

She had him by his pride now. Keyed up, he stepped over there and put his voice over Hayes's as she slowed the record. They tried it again and again and again. It was a lot harder than a person would think. He could keep in tandem with Hayes for a line or two, enunciating for all he was worth, but his air would not hold through the whole verse. Finally Susan looked over at the clock and although it was not yet time for the tea-and-honey break, she declared it to be. She covered her concern--*What is there to try next?*--with kitchen clatter and determined conversation, Monty pitching in a word here and there when utterly necessary.

Turnabout came when they were down to their last sips. Out of nowhere, Monty inquired: "Miss Susan, excuse my asking, but you're on your own, aren't you? Far as family goes, I mean?"

"A raft of shirt-tail relatives over toward Glasgow, but we don't keep in touch. I don't have anyone left other than that, why?"

He was slow to answer. "It fits with the sort of thing I been thinking about, is all."

"And what's that when it's at home?"

He ~~toyed with his cup~~ <sup>his cup</sup> a moment, then settled ~~it~~ into its saucer. "Been wondering if it does something to us. People who are in their own company pretty much, I mean. We get to trying things to keep ourselves busy, nobody around to say us nay. Don't get me wrong, it's a quality I wouldn't trade and probably you neither. But maybe sometimes it makes us bite off more than we can chew, you think?"

Susan studied him before answering. He was quick-witted, she had caught on to, although he stood around in front of that capacity until he absolutely had to let it show. Today's Victrola venture hadn't been a cure for the internal

shortcomings of his vocal ability, and he was right to be skeptical of it. As she was right to be persistent.

"I think it's better to bite big than to be bitten," she stated, rising out of her chair. "Let's get back at it."

The rest of the morning they slogged on, Susan applying rudiments as if they were poultices and Monty the leery patient. At last, weary of working at getting air into the man, Susan went to the piano. "All right, we can both stand a change. Let's try '*Moses*' once with accompaniment and see what happens."

He hung back to the other side of the room.

She took her hands off the keys. "What is it now?"

"I haven't ever sang with a piana."

She made sure her expression gave nothing away, but the mental list had unscrolled. Good grief, in so many ways he still was at the level of her elementary pupils.

"Surely you're not afraid of a musical instrument."

"Afraid, who said that? But...how do I go about it?"

The piano music startled Dolph where he was puttying the weathered sash of a kitchen window. Monty's voice thundered out sometimes atop the notes and sometimes not, the song lifting uncertainly over the valley.

#

DROP CAP

"A letter for you, Mister Williamson."

*Here?* "Popular, am I. Thank you, Jenkins." Wes plucked the envelope from the deskman's hand and went on in past the oil portraits of one President Lowell after another, their own expressions carefully fixed in the obligation unto eternity to present the face of Harvard to heathen New York. Not until he reached the quiet library, deepest recess of the Club, did he hurriedly slit open the envelope with his penknife.

Her handwriting leapt to him, from love letters now consigned to ashes.

*Dear Wes--*

*I thought you were due some accounting of our pupil, and it seemed best to send it to your lunch lair.*

*You will be pleased to hear we have made some strides, or rather, I have pushed and Monty has progressed in some steps. Some, I emphasize; less so in others. His vocal range is improving, although of course not yet as much as it ultimately must. His tone remains his strongest point. In presentation, he no longer stands as if he were made of warped barrel staves. All in all, after these first weeks, I can say Monty is in better possession of his voice. But his voice is not yet in possession of him, which is the breakthrough for a true singer.*

*You are missing quite the contest. He is a striver. Amenable, to a point, and stubborn as a stump beyond that. (He will not hear of using a music stand, insisting it flusters him to have that in his face. Besides, he indignantly tells me, his memory is good enough for a few songs.) Unfortunately he seems invincibly convinced that the lungs installed in him at birth are adequate, but I am determined to build him up, there in the solar plexus and below. The flag of this expedition you have set us upon, Wes, reads not "Excelsior!" but "Exercises!"*

*I must talk to you when you venture to our neck of the woods again. I presume that may be soon? It is the buzz of the countryside (I'm told) that you have bought the Two Medicine & Teton railroad. The TM&T added to the Double W--at this rate, you will possess the entire lower end of the alphabet.*

*I will leave you with a scene of how our days go, Monty's and mine. Yesterday when I demonstrated a note in the uppermost range that I wanted him to practice, he balked.*

*"Can't reach that high one," says he.*

*"Monty, lacking proof that you can't, assume that you can," say I.*

"Just can't," he is adamant. "Sorry."

Such a look as I gave him. Then sprang to my feet and ~~plunked~~<sup>dragged</sup> a straightbacked chair in from the kitchen, ~~its legs skreeking in protest as I dragged it. I righted it~~ and climbed up on it. "This," I intoned down to him, "is a high note." I then sang a perfectly normal lower C. "All others are within reach without a chair."

*It has been a lovely spring here in the Two, but is now turning dry.*

*Sincerely, Susan*

Wes assessed the unexpected flow of words from her. Soon, yes, but not soon enough he would be back out there, over Merinell's fretful protest and the complaints of his daughters who had their incipient debutante hearts set on a European summer. Some more rounds of pacifying, another spate of promising, and he would be able to head west in relatively clear conscience.

He checked the clock ticking discreetly in the corner of the library. He was late for his lunch with Phil Sherman, but Phil was always late himself, entangled ~~one way~~<sup>sinuous</sup> or another. He winced, catching himself being envious of his oldest friend. A bachelor who was also a theatrical producer evidently had innumerable affairs to tend to, some more fair-haired than others. "Surely you remember your Mendelejev from chem, Wes," Phil had said after Wes spotted him at the latest war orphans' benefit with a chorus girl as leggy as a racehorse. "Chorine is the element I've added to the Periodic Table."

That would do for some people, Wes supposed. Unfolding Susan's letter again, he ran his eyes down it as if it were a balance sheet. The lowdown on Monty's vocal status could be more heartening and could be less. It was her remark about buying his way through the alphabet that nettled him. *Susan, Susan, you don't have to pour it on.* She was supposing that he had set his sights on the TM&T-- "The Empty," he knew people called it, not that he cared--

Perhaps Susan has writerly ambitions, but this phrase I've cut seems out of place in a letter. The "scene," in general, seems a bit forced, but I suppose I see the point of it.

only because it ran from Valier, the Double W's handiest shipping point these days, to the mainline at Conrad; another cattle baron grab, another annex to the House of Williamson. True as far as it went, but motives seldom know pure boundaries. *What if I were to tell you, Susan, that this is more like an old military maneuver--shaking the blanket to get rid of the cooties.*

He rubbed his temples with a shielding hand, trying to rid his head of the tensions of last night. In the ever-flowering wilderness of progress, a person now did not even have to leave his favorite chair to visit the battleground of politics. (Election years were always going to be the hardest, he knew. When a spell like last night's came, he missed participation in politics as if a basic sense had been ripped from him, touch or smell or speech.) He had sat up until the bitter end listening to radio voices describe the Democratic nominating convention tying itself in knots over the Klan. The Smith and McAdoo factions would go back to endless balloting again today, deadlocked over a simple resolution against the bigotry which everyone knew went under the initials KKK. The Republicans hadn't really been any better, standing by that mute fool Coolidge, successor to that incoherent fool Harding. Very much, Wes wished he had Susan in front of him instead of her all too representative letter. She could joke all she wanted, but in times like these he was the one who had to face what the Two Medicine & Teton was likely to carry other than cattle. Word had it that railway workers were the web on which the Klan was spreading itself through Montana, the skunkholes called Klaverns by all reports in forty counties by now. *The sneaking bastards.* He wasn't having that in the Two Medicine country. He would need to clean and gut the little railroad, fire every one of them and have the sheriff kick them to the county line if that's what it took.

Like the mills of the gods, the drivewheels of faith sometimes could grind exceeding fine, and Wes took what satisfaction there was in that. He tucked the

letter away. Wouldn't Phil Sherman relish this railway venture, a homely little set of tracks as an excursion for exquisite banter. "But this is perfect for a Galahad like you, Wes," he could all but recite the conversation to come at lunch, "a chance to operate a railroad as something other than organized robbery of the public." "Yes, Phil, and I'll maintain it by passing the hat here in the Club." (But he thought he would not make the case, even to Phil, about the railroad as necessary angle-iron against the Ku Kluxers; as a Catholic cautiously let in to Phil's natural Gold Coast set at Harvard, Wes had learned considerably more than was in the curriculum.) The two of them would spar from there--the East tended to be a sparring match; the West always was a wrestle--and he knew it was time, past time, to go on up now for asparagus and epigrams.

Yet he still could not bring himself to move from the spot in the library, pinned there by too much memory. He did not often let himself be like this, but the mood had come today as sudden and inescapable as the flip of a card out of the deck. The jack of spades, another of Susan's teasing tags for him whenever she caught him trying to see around himself to both sides of his life; but at moments like this, he figured he amounted to nothing more than the jack of Clubs. A little over four years ago, the evening in Helena, at the Montana Club. He had sat in a deep leather chair very much like this one, gazing in perplexity at the man from the other wing of the party, a bald timeserver known for doing exceptionally little in the legislature except carrying out the mining cartel's bidding. "Pull out? You can count on precisely the opposite. When I'm governor I'll make this state so hot for you, you and the copper boys will need to go around in furnace pants."

"Wes, Wes," the politico chided. He put down beside Wes's brandy glass a newspaper clipping. "Miss Susan Duff, Helena's renowned alto, will give a recital this evening at the Missoula Atheneum for the benefit of the Over There memorial where so many of Montana's men at arms lay..." That was followed

yes, let's italicize this flashback, & set the newspaper item in the same newspaperly indented style & typeface? - that Marty's NY World review on pp. 292-9 will need to be set in.

Let's make this Roman to differentiate from the dialogue in the past, below

Wouldn't this dialogue be italicized as with other flashback dialogue? Problematic w/ the newspaper clipping, I know. Perhaps we'll leave these matters.

with the receipt for the Missoula hotel room. Under Wes's staring eyes, the man crumpled the two pieces of paper and flipped them into the fireplace. "Naturally, there's more where that came from."

italics

Most of a continent and a career away from that now, Wes smiled wanly to himself. At himself. That damned henchman had spoken more truth than he knew. There still was a multiplicity, written down and not, where that came from.

## Over There

1919

*"Hallo, Amis!"* The not combative how-do-you-do had wafted across the few hundred yards of battered ground between the Germans' trench and his men as they were digging in. *"Woher kommt Ihr?"*

*"Aus Montana, Fritz,"* a buck private fresh off a potato farm in the Gallatin Valley cupped his hands and shouted back. *"Wir sind Rocky Mountain buckaroos."*

*"Aus dem wilden Westen? Habt Ihr 'six-shooters' wie Old Shatterhand und Winitou?"*

*"Nein, nein! Fur Euch Hunnen genugt ein!"*

At the time Wes laughed helplessly. If only the conduct of war did match up with Karl May's dashing pages of prairie shoot-em-ups as imagined from the woods along the Rhine, and if only one bullet per Hun were enough.

The enemy's attentiveness to newcomers in the stale flat-footed killing match that was the Western Front was understandable: Montanans were the mould for reinvented soldiers, American Expeditionary Force-style--hunters from the

time they were boys on ranches and homesteads, well acquainted with shovel calluses and dirty chores and rough quarters. Most of all, not worn down as the Europeans and British were by the routine of trench life, which was mud and <sup>rats and</sup> boredom interspersed by the warning whizzes of every calibre of weapon known to man. Wes remembered thinking that Company C handled better that day, their first in the frontlines, than they ever did on the grumblesome troopship or in the poker-wild disembarkation camp, and that sort of thought had told him he was thoroughly an officer <sup>once more</sup> ~~again~~. At the time, of course, only newly commissioned as an old captain, not yet a young major; but back in command comfortably enough. "Sergeant, instruct Private Imhoff to limit his conversations with the other side," he had issued the order to keep matters rolling his way, before jauntily setting off to inspect the remainder of the position. Not twenty minutes later, a salvo screamed in on the Montana battalion. He and Lieutenant Olsen had to make themselves thin together behind a shared snag of a tree, shrapnel whining sharp as a singing saw.

# A year and a half ago? Was that really all?

To keep warm, Wes paced back and forth on the fresh wood of the parapet the French government had installed for visitors to the battlefield, of whom he was privileged to be the first. *Luck of the draw, if you count mortality tables as any kind of luck.* Forcing that thought back into its den, he made himself concentrate on the now quiet spectacle in front of him, the vast empty butcherworks that had been his second war in one lifetime. Cuba, the fabled rough riding there, had been just that--a short dangerous jilt-jolt canter and over with--compared to the herd gait of death here. From habit he traced the lineaments of even this dread landscape with the care of a geographer. Somehow still lethal now that they were ghostly, the trenches gashed for miles in both directions

through the once rustic valley like vicious whims of an earthquake; somehow worse because they were manmade.

