to be the time." His fury came and



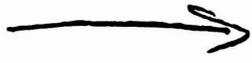
went again, with the rasping memory of the warships standing gray but distinct out there on the Clyde while ashore the strike-breakers wrested back the docks and power stations and tram lines, sailors and police and blacklegs ^{conspiring} to keep the General Strike from ever living up to its name.

conspiring

yes

"The hard times, that was the next chance." His chest rising and falling as if still catching breath from then, Darius recited to Proxy the hunger marches of '31 and '32, the Depression-desperate crowds that took to the streets and struggled with the police, the perfidy of Ramsay MacDonald's government, the flare-up along the Clydeside this past winter...there at 1934, his voice stopped for a moment, then stumbled out with:

"There was some trouble."



Alongside him in the wordless minute after that, Proxy puckered
her lips and began to blow silently and steadily toward the side of



Darius's neck, perhaps six inches away.

When that eventually drew his attention and he turned his head in her direction, she cut off the little stream of air.

"Unless I miss my guess," she said, "you were in it up to the top of your neck."

#

ital

The crackdown had begun in '32, led by the London police. Up the length of Great Britain, the tactic now was to charge into the marchers and crowds of the unemployed, break their numbers with the swing of truncheons. The Clydeside had been delivered blows before, and by experts, but there was no sense having your brains scrambled on a regular basis. Darius, by then a member of his committee's flying squad--movement veterans who were dispatched into the streets whenever trouble or opportunity flared--adapted to the times by carrying a piece of lead pipe, just short enough to fit in the deep side pocket of his jacket, just long enough to have some effect against a policeman's club. He and others of the flying squad particularly watched for young coppers in skirmishes; at the street gatherings, catch one unaware and you could give him a shiver, the whack of your lead pipe against his oak truncheon stinging

ok?
yes

his hand. Doctrine lay behind even such street guerrilla tactics, after all: the minimum of brutality compatible with...

By the winter of '34, Darius's wing of the labor movement and the middle-of-the-road Trades Union Council were in blind alliance simply ^{to try} to keep people fed. There were those, Darius included, who believed the TUC couldn't find its guts with both hands during the General Strike, but resentment never ^{made a meal;} ~~filled the porridge bowls,~~ food tickets had to be distributed to the unemployed, and Darius was to spell his TUC counterpart at the Woodturners Hall the afternoon of doling out tickets there. He arrived to a mob piled against the closed hall.

Darius struggled, half-swam, through the swarm of men.

"I'm from the Clydeside flying squad! Let me through, we'll get the distribution going, LET ME FOR CHRIST'S SAKE THROUGH!"

He shoved and was shoved to the door of the hall, where he managed to negotiate the men there ^{some} ~~a few~~ of them fortunately recognized him ⁱⁿ into letting him unlock the door and go in alone. Then he had to push in against the resisting shoulder from inside.

Roman

SC



Italy

"Crawfurd, you great fool, it's me, Duff!"

Darius wrenched through the narrowly opened door, then he and the other slammed it and leaned their backs against it, looking at each other. George Crawfurd was white as numery paint.

"We're in the shit," the TUC man whispered to Darius. "They allotted ^{but} us five hundred tickets. Christ only knows how many are howling out there."

An easy riotful, Darius could agree. Still, the pair of them had to do what they could.

"None the neverless," Darius intoned, then laughed. Crawfurd gaped at him like a beached fish.

"~~We've got to get at this,~~ ^{We need to get cracking} Darius told him as the outside clamor began to rise again, "or they'll be in here all over us. I'll pass them through one at a time, you hand the tickets."

Crawfurd backed away doubtfully, pulling a table and chair to one side, away from the direct sluice of the doorway.

Darius turned around to the door. Unlocked it, rammed it open and flung himself sidewise into the doorframe, his back straight and

ital

tight against one side and his right foot up as high as he could against the jamb on the other side, making a barrier of his cocked leg.

"One at a time, boys, under the leg!" he shouted into the mass of faces. "Our man George Crawford, inside, has your food tickets. But we've got to do it orderly or it can't get done. Easy go now, here, you be first"—he reached out and tugged at a thick-shouldered man who appeared to be ~~looked like~~ the most explosive of the bunch. "Under the bridge. If you'll fit, we can put through anybody up to drayhorses."

That drew a tentative laugh from the human wall. The thickset man hesitated, then ducked awkwardly under Darius's leg, his back bumping the underside of Darius's thigh as he waddled under and through.

"Easy go," Darius said again, to the next man. "It's the only right leg I've got, so scoot as low as you can, that's the way... Another, now." He reached out for a sleeve, any nearest sleeve, and tugged indicatively downward. "That's it, down to the scenic route. I know this'd be more interesting if my name was Fifi, but..."

For the next hours and hundreds upon hundreds of men, Darius stayed jammed in the doorway, a cork against the hungry human sea. When he

Hal

spotted a particularly small man coming, he would make the switch and put his other foot up on the doorjamb, ~~try~~ to rest the aching leg.

Twice, too, he had to drop his leg and fight off doorbreakers, men who lost their heads, whether from panic, fury or desperation it didn't matter, and lunged blindly at the doorway. Both times he had the luck that the nearest men on line instantly turned into his allies, swatting sense into the berserk ones.

Even a good many of the better-behaved men were ~~a bit~~ wild-eyed, plunging into the arch of Darius's leg. Many others simply looked dog-miserable, ashamed of taking this dole, even if it came from their labor brethren.

Then out of the head of the line raged a man with a thin, pinched face, a twitchy manner, and a screeching disbelief. # "What's it to you whether we starve or not?" he unloosed ~~at Darius~~ from inches away.

"It would offend me," Darius railed back, "to see people die like midges!" Grabbing the man by the scruff of the neck, he ducked him on through beneath his leg.

Through it all ~~Darius~~^{he} kept count, deliberately making it obvious,

L.O.

as proctoral¹ as possible. If he would stay intent and orderly about this, the incipient mob would. Possibly. He let the running stream of numbers purl under his aching leg, his weariness and fear. He found his flat pencil, and each time that he had counted twenty men, he would reach up and score the lead across the doorframe above him.

At last the waiting men were a wedge several deep instead of dozens.

Darius shifted his eyes carefully among this remainder of the crowd,² the last men, ~~the tireddest~~ which would mean they were the angriest.

He let the next few go uncounted beneath his leg as he looked up at the doorframe and tallied the twenties. Twenty of them themselves, which it took him a groggy moment to work out as equaling four hundred.

He swung his gaze back to the waiting remnant and, but for the vital matter of demeanor, could have cheered. There were going to be enough food tickets, by a sound margin.

#

Darius had the tortured back of a keelhauling victim. From his rump to the base of his neck, skin was gone in several places and what was left was red and raw. Crawford uncorked a ^{pint} ~~half-bottle~~ of whiskey and handed it to him. The shirtless man swigged, shuddered, swigged

again and nodded his thanks. Then with obvious pain he put on his coat.

"You're sure you want anything touching that back?" Crawford asked.

"No," Darius expelled, "but can't you see them arresting me for public indecency if I don't?"

"You did a grand job of work here today," Crawford said. "It was a near thing, too—we've only ^{a dozen} ~~ten~~ tickets left. Minus yours, of course"— he thumbed one from the thin sheaf and put ^t ~~it~~ on the table beside Darius— "and my own," putting that one in his coat pocket. "I'll turn ^g ~~in~~ these other ^{back} ~~few~~ to the committee first thing in the morning."

Darius stood silent, weaving just noticeably, the coat draped over his shirtless upper body.

"Another lift of this?"

Crawford held out the whiskey to him again.

"George," Crawford heard Darius Duff say coldly, "turn out your pockets."

The shorter man kept his gaze on Darius and tried a laugh. "What's this, now. Darius, man, you've had a massive day—"

"Give or take goddamn few," Darius's voice came to him wearily but fiercely, "I put four hundred and forty-eight men through that doorway."

ital

ten
That plus our two plus that ~~eight~~ you're so busy showing off to me comes
out at four hundred and sixty ~~sixty~~ ^{tickets}, doesn't it. Where're the other forty
you've palmed?"

Crawfurd cast a disturbed look at the figure before him, damned ladder of a man. He was not predisposed in favor of Darius Duff, who according to gossip along the Clyde had a plentiful history of bedmates among his female Red mates. George Crawfurd, a bit of a trimmer in everything but family matters, wasn't going to be chided by a sleepabout.

"It's not that way at all," Crawfurd began to protest hotly. "You must've miscounted, or maybe I--"

Darius slammed him against the wall, one hand holding the neck of ^g of Crawfurd's shirt while the other felt at his pockets. The searching hand found the extra sheaf of food tickets in the inside pocket of Crawfurd's jacket.

"It's none of your damned business!" Crawfurd shouted. "A man has a right to--" ^m he broke off and swung an arm around onto Darius's back, thumping as hard as he could with his fist. Darius gasped and arched his back, but wrenched out the wad of tickets. Crawfurd grabbed that

turn loose

wrist, trying to make him ~~let go~~ of them. They scuffled until Crawford

pounded Darius's back again, and as Darius groaned, Crawford forced

his hand against the table, clawing for the tickets. Too late he ~~saw~~ ^{glimpsed}

the lead pipe in Darius's other hand.

end
of
#



"Who, mannerly me?"

Darius swung off the bed, keeping his face away from Proxy after that unmissing guess of hers. In the trouble to the top of his neck? More like over the peak of his head. He went to the water bucket and drank from the dipper, the cold galvanized taste going down in big swallows. He remembered the exact sound, like a dropped sack of meal, of Crawford's skull splitting, he could trace out every inch of how that foolish death had come to happen. Crawford, don't. This time, man, don't do as you did, and spare us both the... But there wasn't a second time, was there, where Crawford was concerned. The once was the all.

Proxy could tell trouble a mile off, and Darius was only from her to the water bucket.

Isn't this just ducky, she mullied ~~turned over in her thinking~~ ^{as} ~~while~~ she who halfway has watched him, I find one with a little money and some smarts, and he's some kind of hoodoo in the old country.

He knew she was calculating him. He tried to muster a smile but didn't nearly make it. "What obtains, do you think? Regarding me."

"You mean should I bounce your butt off this houseboat sooner rather than later?"

"That's the essence, Proxy, yes." He did manage a bit of smile now but of the sad sort.

"This Red stuff, and these tictacs of yours over there in Outer Nowhere," she gave a little thrust of her head in the approximate direction of Plentywood. "Are they catching?"

"Some people are quite ^{immune} immune," he admitted. "But you, I would hope—" _M

"Darius. If they pin something on you, will any get on me?"

He looked at her, in that dry way that she figured Scotchmen adopted at the time they were weaned. "Your reputation probably will not suffer, Proxy, even if mine should happen to."

#

DROP CAP

Neil had made the discovery of coal. The seam of it was a couple of hours' drive straight east along the Missouri, to where Big Muddy Creek found its way down out of the Plentywood country and joined the river.

As a mining operation it did not amount to much--the coal crew had to crawl

~~lunker~~ in on hands and knees to dig the skinny seam--and neither did the

coal, soft slightly brownish lignite junk that burned like punk. But Neil already knew life wasn't guaranteed to be a ~~scuttle~~ ~~skittle~~ of anthracite, and so he garnered a ton of the soft coal at a time, all but living in the truck after he got off his dredgeline shift. Wheeler and the other matchbox towns now were showing ~~coal~~ ~~heaps~~ ^{coal} heaps in backyards where he and the Ford ~~Double~~ ^{Triple} had deposited woodpiles the autumn before, and Neil told himself that if he didn't turn into a zombie and drive the truck off the bridge into Big Muddy Creek one of these dark evenings, he and Rosellen were going to have the world by the tail after a few more ~~such~~ ^g trucking seasons.

He blew in for supper now, though, to find Rosellen looking both excited and perturbed. ~~It had to be her writing.~~

"Get a billydoo from one of those magazines?" he barely had to guess.

"Really did, this time," she said ^g somewhere between rueful and thoughtful. "Not one of their printed ^g ^m ^g ^g rejections--an honest-to-God letter from the editor."

"Well, that's progress!" He studied the mixture of expression she still had. "Don't you think?"

410

"It is and it isn't." What Rosellen had dreamt of was an editor's letter, a telegram would have been even better, saying eager to publish

ital. whatever you care to send... "He said my endings need work." ~~In fact, indeed,~~

the sentence that stood out in the actual editor's message was, There

is an adage, Miss Duff, about the writer's requisite scrutiny of his

previous tries: 'Employ the eraser.' "He said they're too much like

ital. O. Henry."

"Who the hell is Old Henry?"

She saw how angry, instantly and deeply, Neil was on her behalf.

Before she could say anything, he was telling her:

"This guy, editor or whatever he is. Write him a letter. Right now, why don't you. Tell him to go take a flying jump."

She ~~went~~ ^{charged} over and hugged him, coal dust and all, coaxing each other out of their mood with the familiar press of body against body. But there still was a trickle of fear in ^{her} ~~Rosellen~~, that the editor ^{might be} ~~was~~ right.

Not only right, but that she maybe could not do any better with endings

or any of the rest of it than she already ^{had} ~~was~~.

#
p. 410A follows

"Scurf," Meg said. "All babies get scurf."

"Yeah, but ~~it~~" Bruce looked at Kate and she at him, mutually dismayed over the ^{ugly} patch of dry scaly skin on the exact top of Jackie's head.

"Kate," Meg's commander-in-chief tone. "It is no ^{lasting} reflection on you as a mother."

"Thanks. I think."

"A little scurf on him or not, he's a beaner," Hugh declared. He grinned across the bassinet at Kate and said, "The family line has taken a distinct upturn," suddenly convincing her of the virtue of Jackie having grandparents.

"Hey, ~~how~~ didn't I have something to do with ~~it~~"

"No offense intended, Bruce."

————— p. 410B follows →

The night after going off to Plentywood again with Jaraala,
Darius ^{hove} hove into the Blue Eagle at his usual time and there was no
Proxy.

"She said to tell you she's out finding gold tonight," Tom Harry
relayed. "I were you, I wouldn't wait up."

"Ah," Darius digested this news. "What's that name you and she
have for a customer with a heavy purse, a John Q.?"

"John D.," Tom Harry provided drily, "as in Rockefeller."

"The very one, of course." Darius shifted from one foot to the
other, casting long-faced ^{gazes} looks around the confines of the Blue Eagle.

"Well, then, now." He put a hand in his pocket toward coinage, upon
second thought drew it back out.

"Cripes sake, fella, you look like somebody just took a leak on
your leg," Tom Harry diagnosed for him. "Belly up here, I'll stand you
a beer. Hate to see a man too bollixed to buy himself a drink."

"What's this under the category of, 'The devil's good to his own?'"
Darius marveled as Tom Harry uncapped a beer and positioned it in front
of him. "Or have you merely gone mad?"

"Duff, I wouldn't trade you for a pinto pony. Come on back into the office a minute, there's something interesting you've got to see."

~~Knowing no reason not to bring his beer along,~~ Darius and bottle strolled after ^{him} Tom Harry to the cubbyhole office off to the side of the bandstand. Tom Harry opened the door and stepped back. Darius stepped in and found himself facing a large man who wore the obvious item of interest, a badge.

At Darius's look, Tom Harry lifted his shoulders in a ~~you don't~~ see any pinto pony around here, do you shrug and closed the door after himself.

"Name's Peyser," the man said, holding out a thick mitt of hand. On his hip rode a pistol with an ivory butt the size of a hunting horn. "I'm the undersheriff down at this end of the county."