Perhaps because it was the one piece of contested earth anywhere around that vaguely held its original shape, Wes made it known he would like to go up onto the hill. The French military attache was solicitous about whether Monsieur Williamson would wish to walk that far, which meant whether he could. Wes glanced at the officer's own mark of the war, a monocle worn derisively over an unseeing left eye--glass the fitting companion for glass, *non?*--and said he would be all right. Then he set off up Dead Man's Hill with the Frenchman.

Actually he was surprised that the only thing he could not manage so far, this first time back, was the weather. November, peeled raw by the wind. Naturally the French had wanted this to coincide with the anniversary of the Armistice. No reason for the weather not to be coldly seasonal too, and toward Verdun he could see clouds building from the ground up. Gauzy gray heaps common to low country, nothing like the flat-bottomed floes shaved white by coming over the Rockies. Wes had a moment of wondering what Karl May did about prairie sky.

He and the escort climbed with odd austere care, the dark maroon topcoat and the blue dress uniform the only advancing spots of color in the dun landscape. The rise of ground was so pitted with shell hole upon shell hole there was barely room to walk in single file between, and to Wes's irritation the escort periodically steadied him with a hand to his elbow. Fresh earth was turned wherever the French graves registration teams had been about their business of exhuming and removing bodies to the memorial cemetery. Across about a hundred and sixty acres, Wes estimated--a quarter section, back home--lay the litter of old rifles, helmets, ruptured canteens, even scraps of uniforms and bone bits.

"non?"

correct?

m'est-ce  
pas ?  
cxd

Beforehand he had set himself a mental exercise of trying to anticipate what would be most uncomfortable about this journey back to where he had made his name and countless others faded onto tombstones; but of all things it seemed to be simply the stillness, lack of any of the signature commotions common to entrenched armies, that was getting under his skin. Nowhere he had ever been was so gruesomely silent, nor so hard on the ears.

The French officer kept to himself whatever thoughts he had about the formidable American insistent upon the view from the top; merely more of the battlefield. Nevertheless, Wes needed to see back through time in more ways than one. *But Lord, to spell it out in bones:* he swallowed on that as if trying to get rid of an overpowering taste. From the first day he and his company of men marched in here, he had recognized the Western Front for what it was: history's most gargantuan stockyard. Trenches and bunkers and sentry posts rather than chutes and corrals and cutting gates, but the herd-handling system, the organizing principle, was shockingly the same as the Middle Ages abbatoir he and Phil Sherman had traced out of its famed ruins near Aylesbury, as a lark, in their wander summer after Harvard. First and foremost, the cattle pens--except that here, the constructed containments had been insanely built in unending quantity, across half a thousand miles from the ocean to the Alps. Then the commodity on the hoof to fill the expectant channels, in this instance a million soldiers on each side, and when those were consumed, another million and another. Feed them, water them, care for them as best you could, these penned droves: then hope against hope that their weight, the avoiddupois of armaments and guts, would tip the scales. Whether it did or didn't, adjacent to the slaughter yards waited the next sites in the process: the trade yards (replacement depots and hospitals), the tanyards and the bone yards (cemeteries and ossuaries such as this hill). Modern continental war this may have been, here, but in grotesque recourse to the

invention of organized slaying it was also fundamentally medieval--a four-year market in the alive, the dead, and the in-between.

Wes pivoted away. This was not a situation where he could say he was satisfied, but he had seen certainly enough, again. "Ready when you are, Captain."

They picked their way back down the hill. Then he climbed into the staff car beside the French captain to go into St. Mihiel and meet the others of the delegation.

Come all the way to the heart of France, and the first notable sight that meets you has to be Wesley Williamson grandly hoisting a glass of champagne? Susan snorted to herself at life's near-sighted ticketing. Quickly covering her reaction--"Merely the bouquets, *pardon*," she made the requisite face to her concerned escort--she squared her shoulders and strode on into the gauntlet of introductions in the St. Mihiel municipal chambers that appeared to have been dipped in national concoctions of red, white, and blue.

She stayed close by the stammering Missoula haberdasher who was state chairman of their committee for the memorial project; his red-eyed wife, with two sons in the cemetery which all but surrounded this town, was worse than no help in this situation. Gently pummeled with hospitality as they were, Susan let her stage sense steer her through. Back when her voice was still regarded as finding its promise rather than having reached its limits, she had performed throughout Europe--cities a cut below Paris and Vienna and Berlin, true, but a swath of Europe nonetheless--but never at an occasion so bedecked as this. Franco-American tricolors aside, everyone there knew this gathering was intrinsically auspicious, coinciding as it did with the imminent date on the calendar which would put the worst of wars one full year into the gentling distance of the past,

"pardon"  
correct?  
Is there a  
better  
word or  
phrase?

into calculable history. Here at St. Mihiel where AEF doughboys and French **poilus** had fought together and broken the German salient, their countries would erect for all the world to see a monument of that hardest alloy to attain, peace. If her given part in that was to hold herself high enough tonight for the French to sight along, she could stiffen herself to it.

Yet under <sup>this sense of mission</sup> ~~it~~ Susan, for all her common allegiance with the other Americans who had been sent, was there ~~decidedly~~ <sup>g</sup> to represent the postage-stamp trust territory populated entirely by herself and Samuel. The colossal memorial statue, to rise out of the field of white crosses marching in place, she had not bothered to have an opinion about, and could not believe Samuel would have. But the archive proposed by the French, to hold forever the letters and diaries of the killed soldiers--their stories in whatever scrawled moments, adding up to the last chapter of a sacrificed generation--she would have skated the Atlantic to see done. Tucked in her luggage back at the clammy **pension** was the packet of Samuel's letters, the most costly of donations.

*Dear Susan--Funny place this world, where they put a fellow on a troop train at [censored] and he gets off a ship at [censored]. Where's any progress in that? She had seen him and the other recruits off at the Great Northern depot at Havre, therefore he had alit at Le Havre, the first of the pushpins she deployed on the wall map of Europe newly put up in the music parlor. Without him, the house seemed howlingly empty. Four crammed years, his high school years when his rambunctious intelligence broke the boundaries of the homestead as her voice once had done, he had been both the man of the place and its kaleidoscope of boy. It was with an eye to Samuel's future, and the music academy for wherewithal, that she had taken the great step of buying the house on Highland Street.*

*Sister dearest--They do have wind here. Reminds me a bit of a constant chinook, but more of a washelli. Samuel with his love of code and collector's*

of "poilus"  
correct?  
(plural)  
Poilus

"pension"  
correct term  
for where one  
would stay for  
a week in a  
small city suc  
as St. Mihiel?

passion for language. She went to his notebooks, found the one with his lexicon of wind names, across the airy face of the earth: *chinook, williwaw, datoo, mistral... washelli*, a coastal Indian word for *west wind*. She took another pushpin from her supply and, eyes all but closed, thrust it into the map on the Western Front.

Susan, *mon cherie*-- "*Solve this, <sup>Solomon</sup> ~~Erasmus~~*," as Mr. McCaskill would say: *With my size 11 1/2s, I am now a runner. My lord and master hands me orders, I twist and dart and squirm through--there is no flat-out running in these slits in the ground crowded with thousands of us, it is more like carnival dodge 'em--and deliver the message, wait for the reply, then struggle back to HQ.* There were three letters after that, brimming with the intrigued jottings of a big-shouldered bright man somehow singled out to trot slips of paper through Europe's artificial canyons of men and earth; and then instead of the mail one day, the apologetic adjutant from the armory across town was at her door, sent specially.

With duty in France now up to her, Susan managed to put aside emotion except to keep tensely dabbling in, *sotto voce*, the correction "*Mademoiselle*" on the endlessly effusive welcomes from the endless officials. Not to take away anything from the grief of others, but she considered the loss of an only brother worse than widowhood would have been. A bereft wife could remarry.

The rest of it, this initial evening, was a matter of maintaining a measured smile and accepting apologies for the inclemency of climate within the confines of France. She played the role of weatherproof visitor to the hilt until inevitably her little group was brought face to face with the famous Major Williamson, whom they surely knew? Oh, they did not?

"Sad circumstances to meet in, Mr. Averill, Mrs. Averill," the distinctive voice undiluted in the several years since she had heard him speak at the suffrage convention--he was the state senator from Pondera County, as a Williamson or

ctd  
"mon cherie"  
correct?  
ma  
Chérie

"Mademoiselle" the correct term of address for an unmarried woman?

Would she include a polite phrase such as "please" or "if you would"?

is there a French term equivalent to "sotto voce"? (in English, "in an undertone")

one of their bootlickers customarily was--and the commanding mien that even then had his listeners whispering *higher office* was similarly undiminished, quite the contrary. Wesley Williamson looked like he always had a cushion under him about six inches higher than anybody else's.

As amused as the occasion would allow, Susan watched him turn in her direction and read her family resemblance with surprise and probably worse; you could not be the daughter of Ninian Duff and pass for anyone else. Uneasy though he plainly was, he spared her any pat remark about resemblance or coincidence and seemed to step back in himself in unexpected apology. He must be here, she realized, as the representative of the veterans, which was to say the survivors, the lucky ones. But how does one qualify for such luck? *The Lord called Samuel*, her father had put a trembling finger to the Bible passage so many times the page bore a smudge, *and he answered, Here am I*; she herself would no longer go near a God who summoned by way of the epidemic of madness called war.

But that was neither here nor there, the concern of the moment was to come up with enough manners to obscure those grudges, older than themselves, that met at fencelines back in the Two Medicine country. Fortunately the occasion was running over with politeness, so she and he could simply extend a hand to each other and apply enough as needed. For public consumption one or the other of them murmured something to the effect that their families long had been acquainted--each would later tease the other for being so slick at watering it down that way--and that was the extent of it.

Curious, Susan checked to either side of him in the crowd, but the high and mighty Wesley Williamson seemed to be unaccompanied. Somewhere he had a wife to tend to, rumored to be high society, doubtless taking in Mont St. Michel or Lourdes while he dirtied his hands with this obligation. Momentarily

Susan was distracted by a freshly bubbling glass someone placed in her hand. By now the mingled Montanans had become the object of ceaseless toasts. Tonight and tomorrow belonged to them. Missing no chance to underscore the cost in lives caused by the foe across the Rhine, the French had expressed the wish to honor before the great gathering of memorial delegations from all of the United States those from the state that, *per capita*, had bled most grievously in the war.

When the honoring sips and accolades to the bravery of *Les Montaniens* were done, naturally Wesley Williamson was gestured up onto the bunting-draped rotunda by their hosts. Susan had to stifle the little something at the back of her throat again when, a sudden study in concentration, he disposed of his champagne glass to the monocled military aide as if to the nearest waiter.

Exactly as she remembered, his speech-making voice sounded sandy, unvarnished, and the more appealing for that. He spoke not in thunderous phrases, but as if concerned to find the right words, the path to their ears. He did not pander to this audience with bits of college French or front-lines *franglais* and while it was not clear how much of his well-carpentered tribute to the fallen of all nations was understood, Susan noted that the French men of government, in their various sashes and decorations, angled their heads in connoisseurial appraisal. Was there anyplace in the world, she wondered ruefully, that didn't eat out of a Williamson hand?

The haberdasher followed in the speaking order and rattled out how honored, deeply honored, they were to be there.

Her turn. Susan stepped forward and in a voice clear as mint delivered the fiscal report--the amount pledged from bereaved Montanans toward the Great War memorial over here--to somber applause. Then onward to the banquet, and no backward glances until the morrow.

ok  
Soldats  
du  
Montana

"per capita"?

Montanan or  
Montanian:  
what would the  
plural be in  
French?

ok  
"franglais"  
an accepted  
word?

#

"In the style of St. Gaudens, is all I am saying. I have in mind 'Grief,' a statue which a family I've known--"

"The Adamases, you must mean, Major? In memory of the sad case of Henry's wife Clover, isn't it?"

"You have seen it then, Miss Duff?"

"Of course. It is indulgently weepy to the point of lugubrious."

The French members of the advisory committee on the design of the memorial were managing to appear appreciative of spirited debate rather than appalled at the American war hero and the American woman going at one another as though they wore spurs on their tongues. The haberdasher from Missoula doodled circles in the margin of his agenda sheet, looking at neither Wes nor Susan.

"And you aren't one for weeping?"

"Oh come, Major. Tears have their time and place. But we can't bawl our way through life or we'd end up drowning in them, wouldn't we. St. Gaudens is irredeemably that way. And Clover Adams, I'm sorry to have to point out, took her own life. The tragedy we're trying to commemorate is of a different order altogether. A grief incalculably more vast, if you will pardon my saying so. The memorial here should speak to the soul and the mind rather than the tear ducts."