Ital

Crawfurd, oh Christ, Crawfurd and Duff, you'll die facing the monument screamed a chorus together in Darius's head, but he managed to shake the undersheriff's meaty hand and drop into the straightback chair the man indicated.

"Where'd you land in here from?" Peyser started right in.

"Glasgow," Darius said without specifying which ~~was~~ nation.

Peyser grunted as if that was what he had expected. "Something you better know about," he said as if Darius had come to him for advice. "I was appointed to this badge by a sheriff who is hell on wheels about politics. He's hell on wheels about most things, but politics really fires him up. Particularly those that go pretty far in a certain direction. Off toward Plentywood, say."

Not Crawford then, sang in Darius. At least not yet.

³ he
Bold with relief, ~~Darius~~ mustered:

"I had no idea there's a law in America against going for a Saturday drive."

"If you're claiming that a man's political persuasion isn't against the law in this country, that's true, as far as it goes. But Sheriff Kinnick, ~~if~~ he was here, would point out to you that we can generally come up with some law that a person is on the stray side of." The undersheriff leaned forward as if getting down to business. "There's feeling that goes back a long way against radicals--Wobs and such. Trouble-making, wildcat strikes, sabotage--that's the kind of stuff the

Wobblies got themselves a reputation for, in case you didn't know."

"That's their reputation, is it," Darius said as if marveling.

"And here I thought the Industrial Workers of the World, to give them their rightful name, were known for being put in front of a firing squad in your Utah, shot on the docks in your state of Washington, and ~~hung~~ ^{hanged} from the nearest ~~bridge~~ ^{trestle} in places such as your Butte."

"I won't say those didn't happen, too," the undersheriff said.

"Lots happens." Peyser eyed Darius as if calculating how large he had to spell it out for him. All the way, he decided.

"If you get on the wrong side of Sheriff Kinnick," the undersheriff



said unequivocally, "he's the type who will nail your pecker to a tree and give you only a rusty saw to get loose with."

"Ah, thank you, no," Darius said. "Point taken."

"But," Peyser patiently kept on, "Sheriff Kinnick isn't here, is he. So, to keep me from having to keep track of you for him, why don't you ~~just~~⁹ be a little choosier about who you hang out with."

By Clydeside reflex, Darius instantly set about to split that doctrinal hair. "Everywhere?"

"No, hell no, only around here. Up in Plentywood, I don't give a poop what you do. That's not our jurisdiction."

"So I'm to mend my manners when I'm not in a car with a certain party," Darius pursued, "but once we hie off together...?"

"That pretty much ought to do it," the beefy undersheriff said in the same spelling-out voice. "As far as I'm concerned, Jaraala's okay."

Some will tell you he's one of those bughouse cases, off the deep end politically. That's only the Scandihoovian ~~flair~~ in him, I figure."

Darius took a swallow of beer and carefully tried: "That sounds like perhaps a different tack from your Sheriff Kinnick's."

"This job's a job." Peyser looked impassively at Darius. "If I had to agree with everything any boss thinks, where the hell would I ever work?"

———

He always dealt with them naked, waiting in bed with only a sheet over him, lights off, his mouth a little dry with anticipation until whichever floozie it was this time rapped on his door.

When he heard the knock now, he raised his voice just enough to be heard outside. "You found it."

About all he could make out of this one as she stepped into the darkened room was that her hair was unnaturally pale, blond, nearly the silvered-up color of the moon on a clear night. As usual he couldn't see the face in any detail and didn't care; face wasn't the part that interested him on these occasions. To his surprise, this one stopped there by the door and said:

"You do keep it darker than a black cat's ass in here, sheriff, sir."

He didn't say anything to that, as it was self-evident. He listened to the sliding sounds of her undressing. When she padded over to the bed, he asked:

"You're who?"

"Does that matter any?" Proxy had been all set to say something like 'Claudette' as usual, but somehow decided the hell with it, brass would do. She still was huffy about Tom Harry having sent her on this, even though she had dickered double the usual price out of him; if Tom and the other Wheeler nightspot owners had to slip some satisfaction to little Kinnickinnick here every couple of weeks, that was their problem and not hers. Quite where this risky attitude came from, she didn't know. Usually the thing to do was to tell herself a joe was a joe except when he was a John D. and then the enthusiasm could be found to exert herself on his wallet somewhat more; but tonight, she was in just no mood to pretend. Nor did she care what he was going to think, sheriff or no sheriff. After all, she had been run out of better towns than this.

This one isn't scared, the sheriff thought to himself, and wasn't sure whether he liked that fact or not.

"I need to tell you what's involved here?" he asked.

"I hear you like--you always want a trip around the world," she said.

As much as it galled him to know they talked about him, he was

relieved not to have to issue minute instructions ~~on something like this.~~

"That's the deal, all right," he said gruffly. Then: "That sort of thing suit you?"

"That doesn't matter either, does it," he heard her say, and then her mouth began to make its ports of call on his small body.

#

Workforce roster in hand, around him ~~low pyramids~~ of dredgeline pontoons being built as fast as hammers could go and the swing shift about to come in the gate and keep the pace going, Cecil Medwick looked upon his boatyard and found it good. Except for one Scottish thistle.

Medwick watched Darius Duff handling work with an ease that, if you did not know better, could be mistaken for inattention. Most of these Fort Peck workers had cut their teeth on rural manual labor, so that the only style they knew was to tear into a job and muscle it into surrender.

But Darius more--^DMedwick wasn't sure he even had the right word for it--^D
_m _m
teased away at the construction of pontoons and pump boats and the like.

His work was good as gold, that wasn't the problem. He was just--^Ddifferent.
_m

And evidently going to stay that way, Medwick had found out. The time he caught Darius putting in a couple of ~~latitudinal~~ bulkheads where he

was sure one ~~longitudinal~~ ^{longitudinal} one would serve, he asked: "Where the hell did you learn to do it that way?" Darius had looked at him with a perfectly serious face and answered, "Building the Queen Mary."

Granted, a man could learn his boatbuilding trade on the Clyde River or up the Woogadooga and Medwick wouldn't care, so long as the guy really knew his stuff. No, that wasn't what was bugging Medwick. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something about Darius did not fit. The guy rang wrong as a solder dollar.

The shift changed, and Medwick traded gab with the men coming on, but he still watched the stiff³spined figure of Darius Duff until it went out the boatyard gate. Medwick knew in his sleep that the best way to can a guy was always FFI, failure to follow instructions. But that method of firing wouldn't work with Darius, because Darius did follow the goddamn things, he simply did so in a way that told you he knew better.

Maybe, though, just maybe there was another shot at showing ^{him} ~~Darius~~ the road. Medwick had been feeling it in the air all evening, and its little stings of cold were starting to hit the backs of his hands with nasty regularity now. He took another look at his clipboard with the roster on it,

thinking through the angles of this. Owen Duff was always a major consideration, but from what Medwick heard about the dredge averages, Owen was maybe having his own troubles. So Owen might not be so hot a hotshot from now on, looking out for every Duff on two legs. And if that was to be the case... ~~and checked the letter after~~ Medwick moved his finger down the roster to Darius's name ~~and checked~~ There it sat, the way to discharge him, ~~that simple~~ good old S for Single. ~~little a~~ After the dredging shutdown, and the Fort Peck fleet was tucked into the winter harbor, a proportion of the workforce would be laid off seasonally, so-called. Preference for being kept on went to the ~~the~~ M's, family men.

Satisfied, Medwick unclipped his roster and stuck it inside his coat to protect it from the faster falling snow.

#

"Well, fuck and foocy." In disgust Owen directed an angry heel at the frozen mud of the riverbank. His spirited try didn't even dent the ~~stuff~~ ^{substance}. Overnight, with the help of a north wind and a dusting of dry snow, the banks of the Missouri had turned into brown iron. And his hope of dredging on into December hadn't even made it to November; this was the thirty-first of October, and it looked a hell of a lot like shutdown.