"You're a hard critic."

"I take it you have never had your career tremble on the words of a music reviewer."

To his credit, she had to grant, Wesley Williamson laughed.

#

On the day that was to culminate in the closing ceremony, Susan would have been nervous if she had let herself. But, dressed in her aqua green best and

with enough on under it to compensate for the cobblestone chill of the town square, she sat like a picture of poise through the speeches that began at mid-morning in both languages, or in instances when the French tried to incorporate English or the Americans made forays into French, pulverized fractions of the two. Then through the rainbow swirls of folk-dances. Then through a rather carousel-like version of Sousa marches by the French military band.

Nerves were one thing, brain cells were another. Yesterday's tour of the cemetery had set matters off. All during it and up to the present moment, she found herself thinking back to the homestead and the dead pile--the heap outside the lambing shed where the dead ones were thrown. Some of the lambs when they ended up there still were yellow with birth fluids. Pink tongues poking out of others. Stick legs, ribs showing. Eyeless; magpies lost no time. Similarly Samuel was plowed under the lifeless mass of crosses here, torn who knew how by a barrage somewhere in the labyrinth of trenches. The sickening aptness, rising to mind the way an insistent nightmare would, she had not been able to get rid of in the past twenty-four hours. She closed her eyes a moment, against everything that crept back. Breathwork came to her rescue, the cadence she made herself feel in the rise and fall of her trained diaphragm muscles, the calm of air supporting her from inside. She had never fainted in her life, and did not intend to start now.

To distract herself further she directed her gaze--very much as if she were taking all this in for the sake of writing it down for Samuel--to this homely old town's black iron lampposts, so ornamented atop that they seemed to be wearing ponderous crowns, and to the ambling patterns of its spotless policemen, making their rounds at the edge of the crowd like, well, like **gendarmes** sampling from one **patisserie** to the next. Almost before she knew it, she was being beckoned up to the platform by the beaming mayor of St. Mihiel.

add

"patisserie"  
correct in  
this context?

↙  
pâtisserie

This had not been her own idea at all. After someone had put it in the mayor's ear that she was a singer--Susan strongly suspected Vandiver, national director of the Over There committee and indiscriminately given to expressions of the American variant of *bonhomie*--His Honor had come importuning in person for his most favorite of American songs, could she not possibly oblige? Resigned to doing what she could with the tumpy-tum tiresomeness of "*Over there! Over There! Send the word, send the word, over there! That the Yanks are coming as she had at endless Liberty Bond rallies, when she heard the mayor's actual request she burst out laughing, she couldn't help it. So much for George M. Cohan.*

Now, presenting the song as precisely as if it were a set of linked *pensees*, each haunting line in dance with itself to the last downcurl of its comma, she stood onstage and, *a capella*, delivered:

*"As I walked out in the streets of Laredo,  
As I walked out in Laredo one day,  
I spied a dear cowboy wrapped up in white linen,  
Wrapped up in white linen as cold as the clay.  
'I see by your outfit that you are a cowboy'--"*

She had been up half the night polishing this presentation, but it was paying off. When her voice was in good working order like this, the audience became a kind of pantomime accompaniment, she had never seen it fail: heads nodding, feet patting out rhythm. This crowd, pensive to start with, had begun to sway, American shoulders and French shoulders touching as they wove the air in unison, and verse by ode-like verse Susan gave the song her alto all, to the immemorial last lines:

*"We beat the drum slowly and played the fife lowly,  
And bitterly wept as we bore him along;*

ok "mayor" the correct term for chief official of a French town?

joie de

grand  
gestures  
of...  
amity  
avenues of  
amity

pensees is

*For we all loved our comrade, so brave, young, and handsome,  
We all loved our comrade although he'd done wrong."*

The applause thundered off the stone buildings of the town square. She bowed her head the sufficient number of times in acknowledgment and deftly made her exit. Schoolchildren followed on to the platform, shyly waving handkerchief-sized flags. The band pranced into action again.

At ease and pleased enough with her performance, Susan relaxed into her seat. Spectator now, she could watch as a contingent of military braid thickened in the nearby archway leading in to the square. Some of the American military leaders in the cluster she could match to their newspaper pictures, others not. Her attention was taken by what must have been a staff officer who detached from the group and made his way along her row of dignitaries to the far end where Wesley Williamson sat, obviously sent to fetch him. So Susan witnessed it: Wes rising and following, the surprise impromptu ceremony at the archway obviously keyed to this place where Major Williamson had saved the day, the medal being pinned to the lapel of his highly unmilitary topcoat by an officer whom she realized with a start was Pershing himself. The tidy cookie duster mustache, the tannic personality that could be felt from here, the dour nickname 'Black Jack' that was all but stenciled on his tunic: the supreme general chatted in rapid-fire fashion, Wes showing commendable at-attention poise during the medal ceremony but appearing more and more startled to be held in conversation by Pershing.

At last they shook hands, and the American commander was hustled around to the speaking stand. John J. Pershing exhibited a marching stride even in mounting the steps. Standing at exact midstage, he threw a salute to all of France and recalled the famous AEF slogan of 1917, "Lafayette, we are here"; no one had expected him to do other. A few minutes of crisp tribute, and the storied

general was gone in a flurry of aides, on to the more elaborate ceremony at Verdun.

Clergy took their turn at the podium, Susan not listening now, lost in herself until the minute the mayor sprang onto the speaking stand and held up a hand, turning all eyes to the town clock.

Within a matter of moments, up in its mechanism some venerable laborious sledge struck a sounding iron repeatedly, one short of a dozen. Once again, the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, when the guns had stopped.

After a minute of silence, a single bell pealed and then doves were released, tornado of peace into the autumn sky of gray. Anyone not already crying dissolved under the band's first notes of the *Marseillaise*.

When it was over, the crowd had trouble making itself leave. Handshakes, embraces, kisses upon cheeks. Promises to keep in touch. Wes shouldered his way along the dignitary row past the awe and clinging congratulations. Now or never. He caught up with her at the archway. "You're staying a few days, Averill tells me."

Eye to eye they were about the same height and so this was risky, but Susan could not resist the almost imperceptible downward glance learned from her years of reading musical scores without seeming to. His lapel, though, showed only its finely stitched self. Why on earth had he already taken the medal off? "Don't worry, Major, I promise not to take advantage of your absence and drive the ghost of poor old St. Gaudens any farther into the ground. I'll be at sessions having to do with the archive."

"Actually, I'm staying too. There's a reporter from the Paris *Herald* who wants to do a walk-through of the battlefield with me. I merely thought--should we have dinner together?"

Brant -  
he took his  
medal off  
because of the  
slaughter yard  
mess that  
starts the  
chapter

Herald is to  
be italicized  
Paris is NO  
It's the familiar  
location for the  
international  
edition of the  
NY Herald.

“Thank you very much, no. Funny tummy,” she evaded with not the greatest grace and resented having to do so. “You and Mrs. Williamson will have to excuse me.”

“My wife is never--she’s not well enough to travel.”

Susan pinned a look on him that should have squashed him but didn’t appear to in the least. “This doesn’t seem right, is all,” he was saying as if working at a puzzle. “I said dinner because I thought you might want to talk.”

“Whatever about?”

Now he faced her with an expression so radically mixed she blinked trying to take it in. “You don’t know, then.” It came out quizzical, but what else was she hearing in his words, something as callow as relief or as profound as absolution? “Sam was my runner.”

## Sand Map

1924

A Saturday, whistling day for Dolph who had a night in town ahead of him and just another spent set of music-drill hours for Monty, the pair of them were riding back to the ranch when a dozen cows came out of the North Fork brush at a trot, and behind them an angular rider and a thoroughly employed stockdog.

Dolph's puckered rendition of "Pretty Redwing" evaporated. Monty knew the approaching man only to nod to; the broad rise of land between the Double W's Noon Creek watershed and the forks of English Creek was a divide in more ways than one.

"The very lads I'm looking for," Angus sang out. "I have some well-traveled livestock for you." He whistled low to the dog. "Heel them, Bobby." With the border collie industriously coursing behind them as close as the tassels of their tails, the cattle raced past the paused pair of riders.

"Helping the wayfarers on their way a bit," Angus informed them, pulling up his horse next to Dolph and Monty. Keeping watch judiciously on the cows'

galloping exodus, he called the dog off. "No charge, though, for setting them into motion for you," he told the two.

Dolph unhappily studied the jangled bunch of cattle hightailing off up the ridge in the exact opposite direction from the town of Gros Ventre and his night's recreation. "We ain't exactly riding for cows just now, are we, Monty."

"But you are drawing wages from the Double W, and the brand on these specimens looks very much like one W followed by another," Angus's voice had shoulder in it now. "Either you take them, or I sic Bob here"--the short-tailed dog keenly looked up when his name was mentioned--"onto them until they're halfway to Canada."

Dolph rubbed his saddlehorn with the palm of his hand as if wishing for a sudden change of luck, then sent a sigh toward Monty. "I guess we better throw them in the west pasture at the wood gate."

"Suits me."

Before they could spur their horses forward, Angus had the rest of his say. "And tell the Williamsons for me my mysteriously frail north fence is about to have new posts and nice fresh barbwire. They'll be wasting their time encouraging their bastardly cows in that direction."

"Mister, they don't want to hear that sort of thing from me," Dolph protested.

Monty was decidedly staying out of this.

"Maybe it doesn't hurt to have it generally heard, then," Angus said, keeping his gaze on the veteran Double W cowhand. "You're lucky it's me who caught up with you and not the incarnation of Ninian Duff."

"That old scissorbill." Dolph saw the expression this brought on Angus and amended: "Excuse my French. But he was always putting the jump on me

whensoever I'd ride anywhere close to the North Fork. Acted like he had this whole country in his pocket."

"Man, he did. The one Warren Williamson was always trying to pick."

"Have it your way," Dolph muttered. "C'mon, Monty, those cows are making miles on us."

Angus inched his horse closer to Monty's. "A minute of your time?"

*Now what? One bossy teacher isn't enough for one day?* But sure as the world, if he didn't bend an ear to whatever this unbudging man had on his mind, there would be some later price to pay. "I'll catch right up," he told Dolph. The wizened rider looked even more put upon, but trotted off alone.

"I don't mean to detain you," Angus said, doing precisely that so far as Monty could see. Elongated as he was even sitting in the saddle, the graying teacher seemed to study Monty's face from way, way up. "How's the songster life agreeing with you by now?"

"Sort of seesaw, one time to the next." Monty resented having to hedge, to someone who happened to pop out of the brush and glom onto him. *What am I all of a sudden, everybody's flypaper?*

"Brave of you, to undergo tonsil exercises when you wouldn't have to."

Monty continued to meet Angus's gaze, although it was not easy. Those agate eyes were too wise for comfort. He knew what they were taking in, a scuffed-up colored cowboy who had arrived at the middle of life but nowhere near its center. He felt the old weariness of having to deal with what he was when every face around him was pearl-handled. Why prolong the malady?

"Tell you the truth, I'm about to bunch it. It's just not working out."

"Are you not getting along with Susan Duff?"

"It's not that, so much."

Angus waited him out.

"I'm maybe not cut out for this," Monty finally said.

The two men tested the taste of that for a moment. Surprise to Monty, Angus shook his head as if he wasn't having any whatsoever. "If she says you have the goods, she's not wrong. Monty, if I can call you that"--people had always called him whatever the hell they pleased--"when it comes to the human voice, Susan knows more in her little finger than you and I and Wesley Williamson combined. If she's had at you this long and is still giving you a chance, man, you're daft not to hang on to it for dear life."

Monty absorbed this, staying wary.

Angus looked off up the creek. "She's been a while gone from here." He turned to Monty again. "I wouldn't want to see her come back only to be disappointed." Preparatory to going, he snapped his fingers above the dog, which crouched and sprang high against the leather of his chaps, and was scooped to its nestling place between lap and saddle horn for the ride home.

"Mister?" Monty did the detaining now. "'Curious' is a habit I never been able to break."

"Say on."

"You make it pretty plain there's some things you don't like about the way the Williamsons operate."

"Just everything about them."

"I take their dollar, same as Dolph there does." Monty trailed an indicative hand down to the WW brand on the pinto flank of his horse, Angus eyeing the dark set of fingers against the snowy patch of horsehair. "And, can I put it this way, you don't know me from a coal bucket."

"But I've known Susan Duff since she was watch-pocket high," Angus replied. "If she's for you, I'm never against you. Tuck that away in case it's

needed, all right?" He rode back into the cloaking brush of the North Fork, and Monty spurred away up the slope of the benchland.

Atop, he pitched in with Dolph to round up the last of the spooked cows. When they had the cattle under control and headed for the west pasture, Dolph beelined over and let his horse fall into step with Monty's.

"What was that about, you going back to kiddygarden, next?"