Owen unloosed a few more stanzas of cussing, but absently, already studying the dredge fleet and the dull gray morning as if adding up a column of numbers and checking the unwelcome sum. "Max, what do you think the chances are of lucking out on a week or two of thaw?"

"Zero, or maybe just none," Sangster provided.

"You're telling me to stash it all in winter harbor, just accept shutdown six or seven weeks earlier than we had to last year."

"Uh huh."

"You're telling me I could get my tail in real trouble if I fiddlefart around and get the whole dredging setup frozen into the river."

"You bet."

"What I like about you, Max, is the way you present an argument."

Owen shoved his hands even deeper into his coat pockets, pulled his chin into his coat collar and peered from under his brows up the bluff toward the Ad Building. "Isn't the Colonel just really going to love this news for breakfast." With Sangster in step beside him, he set off to deliver the word of shutdown.

Wouldn't you know it. Last year I had only the one dredge and the

ital.

weather let us peck away on the fill until Christmas Eve. Now I've got

the four of them up and going and it's the earliest winter since the

Ice Age. Okay, okay, take it easy, Duff, these things happen. Next

year is what I better start worry^{ing} about now. Figure out April, this

time. ~~See if I can come up with a Murgatroyd factor that'll be some~~

~~goddamn use to us, for a change.~~

Holy cow, though. For that matter, foocy and fuck, again. All

of a mighty sudden there's three million cubic yards of fill that I'm

short this year. That ain't canary feed, as Max would tell me. Next

year we--we, hell, me, myself and I--are going to need to move mud like

it's never been moved before. Meanwhile, welcome to winter harbor,

everybody.

#

DROP CAP

The dreamwork of Fort Peck built through the November nights,

turbulent, drifting on the dark change of season and work and prospect,

restless inside the bone hulls of fate, thousands of sleep-made privacies

tossing and turning. Wheeler, with its alcohol content, tended toward

inward uproar: showdowns, arguments won on a second try, woozy otherwise-

unimaginable sexual situations. In the Fort Peck townsite along Officers'

Row, the dreams held a tendency toward hierarchy, Colonel ^{Armenter}Pemberton's vision of a command post in the blissful sweltering Philippines and Mrs. ^{Armenter}Pemberton's nocturnal jaunt backward thirty years and thirty pounds to her cotillion debut both overriding, say, Captain Brascoe's delirious armwaving scene with garbagemen who were delivering garbage into his tidy streets instead of ^{hauling}~~taking it away~~. Across a few of those streets, in the barracks, Darius dreamt back to Scotland. One floor up from him, Jaarala in his slumber was shaking dice against Tom Harry and Ruby Smith, and winning.

In both towns, in the course of any night, more than one man dreamed of Proxy Shannon.

Within the walls of the Duffs, Hugh was on mental horseback, riding a workhorse--it seemed to be the broad-beamed ^{dun}~~gray~~ nag they had called 'Hippo', back on the homestead--through the snowdrifts of the road between Fort Peck and Glasgow. He thought it odd he was drawing a wage for this, merely riding around in the snow, but who was he to complain. Meg, beside him and not, ^g~~in her slumber~~ was on the

bandstand of the Blue Eagle, where she could peer over the heads of the crowd, watching and watching, until finally she saw him come in through the door, the tall familiar figure of Hugh. It was Hugh, wasn't it? Bruce slept the sleep of the underwater walker, stupefied but ~~unafraid~~ ^{unalarmed,} while ~~Florida~~ ^{Kate} wanted out of the dream she was in, where she was trying to wait on customers in the Rondola and feed Jack on her breast at the same time and the smartasses along the counter kept saying, I'll have what Jackie's having. Meanwhile Rosellen was stalled in a reverie version of the Wheeler post office, waiting for the mail. Every time she went up to the wicket window and asked Is there any for me?, the postmaster would say Did you bring a gumnysack for it?, then laugh and turn away. Minutes ~~ago,~~ ^{before} Neil woke up on a rancher's approach road halfway between the coal mine and Fort Peck, having pulled over to doze when he thought he might fall asleep at the wheel, and now, ~~feeling cold and stiff,~~ ^{and around} he had climbed out and was walking around ^g the truck ~~a dozen times~~ to get himself warm and awake enough to drive home. Charlene, by contrast, was steaming in her dream, trying to run a beauty shop the size of Cunningham's department store, customers in chairs even up on the mezzanine, and the

itali

itali

only help she had was Meg who kept asking, Charlene, tell me again

what to do when they say they want the works. And working at sleep

next to Charlene, in sessions that were more like naps linked together,

lay ~~was~~ Owen, perpetually trying to get somewhere on a train, but every

single time the conductor came by and demanded his ticket, he could not

find the thing.

Owen stood it until the Monday before Thanksgiving, when with the

a couple of

holiday ahead and the weekend and ~~two~~ compensatory days off for the

overtime that was owed him, he ~~abruptly~~ was going to be a man of leisure.

None too soon, either. The recession of the dredge fleet, off the

river and into hibernation in ~~the~~ winter harbor, was over and done with,

but ~~it had taken an inordinate amount of office commotion, at least in~~

~~the view of Owen, who didn't like any.~~ After that first hard freeze

and whiff of snow, the weather ~~had~~ turned infuriatingly persistently cold

and nasty but not that cold, not enough to form meaningful ice on the

Missouri River. And ~~he~~ Owen badly wanted the evidence of ice, immediate

thick humped-up drastic ~~God-awful~~ ice, to ratify the shutdown of dredging.

More than evidently, so did the Corps ~~muckety-mucks~~ ~~mucky-mucks~~. He Owen had been tromping

around overseeing the dismantling of the dredge hook-ups on a gusty cold

afternoon (but not that cold) when a message was brought down to him from Major Santee, asking whether current conditions weatherwise warranted reconsideration of shutdown decision. Back up the hill to the Ad Building went the message with Owen's familiar dashed penciling in the margin

small caps

Continue recommend shutdown but UTY. Up To You: Santee was one peeved marshmallow at having the decision bucked back to him that way, but he ended up not countermanding Owen's ~~thinking~~ on shutdown.

And since then, Owen's work had consisted of a lot of staring down the road, so to speak. Next-year calculations ~~Calculations~~ to be done on piping the fill in from enough dredge-pits to keep the dam inexorably growing, and the question of how to regulate the waterlevel in the core pool which would be bigger and trickier than ever, and the guessing game of where to pick up enough added dredging output to make up for this year's three million cubic yard shortfall. Owen by that Monday before Thanksgiving had noticed he was jiggling his knee pretty much constantly as he thought over the year that lay ahead.

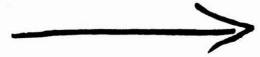
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4/24

Charlene was home when he reached there these days, shutting the beauty

p. 424A follows →

shop earlier as winter [#]layoffs sobered Fort Peck's expenditures. After
they had kissed and she ~~had~~ started to turn back toward making supper,
his hand and arm caught her waist again. Before she could even reverse
her direction, she heard:

"Maybe we ~~get~~ ^{better} go across the mountains and have a look."



It took her a moment to catch up.

"Live it up in Spokane, a night," Owen was saying his way toward it. ~~Owen, the blueprint adherent.~~ He met her eyes with his. ^{Then} ~~Then~~ go on to Grand Coulee and see what we think."

Excitement knocked under Charlene's ribs. "I'll write the Everetts, right tonight." They'd been friends with Connie and Ev all the Bozeman years, before Ev latched on as one of the first engineer ^s hire^d ^d for ~~at~~ Grand ^{Dam} Coulee.

"Yeah, do." Owen hesitated. "For now, let's just tell people here we're taking a trip through Glacier Park before the snow really starts to fly."

He felt they had to tell Max and Pam Sangster the truth, and she could not bring herself to up and go without saying at least something to Rosellen and therefore Neil. But otherwise that was their leave-taking of Fort Peck, few words to anyone and those less than fact. ^{Half a dozen} ~~Five~~ days ahead yet before anybody, even the rest of the Duffs, would know they had gone off to climb a fresh ladder. The two of them (mostly Charlene) worked it out that by taking all their clothes, they wouldn't

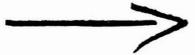
p. 425A follows

even need to come back for their other things; Rosellen and Neil could
send or store whatever was wanted. A telegram from Owen to the Ad Building--

COULEE JOB UNPASSABLE UP would do the rest. The ~~Ad~~ Beauty Shop could

be advertised for sale, and Charlene could come back by train long enough

to handle that whenever there was a taker. ⁴ So, truant from the world,



copy

they aimed themselves west toward the Rockies, swapping at the wheel of the Chevy every hour or so as the railroad towns of the High Line gazeteered away behind them, Malta Harlem Zurich Havre Kremlin, and the mountains slowly defined into crag and timberface and snowfield in front of them. Through Glacier National Park, the cliff-clinging curlicues of Going-to-the-Sun highway kept Owen grinning at the ways the engineers had managed to graft the road onto the mountains, Charlene enjoying watching him at it. The night in Spokane, they made love in an auto court, feeling fantastically free to create all the ^{rumpus} ~~permutation~~ they could, what with only vehicles in garage stalls on either side of their room. After sleeping in and a leisurely late start, at last they were on ~~two-thirds of the state of Washington had to be crossed the next day;~~ but then ^{at last} the plunge of the road to the Columbia River, dark mile-wide gorge, with afternoon shadow. In a ~~defile of stone~~, amid the slate color of the river water, the dam at Grand Coulee was rising like a scaffolded Grand Coulee's cliff. ~~The construction town of Coulee City~~ appeared to be a diluted Wheeler, but Charlene was determined to think the best of it. ^{Wenatchee,} much more sizable, was only an hour down the road, and not many hours beyond that, Seattle and the coast.

The next morning Ev Everett sneaked a job button ^{and an inspector's hard hat} for Owen, and
 with ~~it on the flap of his shirt pocket~~ ^{them on} he could prowl the huge project
 of concrete. He knew Grand Coulee Dam in theory, but a look around said
 it more strongly. Canyonwork, this was; the ~~sides~~ ^{ends} of the dam anchored
 into ~~rock walls hundreds of feet high.~~ ^{cliffs, granite bedrock at its base.} The organizational lines were
 altogether different from Fort Peck, too; this was a Bureau of Reclamation
 dam, no puffed-up Kansas City colonels, majors, or captains. While Owen
 inspected ~~Grand Coulee,~~ Charlene visited two years' worth with Connie
 Everett, and learned to her delight that ~~two~~ ^{other} Bozeman couples she and
 Owen had lost track of, the Lowells and the Krebses, were here on this
 dam, too. The men came home for lunch, then Owen went off with Ev to
 be introduced around the Grand Coulee version of the Ad Building.
 Conversations there confirmed what Owen mostly had heard already, that
 the Columbia was on its way to becoming one massive generating device,
 an entire sequence of dynamo-feeding dams that could be regulated with
 a few flicks of a few switches. The feed of power, he was shown on
 charts, was potentially colossal, from the little reddened coils of
 toasters on a million breakfast tables on up to the new pot-line method

of cooking up giant amounts of the light metal called aluminum. Of
time and the electric river, huh, ran his thoughts. Well, maybe it is
time. Hook up an entire river drainage and see what it can be made to
do, maybe it is time to get in on that. # When the men returned after work,
 Connie and Charlene cooked ribeye steaks for supper and afterward the
 two couples drank beer. Close to the end of the second bottle apiece,
 Ev reiterated that he was positive there would be no problem in getting
 Owen hired on. A little dreamy with the beer, Charlene was watching out
 the living-room window at the nighttime lattice of lights on Grand Coulee
 Dam, as if even the swing-shift crew was helping to dim away Fort Peck.
 And then Owen was saying:

"We're going back, first thing in the morning."

The two of them lay on the Everetts' fold-out davenport, Owen
 catching sleep in those chainlink naps of his while Charlene was stretched
 beside him stiff as a post, waiting and waiting for the night to be over.
 She wasn't going to fight in whispers.

Nor did her stormiest tones make any difference on Owen, the next
 morning when they went out to the car.

"They've got this dam knocked," he told her. "They'll be at it ^{years} for ~~a while~~ yet, but they've ^{already} reached the point where they can build it like they're reading off a grocery list. And that's--^I~~that~~ doesn't feel like it fits, for me. I feel like I'd be throwing away Fort Peck."

Well, yes; Charlene had thought that was the whole point.

"Can't blame you for getting worked up over this." He himself was considerably that way, she saw. "But we came and took a look, and Charlene, damned if I could see myself just stacking concrete on top of concrete. I know coming here got your hopes up. It did mine, too. But huh-uh. I stood around here listening to these juice jockeys talk about how they're going to be able to electric-up your zipper of your pants, if that's what you want, and all I could think about was how many of those ^{watts} ~~relts~~ it would take to cure the pump lag [#] in my ~~poor~~ poor sonofabitching overworked dredges." [#] Facing around from the steering wheel to her as he was, the set of his mouth told her as much as his words; the quizzical underline he had brought to Grand Coulee was gone.

[#] "I know it's tough," he said to her. "But let's go home."

[#]

Neil came humming home late for supper because of delivering coal, and Rosellen didn't care, and when he kissed her she knew his nose would leave a coaldust smudge on her, and she didn't care about that either.

He headed to the wash basin to clean up and she had intended to let ^{get done} him ~~go~~ through with that and ^{sit} ~~be sitting~~ down for supper, but she couldn't hold it any longer.

"I sold some writing."

"You didn't." He spun to her, his expression lighting up. "You did? Wahoo! Which--how much--"

"To the Grit paper."

"Uh huh!" He was eagerly toweling coaly water and wettened dust off himself. "So let's have a look at it."

She handed him The Weekly Grit, full of pithy tales and kernels of wit, with her thumb next to a line in the 'Oh, Say!' column.

Neil read out loud:

"The wind, dancing in a dust dress."

"Uhm?" He peeked inquiringly at her, shaking the pages of Grit as if more ought to fall out.

Iron - ok
to delete
extra
punctuation
marks.
It's is
enough,
I think
yes

"That's—what they took, from my 'Dry Land' story. But they paid ~~twenty-five cents a word.~~
~~five dollars.~~"

"That beats the pants off hammer wages," Neil rallied loyally.

"Rosellen, this is just great. Gives you your start. Grab your coat and let's go tell everybody. Bruce and ~~friends~~^{Katy} first, then—"

"No, wait. Not yet. They'll think I'm...putting myself too high.

It's, well, it is only seven words, Neil."

"What the hell about that, though? ~~Shakespeare~~^{Old} must have started with seven, sometime or another." He watched her expression, which was an odd confessional smile amid firm shaking of her head. "What, you ~~kind~~^g of need this writing to be a secret?" he puzzled it out.

"For now." Rosellen went to him. "You know about it. For me,

that's everybody."

"Airplane ride, Jackie! Rrr rrr zoom rr rreaugh!" The baby ^{am} _{cat} laughed down from where Bruce's hands were holding him aloft. "Doesn't he have a smile on him like a million dollars, Katy?"

"He's a honey," she agreed over her shoulder, still trying to pack their things and Jackie's to go to ~~Williston~~^{Bismarck}, the car nowhere near ready.

"So are you, Katycat, you know that? You really goddamn are."

"And you're a windjammer."

Thanksgiving supper at the cookhouse, Hugh showed up when the rest of the eaters were starting on their second helpings. Thoroughly Hugh-style, Meg thought, dispatching herself across the kitchen to the serving window to tell him so.