"He's known Miss Susan forever. Felt he had to put me through the wringer a little on her account."

"Probably stuck on her himself. Scared we'll beat his time with her." When that didn't bring a rise out of Monty, Dolph cleared his throat. "She's not so bad a looker."

"I wouldn't know."

"I bet. What would you do, though, if you was to git the chance?"

"Do?"

"Don't dummy up on me here, I'm real interested," Dolph pressed on despite the <sup>sharp</sup> glance from Monty. "Say she sort of gave you the eye. Answer me that now, just what would you do?"

In no way did Monty like this territory of talk. Dolph and the other Double W hands could trot into Gros Ventre any Saturday night and have their needs taken care of by a bottle-blonde whore upstairs at Wingo's speakeasy, while that was out of the question for him. Clore Street or nothing, for him, and that sort of trip to Helena wasn't anywhere in the picture until the Major had enough of New York, and why did Dolph have to start yapping about this anyway?

"Dolph, the woman is teaching me singing, is all. That's as far as it can go."

"Aw, I was only trying to sociable, Snowball. Excuse me all to hell if I tromped on your toes."

#  
DROP CAP

I don't quite know what to make of this, Susan resorted to the diary immediately after supper a few nights later, *but somehow we got off onto Wes today. It was mainly Monty's instigation, and it threw me for a loop. We had reached our daily stage of tea and honey--I administer it as a kind of soothing syrup when we hit a certain level of frustration--when he looked at me over the lip of his cup and asked:*

*"If the Major ever gets back here, you think he'll figure he's getting his money's worth on me?"*

*I answered to the effect that Major Williamson can afford any price we could ever cost him. Monty's expression told me he was not remotely satisfied with that, so I added that really, he needn't worry, the Major had no shortage of either funds or hope for this musical endeavor of ours.*

*He wagged his head as if considering that and after a moment said:*

*"Well, he is a praying man, even if he can't get down on his prayer bones any more."*

*His skeptical tone surprised me, given his mother's life of gospel. ("Angel Momma" is long dead but still ticking, from the way he cites her.) Without thinking I said:*

*"For him it seems to have worked."*

*He wanted to know how I meant. Monty is more than bright enough to realize that Wes and I did not find each other in baskets in the bulrushes, and so I went so far as to say:*

*"The Major once told me he felt the cupped hand of God around him, in the war."*

By now Monty has seen, any number of times, Samuel's picture on my makeshift desk. I may be imagining, but I think sometimes I catch him studying it. This time, he did me the cold kindness of not looking in that direction when he said:

"I guess maybe in any sort of situation, there's soldiers and then there's officers."

#

DROP CAP

That woman was going to drive him to desperation.

Breathe, breathe, breathe. You would think she was a lifeguard pumping away on a drowner.

Monty eased the Duesenberg across the cattle guard at the main gate of the Double W, grimacing as the bumps made the elegant car bounce and groan. The county road on in from the ranch was no bargain either, with ruts fried into it by the abrupt turnaround of weather. He wished the Major would go back in the legislature long enough to do something about these christly awful roads that he was always having to baby the car along on.

Even this day off from her tasted bad, thanks to her. "*Breath capacity, I hate to keep bringing it up,*" she had brought it up, last thing yesterday. "*Yours is lazy. That's not your fault, it comes with chasing around the countryside with the Major and otherwise never exercising.*"

"*I'm exercising now, seems like,*" he had pointed out.

"*It doesn't come out in your singing, yet. You must keep at it and at it.*"

Her and her *at-it-tude*. All he wanted was to sing. No, that wasn't quite all. He wanted to sing as free and easy as Angel Momma had, and have the world sit up and listen, and make enough money at it that one wrong turn of a card or stray shimmy of the dice wouldn't leave him flat busted, and for that matter not have to shine up another man's car and then right away be called on to drive it

over these dustbaths called Montana roads. (It went without saying that he was always going to have a general desire for a Leticia Number Two, which he had not had much time to have on his mind lately until damn Dolph touched it off the other day.) Granted, turning yourself into something took work: he knew that in every fiber of his being, he had put himself through plenty back there in rodeo clowning. But these dipsy-doodle nose and gut exercises she kept after him about--it was like she was trying to turn him into one of those carnival freaks who could tie parts of themselves in knots. "Smell the rose, blow the bugle," he mimicked.

Even the way he talked, she had started giving a going-over. The other day when she was soft-soaping another exercise prescription by claiming it had probably let her hang on an extra year in New York back when she was trying to make it as a singer there, he had chimed in without thinking: *"I been there myself, one time with the rodeo, and that New York ain't to be sneezed at, for tough."*

"Have been," she instantly repaired that, *"and 'isn't' wouldn't hurt, either. Any good habit like that will help with your singing, I guarantee."*

She had laid that on him mildly enough, for her, but it produced a spat. He huffed up and let her know that the Noon Creek schoolhouse was not shabby and that his last couple of years there, the seventh and eighth grades, were under <sup>Anna</sup> Miss Ramsay, a stickler for words if there ever was one. *"Then you had better get back to stickling,"* she came out with next. *"It doesn't take that much."*

*"I do that, I'll hear about it from the boys in the bunkhouse."*

*"So? Your singing has to count for more than your hearing."*

That was like her, to have the first word and the last and the majority in between. ~~Not only that, but she was keeping the Major posted on his every up and down by way of mail. How do I know that? Because he did know, was as sure as anything that she was making his ears burn.~~ Yet there she was, still

persevering on him when she any number of times could have said 'That's it' and folded the whole deal.

He frowned, then had to half-laugh, at all this arguing with himself. He ~~had never come up against anything like her~~ <sup>against her</sup> It hardly even did a person any use to get a good mad on! Last thing she had said to him in yesterday's go-round was: *"If it makes you happy to be cranky, you go right ahead."*

a common phrase in 1924?

YES

# He was Johnny-on-the-spot at the Valier depot. Swaying under its pushing finger of smoke, the locomotive of the Two Medicine & Teton Railway teetered across a final coulee on a trestle that had seen better days and came laboring across the last mile or so of prairie into the scant town. Monty was as ready as he could be when the private coach drew to a halt exactly even with the waiting car. "How you doing, Major?"

"I expected you to set that to music."

"Not just yet." Monty contrived not to notice that the train porter wanted him to take the Major's ~~suitcases~~ <sup>luggage</sup> off his hands, instead holding the trunk of the car open for the man to heft ~~the luggage~~ <sup>suitcases</sup> in. Enough bags that it looked as if the Major was here to stay for a while, so at least there might be some stretches of driving when he wouldn't have to be huffing and puffing trying to please the unpleasable over there on the North Fork. Seeking some topic of conversation other than that, Monty asked: "How do you like your railroad?"

"At least it's wide enough."

Monty shook his head as if that was a good one. When he tenderly shut the trunk of the Duesenberg, he turned around to find the Major still standing there looking him over.

"You can't keep me in suspense, you know," Wes prompted as if the report was considerably overdue. "How are you and Miss Duff coming on your musical education?"

“Scuffling along. She probably can fill you in on me better than I can.”  
Monty ducked into the driver’s seat, and after a moment, Wes climbed into the rear seat. But before starting the car, Monty mustered the request he had worked on all the way from the ranch. “Major? On that. Ask you a favor, can I?”

“It depends on the calibre of the favor, doesn’t it.”

“Keep Dolph at the ranch, when I go for my lessons? Dolph is the sort, anything that comes into his head runs out his mouth.”

“Am I hearing right, Monty? Here I thought the two of you were fast friends, all this time.”

“Something like that, I guess. Doesn’t mean he hasn’t got a tongue on him like a longbox wagon.”

“That’s as may be. Whit insists you have somebody along with you over there.”

“Then how about somebody right there handy?” Monty had in reserve. “School’s let out, I was thinking that what’s-his-name teacher--Mister McCaskill?--maybe he could be around to do it.” This was an original approach, Wes had to admit; he hadn’t expected Monty to already be finicking over the exact composition of his entourage. He would need to ask Susan if artistic temperament was the first thing she taught.

Head still turned to implore, his erstwhile chauffeur kept on: “Couldn’t we work it out some way, he be the audience or whatever when I’m at my lessons, and I pitch in on his chores?”

Only at times such as this did Wes long to be back in the military, when he could snap out an order and watch everybody involved fall all over themselves following it without any quibble. “Damn it, Monty, this is Whit’s department,” he confined himself to. And he knew Whit wouldn’t speak to Angus McCaskill if he met him in Hell in charge of the ice concession. Still, if it would smooth

Monty's feathers any, maybe someone else from the ranch crew could go in Dolph's place. "Oh, all right, I'll take the matter up with Whit. But I don't promise anything. Now, does this car still have a motor?"

Monty wheeled away from the depot, creeping the car over the potholed byways that passed for back streets here in Valier. At the intersection where the three-story hotel anchored the young town, he was actually looking forward to the road back to the ranch when he heard the back seat command:

"The other direction."

Mystified, he slowly turned the Duesenberg onto the road out to the eastward prairie. *The man just came from this way.*

Taking a pleasure in this that he knew he shouldn't, Wes let him drive a mile or so, shoulders skewed questioningly, before saying:

"I should have warned you to bring your baby pictures. We're going to Fort Assinniboine for the day."

"Fort Skin-and-Bone?" Monty blurted. "I thought there's not much there anymore."

"Enough to buy," Wes replied mildly. It was true that the abandoned fort persisted in burning down, from vandals or lightning fires or spontaneous friction with the prairie it so incongruously reared out of. But there had been so much of it, when it was built as a Presidio of the north to make sure the plains tribes did not rise from defeat, that rambling buildings still stood and the land that had pastured hundreds of cavalry horses still grew grass.

Monty glanced at him by way of the rear-view mirror. "The Double W need its own fort now? You gonna take on Canada?"

"Very funny," <sup>Wes didn't smile</sup> Monty said. "The whole military reservation is being auctioned, the buildings come with. They'll do for a line camp." <sup>Ha</sup> Wes was a bit miffed at the turn the topic had taken. The need, and Monty and every other bunkhouse

prognosticator doubtless perfectly well knew it, was for a ranch to set up for Whit's son, Wendell, whenever he flailed his way out of Stanford. *The Eastern Front*, Whit had called the quiltwork of prairie they had their eye on, until Wes's reaction cured him of it. Wes now gave due regard to the human question box serving as his driver, and in turn wanted to know: "Remember it when, do you?"

Remembering had already taken Monty over. In his farthest reach of mind the Tenth Cavalry wheeled on the vast parade ground at Fort Assinniboine. The big, big horses, clatter of everything on the men and animals, the band tootling on horseback too. Here and there a white officer, but all the blue riders, faces on them like his mother's and his. "*See him, Montgomery? See your papa? Can you salute him like a little man?*"

"Only barely," he finally answered the Major. Those first three or four years of life might as well have happened in Bible times, so far removed were they from growing up under the crisscross of clothelines at the Double W. Distance was the only reliable arithmetic he knew for Fort Assinniboine. The road unrolling straight ahead of the car, Monty calculated the time to the Marias River and a similar stretch after that to Big Sandy Creek, and then they would begin trending north. "The fort, it's a ways."

"This will give you and the Doozy some exercise," Wes replied, settling as comfortably as he could and reaching <sup>for</sup> his attache case <sup>to him.</sup>

"That's a thing I never did get a good understanding of." Monty checked quickly over his shoulder, getting this in before the Major drifted too far into his thicket of paper. "How my folks ended up at the ranch from all the way over there?"

As neutrally as he could, Wes gazed back at the dark face that was the remaining result of that other. "As far as I know, your father rode in out of the

blue. There was a job on the place for someone like him, he was quite something on horseback. And of course, for your mother when he fetched the two of you."

"Been different if I could remember much about the man," Monty chanced slightly farther. "It sort of keeps the curiosity going."

*"Montgomery, sit down here by me. You know you're my treasure. More so now." Her face so twisted, it hurt him too. "Your papa--Mister Warren tells me he quit the country on us. Him and another. I don't quite know what they got up to. But the mister, he tells me we better not look for him back."*

"It would have been different, yes." Wes, older, all too well remembered Mose Rathbun. The same dark brow on Monty, maybe some of the same slant of shoulders from a life on horseback. If Monty was lucky, all resemblance stopped there. Mose's ilk, in denatured white form, Wes had met up with again and again in the AEF: lifer sergeants, old stripers, who thought the chevrons on their arm meant they could get away with anything. He'd had to bust some of them so far down in rank they slunk around saluting civilians, but Mose Rathbun had never been his to command, thank the Lord. Soldiers not in the manuals became the pencilings of fate.

"Major? Something I did?"

"Why, is there something on your conscience?"

"Not any more than usual."

"Then concentrate on the road for a change, will you."