But he shook his head when she started to dish up turkey and fixings for him. "I'll wait and lift a fork with you, if you please, Margaret."

After the dining hall had emptied out and the servers shed their cranberry- and gravy-wounded aprons and ^{one lone} morose pearl diver was beginning to scrub away at sink load after sink load of dishware and cutlery, Meg's

head appeared in the serving window again. She does still look like the Hal.

top of the line ^{with} ~~in~~ that hair, Hugh noted to himself one more time. For

~~her part~~ ^{ed} she was calling over to him, "If you still want a witness to that eating habit of yours, come take a plate."

~~He~~ Hugh went up for the laden plate, Meg now busy dishing her own.

In through the serving window, he could see Jaraala over by the stove, stirring this and shaking that. Hugh hesitated, Then spoke out:

"Care to join us?"

"No, gonna eat off the stove. There's always cookin' needs watchin',"

came the response. But then Jarala more or less looked at Hugh, and fleetingly even toward Meg. "Thanks anyhow."

Meg and Hugh ate, across from each other at one of the long tables that seated forty-eight. Bruce and Kate were spending the holiday at her parents' in North Dakota, to show off the baby. Neil was working a shift of overtime, since so many others of the dam force were off

for the day, and ^{Rosellen} ~~Rhonda~~ had said she had something she needed to ^{finish up} ~~do~~ at home. ~~Owen and Charlene of course were on their Glacier Park trip.~~ As

to Darius, in circumstances such as this Meg was apt to mention him only in cautious general terms and Hugh to speak of him not at all.

They did have the food to be comfortable with, turkey a la Jarala roasted to a moist succulence and smooth mashed potatoes and heavenly gravy and cranberry ^{relish} ~~sauce~~ with tiny taste nuggets of orange peel and corn pudding an ecstatic taste of which would put you to wondering with

Hugh:

"What does old Cookalorum in there" ^J ~~he~~ nodded in the direction of

Jarala ^J ~~do~~ to this?"

~~could figure that out,~~

"Don't I wish I ~~knew,~~" Meg said with a little rueful smile.

At pie, mincemeat that made the mouth water helplessly for more,
 it was her turn. "I was just thinking, what Owen said about ^{Kate}~~Phonda~~ that
 once? That if Roosevelt his very self were to come into the Rondola,
 she'd ~~have~~ waited on him as if he were anybody else until he was through
 and then ~~told~~^{tell} him, 'Save your fork, President, there's pie.'"

"She would, too," Hugh agreed, with a slightest chuckle.

When they finished the feast, Meg got up and brought back fresh cups
 of coffee.

Hugh took a strong sip, looking off out the window at the dam lights
 haloed by the frost in the air.

"We'll soon have winter here again," he said.

"We will," she acknowledged ^{guardedly.}

She nursed her cup of coffee, wondering about the long nature of
 this marriage, while Hugh went into the other room of his mind.

He did not want to deal with his suspicion toward himself that had
 been building as he went to work on the dredgeline traps day after day,
 but it was growing inescapable. The furrowed path all the way from
 Inverley to the Missouri River homestead--had he been an impostor, all

those years? Worse, a dabbler? A doubt such as this cut to a man's core, that's what it did. No reason it should, he kept insisting to himself. A drop of sweat, produced on hourly rate of pay, ought to be the same as any other drop of sweat, seasonally induced on a farm; but the sun-warm sweating done in a greening field surely ~~show~~^{show} ~~Christ~~^{Christ} on a slick raft, man, Hugh told himself, you'd better not start trying to sort out sweat. Yet he found himself doing exactly that, these days. He was beginning to suspect that damwork was growing sinfully more comfortable to him than farming.



"A penny for them," Meg said, to try to draw him out of his well of silence.

Hugh shook his head. "They're worth positive millions." He looked across at her, ^afamiliar look that said his thoughts would not make themselves known until later, if ever.

Ital.
Hugh is elsewhere, though, isn't he ^{pierced} ~~came~~ back to Meg from that pantry session with Darius. While she waited, waited, waited. Sometimes she had the patience of an imbecile, she thought.

#
 "It would help on the employment, I'm told," Darius stared at ^{houseboat} the ~~ceiling~~ and said, "if I were married."

Ital.
How can they be such total bastards without even half-trying, Proxy asked herself although it was no longer even a question, men. They swarm all over us and they want to play house on a houseboat with us and they tell us about every time they cut their finger with a jackknife when they were little boys, and then they slink off and marry some stupe who's

Ital.

still got her cherry. That tightfart sister-in-law of his must've found

him somebody. Neaten up the famm damily by marrying him off to whoever

Jee Zuz,
the-hell. ~~God~~, I'm so sick of the way they behave. I could just pigstick--

everything-furiously piling through Proxy all but blocked out the next

from Darius:

"Do you suppose you could arrange to be there?"

Proxy stayed silent, the ceiling receiving a scouring stare from her. Finally she said:

~~"You don't mean to me."~~ "This is some kind of Scotch joke, right?"

"Isn't this just the way of the damnable world?" Darius asked the ceiling. "Here I am, ready to enter marital bliss at last, and my intended chooses now to turn back into a coy virgin."

Proxy raised on an elbow and looked down at him. "I hope I wouldn't have to go that far." She studied him like a skeptic buying wild honey in molasses country.

"Are you serious? You're serious."

"I'm at least that bad. One stipulation, though." He reached up and grasped a handful of the short hair at the back of her neck. "If

you've had any proposal before this one, don't tell me the comparison."

Proxy didn't say anything for a bit. Then:

"Say we go get licensed. What am I supposed to do with myself then, weave brooms?"

"You can do much what you like. I need some leeway myself, now and again."

"The Bolshie business, you mean."

"Ah, well,
~~Minimum~~ some of that. Then too, I'm a bit long in the tooth to be thoroughly domesticated. ~~Just~~ ^{Simply} because we'd be married doesn't mean we need oversee each other every minute, does it?"

"I could stay on working for Tom? The dancing, ^I mean?"

"Assuredly."

"If I once in a while see a John D., maybe a little backseat driv^{er}---?"

"Proxy, don't go down a list with me! There's such a thing as quitting while you're ahead, woman."

She moved over onto him. She licked a tantalizing course along his collarbone to the base of his throat, tongued a humid kiss into the

hollow there, brushed the effective tips of her breasts across the rise
of his chest once, twice, and again, then lingered above him with a diagonal smile.

"Since when?"

440

PN

Part Four

PT
THE SHERIFF

1991

Bastard of a case, that truck-in-the-river shenanigan had been.

Long after he had lost office and everything else but age, the sheriff thought his way back and forth through it. Staring out the window of his room in the Milk River Senior Care Center, he would take moments from 1938--that sight of the pair of bodies naked as Creation; or that clodhopper undersheriff, what was his name, mewing "Married, you bet; only not to each other"--and pull those pieces of time apart. Lay them out, conversations, expressions on faces, all the puzzlework of investigation, and sort them over. Try again to find his way into

tricky

when he was just starting on the ~~large~~ process of figuring out what Duffs had done to Duffs.

"We can't account for what happened any more than you can, Sheriff."

One of them, one of that damned family, had made that baldfaced claim to him back there at the outset.

"And don't think we haven't tried."

Huh, they hadn't seen trying until they saw Carl Kimmick.

Beyond his window, same as ever--samer, it somehow seemed to him any more--Glasgow streeted off below the bare northside hill the Senior Care Center sat on. Daylight at least alleviated one of his aggravations, the rooftop sign at the east end of the old downtown. Up there on daddy longlegs supports, in the dark before dawn it was sometimes burned out to ~~EL~~VELT and other times it blazoned in full pink HOTEL ROOSEVELT.