That put a stopper in Monty, and Wes tried to find his way into the maze of papers in his lap. In them lay the route to bring bald-faced cattle to the dun hills of the Fort Assiniboine country, a fresh new Williamson brand seared on their left hips. But this other business, the Rathbuns and their wander into nagging orbit around his own father and now Whit and him, kept slipping in between the lines.

roman?

YES

It's unclear what Monty is responding to. I realize you're trying break them out of the conversation but this exchange seems fuzzy.

He's reacting to Wes's mood

"Damn it," he murmured. Then notched up more civilly: "Monty, I take it back."

*What now?* was registered in the pair of eyes that met Wes's in the car mirror.

"These papers can wait a bit. How's that voice of yours?"

"In operating order, I guess."

"Then why don't we have a sample." Wes swished his sheaf of papers down onto the seat next to him as if the matter was decided. "What type of thing are you and Miss Susan working up?"

"You've pretty much heard them, one time or another," Monty hedged.

"Try me on a fresh one then."

"Uhm, lot of songs in the world, Major."

"The kind your mother would have sung."

For once Monty was glad of all Miss Susan's bellyaching at him about posture, what with the man making him sing while he had to sit here like a lump. He squared himself up behind the steering wheel, pouter-pigeoned his chest for all available capacity, lifted his chin to a goodly elevation and here came as safe a song as he could think of:

*"Look there, my son, my sleepyhead one,*

*the moon followed you home.*

*It's yours to keep, while you sleep.*

*Show it your dream and it won't roam*

*Until the night is done...."*

"Very moving," Wes stated when the last verse was finished, leaving Monty in doubt as to whether it was high praise or he was merely acknowledging that the song had propelled them a little way along the day's long road. Back into his documents went the Major, and Monty once more settled into chauffeurdom.

Both men were accustomed to Montana's long-legged miles. But this journey on a day that had <sup>grown</sup> turned sultry, <sup>turning into a roaster even with the</sup> hot air blasting in through the <sup>open</sup> car windows, seemed to go on and on, methodically, doggedly, hypnotically.

Gradually the tawny hills gave way to homestead farms, spotted onto flats of land rimmed by benchland ~~on every horizon~~. On the section-line roads across the prairie they met no other travelers, black-locomotived Great Northern trains passing them by ~~on the distant northern horizon~~ <sup>by to the north</sup> the only other moving things in the blaze of afternoon. Wes caught himself drowsing, snapped awake and checked on Monty; he was peering ahead over the steering wheel the same as ever.

"Hateful weather," Monty eventually offered above the steady purr of the Duesenberg. Wes entirely agreed.

Time upon time now, the big car topped a rise and the two men were gazing down at <sup>another</sup> lustreless expanses. There had been a distressed air to farms all

along the way, the houses and outbuildings brown howls of dry wood, the ~~Coast and lie off in vain sacrifice to the heat,~~ <sup>put his papers aside</sup> cropland even more stricken. ~~Through his sweat,~~ <sup>to keep them from getting sticky and simply stared out at</sup> Wes ~~blinked and studied~~ the

fatigued fields. To every horizon, the earth had been plowed and anemic grain was trying to grow, but its stalks would barely tickle a person's ankles. ~~He knew~~ <sup>he could tell</sup>

this turn of weather would furl up even more of the homesteaders, those who were still left. He had been reluctant to see it on his route from the East, but ~~the~~

~~hard~~ seasons of the past years all led to this reaping of the wind. The puddled

settlements on the great prairie were drying up, <sup>too</sup> Banks were evaporating, entire towns would go next. It was incredible, the reversal of the wave of settlers that

had made Montana and the Dakotas the coming places, before the War. *Buy*, he

knew he was going to hear out of Whit the minute he set foot on the ranch, *get out*

*there and buy them out.* That had been the Williamson way, it had built the

What is  
benchland  
by definition?  
I'm just  
curious my  
own self.

a very  
elongated  
grassy mesa -  
flat "bench"  
of rise across  
a horizon

Double W ever since their father had come into the Two Medicine country on the fading hoofprints of the buffalo and swamped the prairie with cattle.

This ~~weather~~<sup>drought</sup> though, good God, how many summers of this were there going to be? Wes felt himself turning into hot salt soup in the stifling car. "What do you think," he solicited Monty's opinion as though the day might be more readable from the front seat, "might this bring rain?"

"Got me. The air does feel sort of funny."

Even though the road ran straight as a rail for a dozen miles ahead, Monty never shifted his eyes from it. Wes, gandering, was the one who puzzled at the smudged sky to the west. The ~~horizon there had gradually roughened with hills,~~  
~~breaks, coulees, and that~~ banked horizon of hills was ~~now~~<sup>now</sup> 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 weather always have that much trouble making up its mind out here, I wonder?"

Monty sneaked a 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 put his head out the window and ~~stared west~~<sup>studied the mass of muck</sup> to be sure.

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

The butter-bright car sped on the dimming road for the next five minutes, ten, fifteen, with Monty pursed and restless over the steering wheel while Wes tried to watch both the road and the phenomenon ~~to~~<sup>approaching from</sup> the west, the earth rising in wrath. A half-light, yellow-green, descended, perceptibly darkening as if a shadow-dye from the dust storm was flowing ahead into it. Wind began buffeting the car, the steering gone woozy in Monty's clenched hands. Wes registered, to the instant, the full arrival of the dust, the prairie flooding by him in the air, a dirt-sea surging up into the next element.

Why would he need to stop to see it?

To study it, make sense what it is

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

Monty braked and veered, swearing, and just managed to miss the last leaping animal. "Your headlamps!" Wes ordered in a shout and Monty already had darted a hand to the button on the dashboard ~~and refastened his gaze to the road.~~ ~~The pair of men saw~~ in the headlight beams dust ~~blowing~~ <sup>a ground blizzard</sup> across the surface of the road like wisps of brown snow.

They were in past the parade ground before they could discern any of the buildings of Fort Assinniboine.

Before Monty could see it coming, a rolling washtub met the Duesenberg's radiator grill and bounced away. ~~Monty~~ <sup>Monty</sup> He managed to steer in close to an abandoned barracks that sat broadside between them and the dust storm, the building's turret dim over them like a castlement in the fog of some terrible era. The dust fury kept on without letup. ~~They~~ <sup>pair of men</sup> could hear it stinging wherever it could find wood, scouring off the paint of buildings around them. And the ~~two men~~ <sup>two men</sup> watched astounded as on the pathway between this barracks and the next, not mere dirt but gravel, actual small stones, blew into <sup>long</sup> thin drifts. Tumbleweeds spun tirelessly across the parade ground, and every so often a stovepipe flew by.

Held in confinement by the groundstorm, each man went into himself as they sat waiting it out in the <sup>increasingly grimy</sup> sanctuary of the car. Wes's mind was <sup>doing its best to</sup> ~~reenforcing~~ itself with sound principles for investment here, the airborne nature of Fort Assinniboine at the moment notwithstanding, but Monty's thoughts were speculative. Hidden somewhere out there was everyplace a sergeant of colored cavalry had courted a hymn-singing laundress, and the exact room in the married men's quarters where they had done their business of bearing and he had squalled his way onto this earth. But for the life of him he could not pull back anything

I would imagine that some dust would still get into the car's cabin. This might be interesting to note in terms of scene description.

good idea

substantial from his first handful of years here. What he best remembered, as if he could reach down at this instant and touch its magical cool skin, was the fire escape at the post hospital. It must have been the latest thing, a chute like a metal tunnel that even a mite of a boy could climb up inside, barefoot, and then slide ecstatically down. He wasn't to go climbing the ones of the other big buildings, the post headquarters and like that, but the hospital's was the best one anyway. Up he would go, then the glorious seat-of-the-britches ride down, shooting out the end and there would be his mother in the white field of wash. But that, and nothing beyond dimness about the parade-ground figure whose seed desposited him into this Jericho of the prairie. That and his mother's drumbeat of verdict: *"I tried so, with that man. And for him to pick up on us with never a word."*

At last Wes roused and peered out into the lessening hurricane of murk. "I think we better give it a try, now."

Monty crept the car through the ghostly fort until Wes leaned over the seat and pointed. An aftergust of the storm caught them before they could make a run for it to the building where other vehicles were haphazardly parked and lights glowed wanly in the first-floor windows. The brown blown grit could be heard doing no favors to the glossy finish on the Duesenberg, and they could feel the dust collecting on them as deep as their teeth, the air about thick enough to chew. Wes tied his handkerchief over his face like a bandanna, and at a motion from him, Monty quickly followed suit. They struggled against the wind to the door of the building. When they clambered in, the small crowd of bankers and ranchers and the bowler-hatted auctioneer looked around in alarm at the masked invaders. Wes yanked his bandanna down, and Monty rapidly followed suit. As they swatted dust off themselves, Wes said to those assembled: "The Fort Assiniboine land, gentlemen--we had better hope it's not blowing by for good out there."



DROP CAP

“It’s going to be the ruin of a good choreboy.”

“Whit, he has a rare voice. You’ve said so yourself any number of times.”

Still feeling sanded ~~down~~<sup>raw</sup> by the dust blizzard of the day before, Wes was in no particular mood for debate, but that had never stopped his brother.

“Calling cows is one thing,” Whit stated. “Putting on a bib and tucker and squalling out ‘Doo Dah’ is another.”

Wes plumped up a neglected cushion of the chair on the visitor side of the desk--his brother made a point of doing the same on his rare New York visits--and settled in. “For Lord’s sake, man, you had him sing for the Archbishop.”

“That was here. Under our own roof.”

“Monty deserves this chance to get out on his own. He’s not ours to do with as we please, forever and ever, amen.”

“Next thing to it. Monty still wouldn’t have a pot to put under his bed if we didn’t keep giving him a job.”

“Giving him?” Wes grated the words out. “You know better than that.”

Whit ran a hand across his forehead. “Aaah. There’s the woman, too.”

“Susan Duff came into this of her own free will. She can take it.”

“So you’ve already proved<sup>once</sup>!”

“I told you at the time she’s no concern of yours,” Wes abruptly was giving this private speech his all. Whit eyed his brother there on the far side of the scarred old desk. Was his case of petticoat fever coming back? No, there had been more to the Duff woman than that. Which must have made it even worse for Wes. There were times, though, when he wondered whether Wes was secretly glad to have been cut out of the governor’s race, even the hell of a way it was done. Not glad, that would be too much to say. But relieved, maybe? Absolved somehow? Whit still couldn’t tell. Wes was too complicated for him.

"What she gets out of this is her damnedest pupil ever. Are you listening, Whit? I'm seeing to it myself that she's taken care of, on the money end. I don't tell you how to run the cattle--"

"Good thing, too. When it comes to cows, you don't know which end eats."

"--and I'd appreciate it if you didn't volunteer your every thought about this."

"Have it your way. But this haywire notion of Monty's that Dolph all of a sudden isn't good enough to tag along with him--does he want tea and crumpets, too? I'm not pulling Dolph off this and putting someone else to it, no way in hell. There's no sense in creating hard feelings among the crew." Whit settled deeper into the ancient office chair on his side of the desk. "Could we talk some business about where we're going to put cows, you think?"



Word always raced around the ranch when the Major, natural inspector-general of corral-sitters and dawdlers, set foot out of the big house, but for once it failed to reach Monty and Dolph before he did. Splattered just short of polka dots, they halted amid their task of whitewashing the harness room and looked around at him.

"Caught you at it," Wes said sternly enough to maintain his reputation. "Working. Are you trying to ruin the reputation of the whole crew?"

The two told him that choreboys always had more to do than they knew what to do with, which for both of them had an element of truth in it, and stood waiting to see what he wanted, brushes dripping.

Conveyance to the North Fork, he informed them.

*Where's this come from?* Monty's thoughts lined up in alarm. *Why don't he just go over there with us tomorrow when we do?* Very slowly he wiped his hands. "Take me a little while to get cleaned up enough to bring the car around."

Wes waved that off. "Let's keep life simple. Hitch up the grays for me, I'll go cross-country." Everybody on the Double W knew singular from plural, particularly when uttered by a Williamson, and Monty and Dolph apprehensively slid away into the main barn to fetch the horses.

They watched the Major drive the buckboard up to the big house, hating to admit to themselves that he handled the reins as spiffily as either of them could. Minutes later, team and well-kept wagon went back past them at rattling velocity and kept on at a smart pace until starting up the incline of the benchland.

"So what do you suppose?" Dolph was intrigued. "He's heading over there to git your report card from her?"

"Or maybe yours," said Monty.

Once atop the broad bench of land, Wes spanked the reins across the rumps of the horses, setting them into a prancy trot again, and anxiously studied the sky to the west for indication of how the weather was going to behave. Indeterminate, as usual in the Two Medicine country. He put the weather question aside as best he could and concentrated on the pleasure of handling fine horses again, the leather feel of the reins tethering him to the moment. A kind of pleasure he had almost forgotten took him over, the team of grays fresh and wanting exercise and snappy at the ends of the reins, the bolster beneath his knee with almost the feel of a saddle, although he knew that was stretching imagination some. The commanding officer who came up out of the cavalry had singled him out even in France, that incredible time, to remark on how lucky Wes was to have grown up in such glorious horse country for a soldier. Wes ruminated on that now, the assumption that where you were born fitted you to the country. As sure

I assume this means that they know that Wes will go alone, but this seems an odd way to put it.

It's a way of emphasizing the baronial 'I' when Wes or Whit uses it

as anything, before his wound he would have cantered across this benchland on a saddlehorse as if under a satin guidon. But he didn't mind at all having been dealt out of Indian fighting by chance of birthdate. San Juan Hill and the St. Mihiel salient had been enough wars to hold him. Those and Montana politics.

So, he concluded contentedly, take the <sup>saddle</sup> horse part out of the equation and it still was glorious country on a day such as this. Up here on the level divide between the creek valleys the scope of earth opened, the Rockies suddenly enlarging with the skyline expanse of cliff and reef and cuts of crag chipped like the faces of arrowheads, and the sun-browned prairie boundless in the other direction. As ever to Wes's eye and mind, the sweep of it all curved away through the profound distances of the Two Medicine country to where geography turned into history. This reach of earth drew its name from the canyoned river thirty miles to the north where the Blackfeet<sup>ee</sup> tribe in legendary times twice built their medicine lodge for sacred ceremonies; but in more ways than that, Wes knew to the innermost timber of his being, this had been a land of two medicines, two sets of the most potent beliefs a people could hold. The struggle for the prairie could be said to have begun here, when Meriwether Lewis and his exploring party bloodied the Blackfeet in a parley that turned into shooting, in 1806 on the banks of the Two Medicine River. Evidently inheritors by nature, one of the creeds of the Williamsons which they did not even need to discuss out loud was that if they had not put together a cattle empire on swaths of land here for the taking after the eventual diminishing of the Indians and the buffalo, someone else would have. It played through Wes's mind now that he was on his way to take his medicine from Susan, who had once told him that when it came to owning chunks of the Two Medicine country, he and his father and Whit behaved like St. Bernards in a windowbox.

saddlehorse

Long thoughts ended abruptly as he ~~came to~~<sup>reached</sup> the edge of the benchland and had to wagoneer the still spirited team down the slope and across rough meadow to the ford of the North Fork. He eased the team and wagon into the clear creek. Pulling into the yard with the wheels still shedding water, he whoaed the horses vigorously enough <sup>to</sup> announce himself, but no one appeared. Women's voices in duet carried from the house. Wes had to smile. Susan would not interrupt a song no matter what. He stayed in the buckboard, listening, the ears of the matched horses up sharp in curiosity.

When the singing concluded, the door of the house opened with alacrity. "If it isn't Major Williamson," Susan announced for the benefit of the interested. He saw her shoot a look past him for Monty and Dolph.

A smaller figure joined Susan at the doorway. Wes climbed down from the wagon and made himself sociable:

"Mrs. McCaskill, isn't it? Don't break up your songfest on my account. You sounded like a set of larks."

"No, it's time I wasn't here." Adair too seemed to search the air around him, more than addressing him with her eyes.

"Please, don't let me run you off."

Adair looked squarely at him now, as did Susan beside her. Uncomfortably Wes amended: "I didn't know I would be interrupting anything, I only came over to make sure everything is squared away. With the music enterprise and all."

"I dasn't take too much advantage of Susan," Adair said, leaving the impression there might not be enough to go around. She plucked out a pocket purse and paid some coins into Susan's hand. "If I don't go home and get at things, we'll have to eat sin for supper. And probably borrow the salt and bread from you for that, even."

Susan gave a hoot at the old saying. "Careful, or you'll set off that sinner you're married to. He'll be rhyming *sin* and *thin* at you until the words wear out."

"Wouldn't he, though."

Wes let all this pass as ~~obliquely~~<sup>if</sup> as if he had wandered into a conversation between Frenchwomen. Adair mounted her horse in climbing fashion as Wes held it by the bridle, then her small solo form went from sight around the bend of the chattering creek.

He assembled himself again for what he had come for. "Here I am, as summoned."

"'Summoned,' that will be the day. Won't New York fall down, without you there to support it? We thought you had forgotten your way back to Montana." The tingle of the song still seemed to be all over Susan. She spun to go back in the house, but he made no move to follow. "Wes? You could step in. Homesteads don't bite."

"Actually, I was hoping we could make an outing of it--I haven't been up under the Reefs in ages." He stayed rooted in the yard, appearing abashed. "More fool, me. I'd forgotten that even up here there would be the matter of the neighbors."

For her part, Susan looked highly amused. "Neighbor, singular. You haven't that much to worry about, here. Adair McCaskill holds to herself, in every way I can think of."

"Well, then." Wes drew himself up. "If this won't set tongues off, near and far--I brought fried spring chicken and hard-boiled eggs and <sup>fresh</sup> biscuits and chokecherry jam and a jar of Mrs. Gustafson's dreaded pickles and a bottle of chenin blanc."

"A picnic! Who would have thought the soldier man had jam in him."

“Susan, damn it--if you don't want to go, just say so.”

“Don't be so touchy, of course I want to go. What's left for me to provide? Ah. A representation of strawberries. There's a patch of wild ones along the creek bank. Let me change, and pick those, and I'm at your service, Major.”



Their route took them west on the uneven scrape of road, hedged with tall brome grass. After the climb out of the creek valley they were up onto the shoulder of Breed Butte, the buildings of the abandoned Scotch Heaven homesteads here and there below them like wagons in a looping circle, left to fall apart. Wes clucked encouragement to the horses when he wasn't regaling Susan with everything he had stored up for this. She listened eagerly to his account of what was on in New York, even to his dodgy report of subscription evenings--"conscription is more like it"--at Carnegie Hall with Merrinell's circle, and all the good dirt about politics in Coolidge climes. When this ran out they found enthusiastic things to say about the day's weather, the sun holding the Two Medicine wind at bay for once. To look at, the two of them might still have been lovers unencumbered by discovery.

But Susan was careful not to promote touching against each other in the sway of the buckboard over the thin-tracked road, and they both looked relieved when the wagon reached timberline. They agreed on an open grassy circlet that gave an opening of view there near the top of a foothills ridge, where the rimrock of Roman Reef capped the entire sky west of them. Finding a spot with a welcoming smattering of wildflowers, they spread a serviceable tarp. Cork came out of bottle, mutual faces were made in scorn of Prohibition, and they sipped at the wine and the day.

From this elevation they could see the distant gray-tan of drought, off to the east where Wes had told her about the prairie dust storm. Here under the mountains the snowbank-fed coulees held a tinge of green yet, but hayfields and grazing land already looked wan. The country was going gaunt, like the flanks of a greyhound.

"You were right," Susan gave him his due. "It's best to be up here, before the summer gets everything again."

Wes smiled <sup>absently</sup> ~~slightly~~. "Even a tossed coin comes down right half the time."

Turning his head, he searched along the base of the towering reef to a particular swatch of timber with an open park many times the size of the grass pocket they were in. "That's where my father took Roosevelt after elk, that time," he said as if refreshing his knowledge from a guidebook. He and Whit along as youngsters who would be heirs to such behavior someday, watching in awe and envy as the men sat around the campfire drinking whiskey chilled with fistfuls of snow. Theodore Roosevelt full of bounce as he emerged from his tent the next morning and woke the entire camp with his yelp to their father, "*Perfectly bully country, Warrie!*" Wes grew aware Susan was watching him with her studying expression. "What?"

She merely shook her head and put her eyes to the same use again behind a sip of wine.

Caught by the day and the chance to see it all from up here, he scanned out eastward ~~again~~ over the dun grasslands and fields. To him it resembled a sand map, in the vastest headquarters, but instead of the croupier sticks of staff colonels and toy troop movements, the contest for land was deployed to see on that miniature of earth. He could have recited it to the nearest dollar to Susan, if she wouldn't have batted him off the ridge. There below them the west pasture of

the Double W broke off, like a salient that had been blunted by the boundary of the Two Medicine National Forest. Wes could even pick out the wood gate, called so because the Double W used it as access to timber for firewood and corral poles and buckrake teeth. Over the shoulder of Breed Butte from there lay the North Fork of English Creek, the old Duff and Erskine and other homestead pastures where Angus McCaskill's band of freshly-sheared sheep were as visible as peeled eggs. Beyond the last barb of McCaskill's wire fence the rangeland was the Double W's, all the way to the irrigated farms around the fledgling town of Valier and the blue eye of lake there which seemed to be returning Wes's ~~Once more he was helpless against too much memory~~ appraisal. In the boom before the war he'd had to talk like a good fellow to convince Whit to yield that <sup>Valier</sup> land to the Minneapolis grain concern and their irrigation engineers--*Cattle are no good to us unless there are stomachs around for them to find their way to.* He had been ahead of things then, guessing with terrible rightness that the dry-land farming that was bringing needed people to Montana would someday go drier yet. Irrigation, roads, towns that amounted to more than wooden tents, progress paid for by taxing the extractors; he had seen the shape of what could be. On what proved to be the sand of a political career. ~~And now he was faced with a brother who wanted blowing-away homesteads bought to make up for the Valier irrigation tract.~~

Susan brought him back to himself. "Wes. On most picnics, there's food."

"Let's dig in, then."

The wicker picnic basket disgorged. They passed its ingredients back and forth, foregoing conversation for flavor, until Wes no longer could stand not to ask.

"All right, I give. What's a sin-eater?"

Maybe  
cut  
this  
paragraph  
in half

Nope.  
Wes doesn't  
get as much  
page time  
as the  
other two,  
so he needs  
these  
occasional  
interior  
graps

"If you were lucky enough to be a *Lowlander* instead of one of those ridge-runners in plaid skirts," Susan responded with mock severity, "you wouldn't have to ask such a silly question."

The ins and outs of the Scotland-born were beyond him; Williamsons had been this side of the ocean since hiking their kilts after the Battle of Culloden. "Deprived as I am, you could take pity on me."

"I'm to instruct you in sin-eating, am I. Very well then, it's, mm, a kind of wake. To relieve the dead of earthly sins, I suppose you'd say I wasn't all that old when Gram Erskine passed away and I saw it done, right there." She inclined her head toward the Erskine homestead, next up the North Fork from the Duff place. Wes felt the stir of his father's voice in him: "That Erskine is another one--in cahoots with Ninian Duff."

Susan was saying, "Scotch Heaven's first death, she must have been. So, they were all still full of the old country," pronouncing it *auld countrrry*, "and nothing doing but they had to have a sin-eater. They take and put a piece of bread and a salver of salt--oh, it's easier to show you. Assume for the moment I'm not among the living." She took one of the biscuits and the salt shaker in either hand, lay back on the tarp and carefully positioned them atop her chest, where her her breastbone clavicles met. With eyes shut and held breath, she made a perfectly still body there on the shroudlike canvas. Wes watched, fixed as if hypnotized, as one hand ever so slowly came up out of the grass holding a single shooting star and joined the other hand in folded repose beneath her breasts, the tiny flower in mischievous droop there.

"You're spoofing and you know it," he burst out. "That damned posie--" "a wee wilted bouquet is "You caught on, but ~~it's~~ a nice dramatic touch, isn't it," she sat up and tossed the tiny flower at him as biscuit and salt cascaded off her to the tarp. "The rest of it, though, I swear to you is done just that way. I remember being surprised my father wasn't the one to do it for Gram," she glanced again to where

↑  
no above

I don't understand what this is all about, and after reading the next few pages I'm still not all that sure what sin-eating is

the Erskine place was in slow descent into kindling. "Anything civic and grim usually fell to him. But maybe he was too much artillery for the occasion. 'Ay, Gram, as ye were better than ye were bonny, it is beyond our imagining that ye could have been up to anything, in your younger time over across the water. But on the odd chance that ye strayed from the beaten path into yon bushes of sin, we'll relieve ye of that indiscretion now.'"

Her uncanny mimickry of her father sent Wes's blood a bit chill. Susan sobered out of her role, but her lips twitched at the complicated remembrance. "The Erkinies asked Angus McCaskill to be the sin-eater instead. He always had the knack, at any of that old ritual. There he stood, right by the corpse, I can see him yet. Eating of the bread and salt, to lift the sins off the poor old deceased."

Wes seemed to be in one of his deeper mullings. After a long moment he said: "A penitent for all concerned, it sounds like."

"If you have to be Latinate about it."

Stung, he scowled across the carpet-width of tarp at her.