Either way, that name poked at the sheriff like a neon pitchfork. He always waited until daybreak took care of that sign to do what he did now, employ the wooden coathanger he used for opening the window by fitting the hook over the handle of the ^{stiff} latch and giving a both-hands pull to unlock ~~the~~ ^{it,} ~~stiff~~ latch, then shoving a wooden end of the hanger

against a corner of the glass to push the window as open as it would go. Air the place out, let in what he could against the institutional stuffiness. Even bad weather improved this place. ^{Actually} This appeared to be a good enough day outside, although you never knew, even here in September, if the clouds were going to build in from the west and by one o'clock be ~~raining~~ ^{storming} hard enough to knock down a nun.

Glasgow looked weathered in a lot of ways.

Up and down was the history of towns like this, of course, but it had been a while now since up. Things had boomed when the SAC air base came in, north of town—^{B-52} runways the fattest construction payroll since Fort Peck Dam. Then when it ~~started seeming~~ ^{seemed} as though we weren't going to have to atomize the Soviet Union after all, the flyboys picked up and went. Empty base, bigger than the parade ground of Hell, just sitting there, weeding up. Concrete all over the prairie, while the dam holding back the Missouri was of dirt; it took a lot of government doing to get things that backward, the sheriff thought.

Grimacing, he slightly shifted ~~the position of how he sat,~~ there in ^{his} ~~the~~ supposedly mobile confinement. He had been hating this wheelchair

from the precise moment his fanny first met it.

"The two of them, out there that way--none of us knew anything like that was going on. Sheriff, we're a family who've always had our differences.

But you never can expect something of this sort, can you. It takes a lot now, for us to hold our heads up." How hard that Duff case had started

off. And kept on being. He could still remember how his heart stopped a little, there on the boulder face of the dam, when he grasped the fact that the two drowned bodies in the truck were not a simple pairing.

How he started, on the instant, trying to reconstruct ~~what was verifiable~~ ^{the chain of events.}

the watchman heard the splash at such and such a time, then the lapse

with the diver grappling down there in the dark, then the truck coming

to ~~up out of the river~~ ^{surface} nose-first on the ~~crane~~ ^{crane} cable, water sheening

from it. But the greater water, the river, shut off the scene of before

that. Of what had drawn that truck to the bottom ~~of the river.~~ The

only sure thing he had then, in what had gone abruptly from a vehicular

mishap to a full-fledged case of probable homicide, were unclad bodies--

one of each, naturally--there in the truck cab. Intact-looking people,

yet the spark gone from beneath the woman's crown of hair, and from

behind the man's span of forehead. For his own benefit the sheriff had needed to study up some ^{on} forensic medicine in his job--the oldest dodo of a doctor always ~~was~~ ^{was} appointed county coroner, and about half the time couldn't even be trusted on cause of death--and so he knew that each brain, under the bonecap of each person's head, was shaped something like a low leafy tree, a canopy of cortex. Under that canopy rested the brain's ~~further~~ ^g constituent parts, rootlike. Looked at that way, the person was the family tree, in and of his or her self. Carrying everything that had gone before, familywise, back all the way to the dawns of history, there in that personal mental spread of tree. And for all that to just go, vanish--how people could let themselves be pruned out of life, through some weird situation they had put themselves into, was beyond Carl Kinnick. But then maybe that was why that man and that woman had ended up as victims, there in that sopping truck cab, and he as sheriff.

Ex-sheriff.

Xed out of the political picture ^g in the '74 election. He'd done every kind of electioneering he could think of in his own county that year, then gone down to Billings for the Republican congressional

candidate's last-gasp rally. This is what politics had come to, dragging yourself halfway across the state to try to get glimpsed on television along with a swarm of other tie-wearing stiff-smiling officeholders or would-be's. Back in 1952 the sheriff had managed to switch parties in good style, declaring himself an Eisenhower man and contending that he of course would have been proud to remain a Democrat if that party'd had the common sense to nominate Ike instead of that eggbrain Adlai; pretty shrewd alibi, if he did say so himself. But it cost him in '74. As he drove home from that Billings rally to Glasgow on election night, defeat drummed down on the Republicans, the car radio reporting the Democrats ~~had~~^{had} ~~obliterated~~^{ed} the GOP congressional candidate, ~~taking~~^{en} most of the state legislature, ~~winning~~^{won} across the board. Watergate and that ~~creep~~^{creep} ~~pretzel-pick~~ Nixon; the sheriff drove north through the night listening to every detail of the national crapstorm cascading down on anything Republican, the moment at last arriving when the radio voice said

Even long-time sheriffs are being turned out of office in the Democratic sweep. Up in Valley County, Walt Jepperson is leading the incumbent Carl Kinnick by nearly five hundred votes.

Half a thousand votes. Good Christ, in Valley County a losing margin like that was as bad as five hundred million. As if the population of China had swarmed to the polls and all voted to kill him off as sheriff. Abruptly the tall grass at the edge of the highway danced in his headlights, the car drifting toward the ditch while he was in the trance of that election result, and he'd had to sheer the steering wheel hard to keep the car on the road. Wouldn't that have been something pretty, too, giving the bastards a chance to say he couldn't take defeat and went and committed suicide.

~~Now~~ a knock on his room door shunted aside that train of thought.

Two quick raps, by knuckles that knew what they were doing. Flinching all the way, the sheriff wheeled himself around to face the door, then said merely, "What."

The nurse came in to check on the LP, as the old sheriff was called by the staff.

When she'd started working here she assumed it meant Long-Playing, like an old phonograph record, because of Carl Kinnick's seemingly

neverending longevity. Soon enough, though, she'd heard somebody refer to him as the Little Prick, and by then she understood. Just when you thought he couldn't possibly surpass his own ^{LG} world record for orneriness, he found some way to. The time when the recreation director Doris, new on the job then, planned a surprise birthday party ^T—must have been the LP's eighty³-fifth, ninetieth? who the hell could tell, or cared any^T— and gone to the trouble of digging around in the Valley County Museum to find a poster of Carl Kinnick running for election in the 1930³'s.

Framed between his name on top and Democrat for Sheriff underneath, ^{am caps} pearl³-gray Stetson tugged down in a businesslike way, he made quite the picture of a lawman, everybody thought. But he took one look at it and cussed out the recreation director unmercifully. It ended up with him shouting at Doris that if he ever wanted to be surprised, he'd let them know about it first.

Now Kinnick appraised the nurse's body as he did every time she came into his room, aware that she didn't like being looked over but also knowing he could get away with it. No sense being so old and crippled up if you couldn't at least run your eyes across an attractive young flank.

Ital.
 Shitheaded old poot, the nurse thought, but said:

"How's your hip today, Mr. Kinnick?"
~~"How's your hip today?"~~

"Hurts," ^{he} reported ~~Kinnick~~, the same flat way he did every day.

"You're supposed to exercise it more, you know that," she said as she did every day. She herself could not see why a hip replacement had been done in a person this ungodly old. For that matter, why this contrary little man had agreed to undergo the operation. But old age is ~~another~~ ^{some other kind of} territory ~~and~~, people exist in it by their own lights, she always had to remind herself in this job. At least Kinnick didn't paw at her, the way the old grabber down the hall in 119 always tried.

"So are you going to?" she asked.

"Going to what?"

"Exercise-your-new-hip-joint," she stipulated as levelly as she could.

To her surprise, Kinnick squinched up that dried-apple-doll face and seemed to think over the matter. But ^{then} he pronounced:

"Doubtful."

"Mr. Kinnick, you're a case in more ways than one," the nurse spoke in a sweet-sour tone which she knew couldn't land her in any trouble,

and went out of his room.

He hated to see her go, as always. The little spots of time when she was in his room were ^{the} only sample of real woman he had, any more.

Peysner.

Norman Peysner.

That was the overgrown undersheriff's name, it came back to him now, along with the guy's football-shaped face. Naturally the big lummo ~~Peysner~~ hadn't had a shred of a theory as to what happened in that truck at the dam and so he, the sheriff, had to do it all on the Duff case, from scratch. The undersheriff wordlessly in tow, Carl Kinnick had traipsed the Fort Peck project and its rickety towns from one end to the ~~another~~ ^{like badgers on} good God, one set of Duffs lived ~~in a houseboat~~ ^{high and dry} up ~~onto the bluff above the river~~; what kind of people were these? as he tried to figure out that truck ~~event~~ ^{shenanigan}. Go around and question ~~each~~ ^{them all.} ~~of the rest of the Duffs~~. Work on them ~~one by one~~ ^{every minute of} make them account for their whereabouts that night of the drownings. Sort through the possible motives, although the Duffs were a bunch you could not easily nail down; every time you thought you had a motive clear, some new angle

popped out from another Duff. And while he was working on them, plenty was going on amongst them, he could sense. Against him, against the world of justice he represented, they closed ranks. But he was as sure as anything that they ~~had~~ ^{were having} some pitched fights, and there were obvious silences; the, what, eight of them surviving the drowned pair were trying to sort out what they had left, which even the sheriff could see amounted to one another, not ^{the most} comfortable sum after what had happened. Dealing with that family of Duffs, the sheriff for the first time in his life entertained the thought that maybe orphans did not have it so hard after all.

Well, what the hell can you do, though, when you come right down to the pussypurr question of how people are going to behave.

Almost a dozen terms in office, and he still hadn't been able to predict with any real certainty. He had sherifed as hard as he knew how, given his every day and far too much of his nights on behalf of law and order in Valley County, and in the end they threw him out just because he happened to be wearing the same political eartag as Tricky Dick Nixon. Sure, he knew that some were saying, even then, that Carl Kimnick was

older than bunions and ought to be tossed onto the retirement heap.

But didn't something like his perseverance on those Duffs, that truck,

the river, go to show that he—

He moved wrong on the hip, and gasped with pain. ^{God}~~Christ~~, how could

his own body jab him so? He considered buzzing for the nurse, ask her

to dig out a pain pill from the bottle in his top dresser drawer. But

he detested pills, about as much as he despised asking for help.

Slowly he caught his breath and waited out the misery in his hip,

taking a look around his room for the how manyeth time. This place.

Not much to recommend it, life in here, but he was doing what he could

with it. Meals, which everybody else in here tried to make a big deal,

he merely went through with because he had to. Ate alone whenever he

could, and purely silent if somebody ended up having to share a table

with him. And ^{only}~~just~~ one good television night in the week, when he could

watch America's Most Wanted, with the sound off. Give himself a chance

to study the wanted-poster faces, and try to guess ahead in the crime

re-enactments the actors did.

Beyond those few things, getting by in here was a matter of maintaining

period
instead
of question
mark.

his orneriness the way he did. By now he had a full theory of it: a philosophy of why to be difficult, if anybody ever took the trouble to ask him. All right, there were those who'd say he did not even need to work at being mean, it came as natural to him as a morning piss. But that radically underestimated the ~~exertion~~^{effort} he was making, if they only knew. Huh uh, this was an entire new deal, the extent to which he made himself stay furious against the walled-in world. ~~What the hell,~~
~~everything~~^{Cap E} ~~else~~ had shriveled up; his ~~pecker~~^{pecker} no longer worked, his hip gave him constant torment, he sat here at the mercy of white uniforms twenty-four hours a day. (Yet people thought he was in a problem mood because he was lonely; the dumb bastards, they didn't even know he ~~had~~^{always} had the Duffs.) So this was what he had arrived at, careful and constant exercise at staying stubborn. Crabby, contrary, owly, behaving like a mean little bastard; whatever term you care to call it by, he would tell you that the capacity for being ornery was the one power left to a person in old age.

Finally Carl Kinnick checked the calendar again, and this circled day. September 22nd again. That and the fancily printed 1991. ^{Huh.} ~~The~~ century had reached the point where it read the same forwards or backwards.

He wouldn't be that way himself for another eight years yet, would he,
ninety-nine
 at 99. There had been a spell of years when he hated aging, could not
 figure out why people shouldn't ^{just} conk out at some given point, like car
 batteries ~~always~~ do the month after their warranty is up. During that
 time he ~~half-wished~~ ^{half-wished} that he had not corrected his patrol car's veer toward
 the ditch that Watergate election night. But ending up as blood, gristle,
 and windshield shards didn't appeal, now that he could study back on
 that alternative. No, Carl Kimnick had got over wanting death's quick
 cure of everything. Traveling with the century wasn't easy, but so what.

half wished

PN

PT PLUGGING THE RIVER

1936-1937
N

It was the middle of February and the wind had been shoving at the north side of the house all of 1936 so far. This morning, the stillness woke Meg up. She burrowed out from under the six blankets heaped over her and Hugh, just far enough to raise her head and listen into the crystalline silence. The cold of the air pinched inside her nose.

"Hugh!" She turtled her head back under the load of covers and desperately nestled herself spoon-fashion against the length of him in his longhandle underwear. "Hugh-it's-freezing!"

Ital.

Groggily he rumbled: "Margaret, it'd be news if it wasn't. We've had freezing weather since around October, for God's sake."

"I mean, in here! The fire's gone out!"

Hugh absorbed this. Then said in the tone of a man wronged:

"Goddamn that soft coal."

He lurched from under the mound of bedding toward the stove and could tell at once this was not merely the feel of a fireless house, this was deep cold. He rattled open the firebox of the stove and swore at the dead ash of the coal he had banked the fire with at bedtime. Crumpling yesterday's entire Glasgow Courier, he stuffed it in the stove, grabbed up a double handful of kindling and chucked that on top of the paper, and, [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 work socks, 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 ~~Proxy~~ ^{with} in a rare note of uncertainty: "Don't they?"

"How the frig do I know? This place" TM --Proxy indicated the frosted-over front windows of the empty Blue Eagle TM --"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? TM

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, ~~Shannon~~ 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 madder moary." He shook his head. "I could never see it, myself."

"That's sure frigging astonishing to find out, ~~Tom~~." ^{Tom}

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

"How would hot toddies go?"

"They wouldn't. The only time a Montana ^D 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 ^m?"

"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?"

STET

"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 empty barroom and dance floor.

~~the frost-tinted emptiness of the Blue Eagle.~~ Finally he said:

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

"So should we close up shop?" ~~Proxy inquired.~~

"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?"

Back at the onset of winter, in the courthouse at Glasgow, Proxy

had needed to think madly to recall ^WSusannah^W as the given name she'd furnished Darius and then she had to give him a dig with her elbow when he started to fill in ^WRenfrewshire^W as county of residence instead of ^WValley,^W but they managed to do the deed, nuptially.

"What now?" she asked him a little nervously when the Justice of the Peace was through with them. "Give each other a bath in a washtub of champagne?"

DROP CAP

He looked ~~at her as though~~ surprised. "We get the family over with, of course. Then we settle in like old dozing spaniels." He pulled her to him and there on the Justice of the Peace's front porch gave her a kiss that she felt to her ankles. "Don't you know thing one about married life, woman?"

But the jitters caught up with Darius as soon as groom and bride began making the rounds ~~of the Duffs,~~ Inches inside the doorway at Owen and Charlene's, an exceedingly thin grin plastered on him, ~~Darius~~^{he} introduced Proxy. "I've gone and got you an aunt. Please may I present Proxy, ah, Duff, she would be now, wouldn't she."

"Uh huh," issued out of Owen as he gave that night's first blink of recognition. Jesus, that one. Perfectly vivid in memory was ~~All the male Duffs, with the prominent~~ ~~exception of Darius, had been in the Blue Eagle, the evening Proxy flattened~~ the redheaded taxi [#]dancer. "Well. Congratulations. Come in. Uh, sit down."

"Yes, do," said Charlene, all interested. Here you go, Owen. You wanted Fort Peck, here's a case of it in the family for you. She looked Darius in the eye and then Floozy, no, Proxy it was, wasn't it. "You've