*Tell her, it all screamed in him. See how she likes knowing. Let her try all the bread and salt in the world, then judge the lot of us.*

"Leave it to me to take the shine off a picnic," Susan apologized, torn by the abrupt twist in his expression. Someone who had been patted by Presidents and supreme generals, and she was having him on as if she were a devilish schoolgirl. She never would see why he let a stuffy church stand in the way of all else available in a life such as his, but-- "Wes, really, I'm sorry I got so wound up."

Wes sat up. "Water under old bridges, some in Rome and some not." His face found its mask of command. "Wasn't I promised strawberries?"

They ate the thimbles of flavor, then Wes, seeing the afternoon go, brought out the name of Monty and it was Susan's turn at serious.

"That's what I need to talk to you about. I have to know, how long are you willing to put into this? He has quite a way to go."

"How do you mean?" Wes propped on his side facing her directly, the better to take issue. "Training in anything worth doing takes some while, why should singing be different? I thought you told me once there were songs it had taken you all your life to learn."

"Monty picks up most things, he'll outwork the clock," Susan granted. "With any other pupil, I'd be thrilled silly by now at what comes out of him at times." She stopped to gather the exact words. "But there's something holding him back, he cannot seem to get his wind built up. I've tried everything on him but a tire pump. His breath capacity simply isn't there. Without it, he'll never be more than a kind of human hurdy-gurdy."

Wes had to laugh. "All the lungpower he puts into conversations when he's ostensibly driving me, I'd have thought Monty has as much breath in him as anybody."

"He needs half again as much as mortals with tin ears," she took a bit of the point off with a smile.

The expression on Wes she could no longer read. He retrieved the crumpled shooting star from the surface of the tarp, sniffed it as a bullfighter might a rose, and tossed it back to her. "As long as it takes, Susan."

She hoped they were talking about the same thing. "Very well, then. We'll battle on, Monty and I."

"That's what I bargained for. Oh, speaking of, I need to borrow our prize student back around the end of this week. Helena business, a couple of days should be enough."

"Make him practice his breathing while he's in your tender care."

“What am I, the assistant choirmaster now? Here we go, there’s a drop of wine apiece left. Mustn’t let it go to waste.” He sat up to perform the pouring. They toasted out of habit, then Wes put his glass out of harm’s way and turned half toward her. “I did recognize that song when I pulled in, I’ll have you know. Not bad, for me.”

“It’s only an old ditty.”

“It didn’t sound so, in Edinburgh.”

His words came out lightly enough, but Susan froze, locking a look onto him over her tilted wineglass.

#

DROP CAP

“Wes. *I don’t know, this may be something run-of-the-mill to you. But I have it bad.*”

“*Catching, isn’t it.*”

Restraint had gone out the mullioned windows of one French hotel after another, then Amsterdam’s, that of Brussels, one or two in London, and now the casements of the misnamed sleeper train to Edinburgh. Something in the water in St. Mihiel, they naturally joked; how else account for such a sudden onset of the malady of love? After the first curious but cautious dinner together, then a second and third as if they were plenipotentiaries returning to a truce table, it had them. Now here they were, two weeks into a romance as full of sway and pulsation as this galloping train compartment. She was a woman grown, whose heart had been lent more than once before and retrieved with no great fuss. He had the world, what need had he of an elongated spinster lover? Ridiculous for the two of them to be bumping around Europe in a fog of love. And proving irresistible.

“*How much longer can you fib by cable?*”

He said nothing, then caressed her cheek with an odd shy stroke. They still were getting used to touching each other. When he managed to speak, his

words were soft with regret. *"Until Monday. I have to be aboard the Aquitania or they'll be sending a search party for me."*

She knew nothing to do about that except acknowledge it, brisk as a whisk broom. *"At least we have somewhere that a weekend amounts to about three days, a Scottish Sunday is so slow."*

At the railway station they raced to a black taxi with *Mackay* primly lettered on its door in gold, and were trundled up the hill to the Royal Mile. Restless with the thrill of their affair, both of them wanted to walk and walk, go arm-in-arm through this sky island of stony grace, stroll unafflicted under the exclamatory church steeples jabbing home their points to the clouds over the city. They gawked at sites thick with the soot of history, lunched, kissed behind a kiosk, sampled bookdealers' wares, took tea, and at last worked their way up to the Castle, various in its stone textures--all dark, but subtly different, like some natural palimpsest of the centuries. Susan felt as if she had stepped into someone else's life. But at last she had to admit: *"My feet are about worn off. Where are we putting up?"*

With the sorcerer's aplomb she had come to know, Wes gently pulled her into the doorway of the building just outside the Castle gate. *"Here."*

They bumped and laughed their way up the corkscrew wind of the stairs, to the top-floor flat. *"The agent said it should be "--he triumphantly plucked a key from the top of the doorjamb--"here!"* In they went, breathless. Every window threw them a view of another essence of Edinburgh. Down in the Princes Street Gardens, the flower clock told time in autumn blossoms of heather. Regularities of roofline chimney pots thrust up as if each street was a soberly engineered steamship. On the Castle side of things, the room offered a pert ironwork balcony which looked onto the stone-laid parade ground.

"It's an enchantment, Wes. We had better treat it as such." She went to him and they ardently invented each other all over again, starting at the lips.

After, they lay in bed facing each other, lazy and replete, not needing to say anything. They burst out laughing together when a whistle shrilled and bagpipes began to drone under the window as if mocking their dormant state. *Hiiiyuhhh!* came a rouseful shout from practically beneath their bedsprings. "That'll be a sergeant-major, sounding the tattoo," Wes identified as if by rote. "Come on, let's get ourselves decent and see this."

By the time they reached the balcony, the Castle parade ground had been turned into a vast drumskin, the slow-step of the kilted marching contingent seeming to be echoed in the bass thuds and staccato rustles of the drum corps. "I suppose you ordered this up, too," Susan put to Wes as she hooked her elbow in his in reckless dance-like fashion, maybe some innate Lowlander defense against ferocious Highlands music. "That would take tall ordering," Wes answered in a voice husky enough that it caused her to peer at him. "They're from the Black Watch. 'The Ladies from Hell,' the Germans called them. They were two or three down the line from us, when we took St. Mihiel." Now, with the pump of a dozen elbows at once, the piper corps resumed its determination to make the wind work, earn its supper by inhuman humming. Flaunting their plaids to gray rational Edinburgh, the Black Watch honor guard marched confidently to music like no other.

Wes held Susan close as life itself while they watched the spectacle. He <sup>could not help but</sup> wondered what accompanied the skirl of tunes through her mind. His own thoughts spiraled, but back and back to the same place to ponder from. If Susan had not been avid to know all she could of Samuel's service unto death, and if he himself had not been equally conscience-bound to make her know that only the war's worst havoc, in the form of the desperate barrage with which the Germans

tried to head off the St. Mihiel assault, had been able to kill Private Sam Duff, the two of them would not be on this balcony with arms twined around one another. How in God's name--and it was a question Wes was addressing to the higher order of things more than nightly--could love be sired by war this way? He kept feeling that some eternal apology was owed to Samuel Duff. Men by the hundreds in the Montana battalion, enough for almost any soldier to be anonymous to any officer if fate would let him keep his head down: but not that one. While Wes stood seemingly entranced by the ceremonial soldiers below the balcony, the trench scene populous with his own men kept insisting its way back into him.

*"You're in for it now, Sammy."*

*"Whooley, listen to them over there--'Mein Gott, Mein Gott!'"*

*"Too good a shot, old kid!"*

Not liking the way that commotion sounded, he had come out of the HQ dugout to tend to the matter himself. The sergeant spun around to him and reported:

*"It's Bucky, sir. Sam Duff bagged him. He dropped out of that tree <sup>over there</sup> like a ton of bricks."*

By then the battalion had made something like a mascot of the <sup>camouflaged</sup> German sniper possessed of buck fever, or instructions to merely pester the Amis but not make them mad, or perhaps some personal indisposition to chalk up kills of time-serving trench inhabitants no more careless than himself. More than a week before, the men had assured Wes the sniper they had inherited with this sector couldn't hit a bull in the ass with a shovel. Wes had taken time to make sure, but the bee buzz that flew harmlessly high over helmets maybe half a dozen times a day backed up their assessment. In one of the infinite manipulations that constituted the conduct of war, Captain-soon-to-be-Major Williamson accepted

this ineffectual sniper as a token from his German counterpart across the way. Oblique considerations of this sort had invisibly grown in these armies mired together in years of blood and mud. The shouting back and forth, the enlisted men's common language of jocular calumny. Patrols that didn't go out of their way to pick a fight. Reluctance by either commander to call in salvos, with shells that fell short, shells that were overshot. It sporadically tore apart into savagery and blind killing during the offensives--Wes knew more than his share about that, too--but there existed a morbid mutual etiquette of the trenches.

Heart sinking, he singled out the big-boned young soldier in the mob crowded on the duckboards. "*Duff, come with me,*" he said with enough bite in it for the others to take notice and led the way into the HQ dugout, Samuel ducking his head to follow through the doorway. Wes waved off the lieutenant and went on into backmost area where there was an actual scavenged door. "*In here, Private.*"

This was going to take a while. Wes dropped into one of the prized chairs that had found their way here from some wrecked French farmhouse. Alone there, difference in rank notwithstanding, the two men looked each other over with utter frankness. They were a long way from the Two Medicine country. They were a long way from anything as simple as rangeland feuds.

*"Oh, at ease, Sam, before you solidify."*

The young soldier shifted his weight enough to comply. Wes studied the lean ungiving face, wondering what blade of fate had created the Duff family line. As much curiosity as rank as in his tone, he couched the reprimand:

*"I thought I passed word for everybody to lay off that miserable sniper."*

*"I didn't hear the straight skinny on that, sir."* That last word obviously came hard to him. *"I just this morning got back from the field hospital."*

*"You're a wicked shot, Private Duff."*

*"That's the way I was brought up, on the homestead. Sir."*

Samuel's gaze gave nothing. Wes knew better than to try to wait him out, the young man's version of soldiering--which was to say his springsteel approach to life--would never be amended by anything either of them could say. Sitting there, Wes felt the weight of command push at him from another of those oblique vectors. Trained as he was to both politics and war, there were times when he could sense the force of the future moving over him like wind-kited clouds; here standing opposite him, he could tell, was a certainty on the casualty list that would arrive to his desk after the next patrol or the one after that. Soldier Samuel Duff was too fearless for his own good. Then and there, compelled by something he did not want to put a name to, Wes had called in the lieutenant and ordered that Private Duff be taken off combat duty and assigned as HQ runner.

And put him in the eventual path of a barrage? Or granted Samuel a few more vital days or weeks before the slaughter market herded him in? Wes became aware he was gripping the wrought-iron railing hard enough to cramp his hand. There on the balcony, the long figure of Susan lithe and warm against his side, he retreated again from the past. He had told her everything he could bring back about Samuel, except the sniper episode and its aftermath, consequence, call it whatever. How do you tot up the incalculable? The parade ground was drawing a curfew for him, he was glad to see. The pipers were winding down, the drums muffled, as the honor guard slow-marched away in the dusk toward a portal of the Castle. Gratefully renewing his clasp on Susan, Wes realized she had been deep in her own drift of mind. To help bring her out, he pinched his nose closed and made a try at the drone of Edinburgh accent they had been hearing all day: *"And where ha' ye been, Miss Duff, while the laddies were makin' their march?"*

*"You asked. My father marched here."*

Wes ~~almost~~<sup>nearly</sup> fell off the balcony in surprise.

*"He never did! Ninian Duff, on parade at Edinburgh Castle?!"*

Susan failed to see amusement in it. *"Wes, you're a famous soldier. But you're not the only soldier there ever was."*

*"No, no, not that."* Wes covered as best he could: *"All I meant was--kilts on your father?"*

She had to laugh at that.

But Wes could not leave it alone. As they went inside, he said as if it was merely curiosity getting the best of him: *"Humor an old soldier on this, can you? Outfits like the Black Watch, regulars probably since Waterloo, <sup>ordinarily</sup> ~~usually~~ have the honor of marching here. What on earth deposited your father onto that parade ground?"*

*"Some shire regiments' whoop-te-do, I don't know any more. He and the others from Fife carried the day, you may be sure."* Susan paused. When she looked around at him, her assessment came with that alarming Duff ~~Frankness~~. *"Now one for you. Why does every man who has meant most to me have to be a soldier?"*

Wes would not go near that.

*Interruption saved him*

~~Opportunity saved them,~~ footsteps on the stairs bringing victuals enough--

Wes never was one to underdo--to suffocate all their appetites but one. Back to the basics of laughing and love, they rollicked through that evening as though it was the only one they would ever have. Before long they revisited the bed, where kissing led to teasing--she had to disprove his speculation that her exuberant new floor-length French nightdress copied the dimensions of a Breton woolsack; he in turn had to abandon brocaded pajamas that she claimed made him look like a misplaced bullfighter, ~~and vice versa~~. By the time proper night had found Edinburgh, they were drenched in each other.

Eventually the fireplace had to be fed. Susan said it was her turn and Wesley lay watching and making her laugh with his preaching of admiration for her, high and low. *"The shins of the father are not visited upon the daughter."*

"You." She returned to bed with a flounce, but there was something serious to be asked. *"How soon will you be in Helena?"*

*"It'll have to be after New Year's."*

*"That's a scandalous length of time."* No sooner was that out than she regretted her choice of word.

*"The best I can do. Susan, you have to know--there's going to be a lot of that."*

*"I didn't exactly think I had title to you all of a sudden."*

*I...you...sudden.* All this was a field of thought that his imagination at its most wild could not have led him to, back when he had been safely loveless, with only a war to worry about. But here Susan Duff indisputably was, next to him in their mutual state of altogether. A woman a man could make love to six directions from true north and she would slyly keep track of the compass for next time. And each time, after lovemaking, he knew that everything outside of that was stacked against them. An incurably married man (doubly wedded, actually, given what could only be called his inbred necessity for a faith; he regarded the church much as he had the army, cumbersome but the only thing on the particular job), politically on the rise, fortune's palm lines clear as a map on him--and this woman who stood out a mile, as Duffs always did. Again now he traced tentative loving fingertips over the features of her face up to that distinctively Scotch high forehead, vault for a canny brain; her expression told him she knew the odds as fully as he did, and he despaired. Throughout these past two weeks he had tried to break through rationality--it was surprisingly like the coldness of combat bravery, a pane in him that covered as if with frost and that he could not see beyond--and

make himself give up everything for her. Pull a Robert Louis Stevenson, flee off with her to the South Seas, why not. And vegetate happily ever after; that was why not. Grasping this, knowing it in himself as deep as the fissure in the heart where the soul pools up, he even so could not let go of the anguished wish to be otherwise than he was. He hated being incapable in any capacity, especially the one--call it flight--needed to leave behind all the others in his life. Now the mustered words came out of him haltingly:

*"I'm not much at this, you know."*

By now Susan had learned that like all heroes, Wes had a side to him that didn't always come into daylight. She could have told anyone interested that he liked to fool people by going around as if he were the pluperfect example of a stuffed shirt; until the shirt came off him.

*"No, I didn't know that at all,"* she issued back to him. *"Here I was hoping for a cross between Sergeant York and a sultan who knows his way around a harem. Why, Major, you're blushing. All over, I do believe."*

*"You're a handful."*

*"What, me? 'Jaunty as a feather, faithful as the heather.'"* There was another of those cloud-bringing words, *faith*.

Wes shifted his lower part carefully on the bed. To preserve the night, he said:

*"The martial music about did me in. Could I talk you into singing something for the occasion? Us, that is?"*

*"Ah. All this is a plot to coax me, is it."* Susan gave him a mock discerning look, like an abbess who knew very well what Chaucer was up to. Then laid a solemn finger on his lips, as if marking her place, and was up and searching for her nightdress. More or less sufficiently attired, she strode back, performance already perking in her, came to the foot of the bed and folded her

hands in professional ease on the bedstead there. She gathered herself, with the slight lift of her chest that drew breath in, and softly delivered:

*"The evening brings all home, 'tis said  
Those who stray, and those who roam,  
The evening brings all home.*

*In the restless light of day,  
We abandon ourselves to quest.  
When the blushing sun kisses the west,  
We awake and find our way.*

*The evening brings all home, 'tis said  
From islands far, and Heaven's dome.  
The evening, the evening,  
The evening brings all home."*

#

DROP CAP

There on the picnic tarp, Wes immediate and intent across from her, Susan knew better than to remember a golden blush over that time. The two of them had been no perfect fit, from the start they had known which parts were ill-suited for the other. It can grow musty in the loft of the mind; Wes, when he wasn't activated by politics, tended toward an attic-headed collecting habit: rare books, manuscripts, scraps of language that pleased him, property. Herself, she had constantly had to wonder, another possession in among those? In turn, Wes understood of her that she was of brusque blood, given to directness when that wasn't the route that had come to be expected, as a Roman road will fly like a spear from the past through the modern swerving muddle. Not a match, a

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Williamson and a Duff, that either of them would ever have dreamed of. Yet they had coupled as naturally as wild creatures, until they were found out.

“Susan? Something?”

“Yes. We should be getting back.”

P. 138 follows →

## Catching Breath

1924

The Sunday morning of the Helena trip, Wes walked the few blocks home from early Mass at the Cathedral pondering how he had ever thought he was in any way fit to govern half a million people, given his record lately on a number he could count on his thumbs. He tried to put the mood away, box it in the admission that the lives of others are not something you can catechize. But no sooner was he into the house than Mrs. Gustafson came swooping on behalf of his breakfast with a glint of intrigue that would have done credit to a stiletto, and it was only a matter of time. After her third hovering pass with the coffee pot, he told her: "All right, tell him I want to see him."

Monty gingerly stepped into the breakfast room.

"Let me hear your side of this." The Major, as if he had a wayward boot recruit in front of him.

"Things got a little out of hand, is all."

"A little? I have to bail you out of jail and haul Doc Walker away from his breakfast to wrap you like a mummy and that doesn't amount to anything?"

"Major, I got more than I bargained for." This was tricky ground, Monty knew, but it had to be negotiated. Saturday night had to belong to a wage hand, not a hell of a lot else in life did. "Knocked up, locked up, and doctored up, like they say--I didn't go looking for any of those."

"How are your ribs?"

"Tenderized." He winced with the word. They would have to go after his ribs. Those Chicago brakemen had some sort of instinct, when it came to working a person over. Ten years ago, he'd have taken any of them on, the entire Zanzibar if it came to that. But that was ten years of the general wear and tear of living. Deep down he knew he had been lucky last night's brawl had been only fists. Clore Street wasn't a gun place so much, but you could easily get cut there. At least he hadn't run into somebody who would have worked those ribs over with a clasp knife. "Honest, Major, it don't amount to anything. I can be on the job right this minute, I can drive."

"What was it this time? Fantan again?"

"No, sir," indignation ringing through. Pause. "Wrong spots on my ponies." He could still see the fatal dots on the dice that wiped him out of the crap game. "Had them loaded, is what I think, and slipped them in on me despite how I was watching. I called this bruiser on it, and next thing I know, him and another ugly case were giving me what Paddy gave the drum."

Wes still eyed him, standing there stubborn as a government mule. From long experience he knew you couldn't take the spree out of a man, but you could shunt the man out of a spree. He would make sure there was no more Helena for Monty for a good long time. As to the here and now, what harm had been done, other than to Monty's epidermis?

"This stays between us, you hear? It's not to reach the ranch, and particularly not the North Fork."



DROP CAP

The North Fork was murmuring a diminished tune now that spring runoff was past, and Susan could hear the first splashes of the pair of saddlehorses finding their footing as they forded the creek these mornings. Ready herself, she kept track of the scuff of hooves coming up from the creek crossing, then heard tones of voice that sent her out into the yard.

"Makes no difference to me what you do," Monty was saying crossly to Dolph.

"Snowball, I still bet you there are fish in there big enough to halter, now that the water is down." Dolph dismounted and came over to her at just short of a trot. "Ma'am? I'm pretty much caught up on the chores except milking and the woodpile and little stuff like that. Would you mind if I was to go fishing a while? I'd be right down there at the creek, first hole or two."

"I would very much like for you to go fishing, Dolph, especially if you guarantee a batch for my supper."

"The fish doesn't live that can resist me, Ma'am." Whistling, he headed off to dig worms for bait.

Monty was a case of another sort today, she saw at a glance. His trip into Helena with Wes did not seem to have refreshed him. His eyes were not exactly bloodshot, but they were not the picture of milk-like calm either.

He hugged his elbows warily, aware that she was looking him over as if she were candling an egg.

"Ready?" she asked in a tone that was pretty close to an opposite verdict.

She put him through the same songs as before. As the last note waned prematurely, she did not even have to say the obvious.

He ventured: "Can't I stick to songs that don't take that much breath?"

"Only if you want a career of singing Mother Goose ditties," she snapped and stormed across the room. "One thing singing is, is processed air. Breath made wonderful, into a kind of painting that the ear can see. Yours is still daubs."

She swung around and stood gazing at him as if he were put together wrong. "Monty, I can't understand this," she <sup>expressed the obvious</sup> said, her voice wound tight. He watched her warily. She could crank out indignation like a jay when she got going, but he had never seen her like this. "This runs against human nature," she let him know in no uncertain terms, "that your breathing isn't working up the way it should. I saw Jack Johnson in his prime. He had a chest like an ox"--elbows flung back, she dramatically held her hands wide either side of her own not inconsiderable chest--"he could have sung Caruso off the stage in *Pagliacci*!"

"I'm no kind of a Jack Johnson!"

"That's not the point, you're not any approximation of a living breathing singer and by now there's no reason you shouldn't be!" She flung out a hand as if to indicate him to himself. "You don't have that many years on you. And you haven't led as dissipated a life as some, I wouldn't think." He looked askance at her, but she seemed to intend that as a compliment. Susan dropped silent for about a breath and half, then said as if draining the last words out of herself: "I have tried until I'm sick of myself at it, you seem to give it all that's in you, and we get nowhere on this. I have to tell you, I don't know why but we're up against it."

Monty shifted around, trying to decide. She would wear him down to a dishrag, with these everlasting exercises, if he didn't own up to it.

"There was this bull."

#

One moment your feet are under you, dancing zigzag in the arena dirt, the scarred steel barrel all the barrier you've ever needed between you and the horns,

then you take the least little step wrong and stumble, maybe on a hank of a rider's grip rope, maybe on a heel-size rock brought up by the frost since last year's rodeo here, maybe just on the blunt edge of the law of averages. The crowd responds with glee, thinking you are teasing, pretending to go down on a knee in prayer in front of the bull. The noise reverses to a gasp as the bull piles in on you, butting, hooking. Over by the chutes they all yell at the bull and someone dashes out and bats it across the face with a pair of chaps, keeping the animal off you until Dolph can wedge his horse between. Whit Williamson charges down on you, whey-faced. "*Snowball! It get you?*" You can't quite catch your breath to answer. Somebody knows enough to keep them from moving you until the doctor waddles from the grandstand with a black bag in his hand.

#

*The hell with it*, he tried to maintain to himself after the story spilled out of him. *If this's all she wrote, then that's how it has to be.* Telling her lifted the teetertotter off him, the ceaseless back-and-forth in himself about whether the goring was a mere excuse or an everlasting pinch his body was in. But at the same time it emptied him, left him voiceless inside as well as out. Dully he looked back at the fierce face throwing questions at him.

"How deep did the horn go?" Susan demanded for what was probably the third time.

"Collapsed my lung."

"Aha!" Apparently sympathetic as an ice pick, she pressed him: "And when exactly was this?"

The terror of that time flooded back. White sheets, unnaturally so, and while he was flat on his back like death warmed over, the real thing kept trundling by, its spore maybe in every labored breath he took. Lying out there in the arena dirt after getting gored was nothing compared to weeks in that Helena hospital

with corpses being wheeled past almost hourly. Remembering, he gritted all the way to his wisdom teeth before managing to get the words out:

“Same year as all the flu.”

For a moment Susan seemed stopped in her tracks. Then she asked in steely fashion: “Why on earth wasn’t I let in on this?”

“Wasn’t any way to, was there,” he burst out. “What was I supposed to say, ‘Oh, by the way, I’m a one-lunger’? The minute you figure I’m some sort of cripple in the chest, you’d drop me like a bad habit.”

“That’s not so!”

*Isn’t it?* everything in his stance asked.

Susan thought furiously. All this time she had been trying to build up diaphragm strength in this man but if the muscles in there were mangled beyond repair--she glanced in despair for her copy of Hargreave’s *Illustrated Musical Corpus*, snugly on its shelf in the music parlor of the house in Helena, then rounded on the living subject.

“Take off your shirt, please.”

Monty looked everywhere around, then straight at her. “I can’t do that. It wouldn’t be right.”

“There are only the two of us here,” she said.

“That’s why it wouldn’t be right.”

Red spots appeared on her cheeks. “Monty, for heaven’s sake. I need to see your ribcage, is all. If you’re going to be bashful about it, it’s merely a matter of pulling your shirttail out and yanking it up to about here,” she pointed a finger to the base of her breast.

He shook his head, eyes cutting to the nearest window. You never knew.

“Very well. I’ll fetch Dolph up from the creek to--”

His "No!" filled the corners of the room. The last thing in Creation he wanted was to have the whole Double W bunkhouse in on this.

"Please." He angled half away from her, but his plea was painfully direct. "If this counts so much, I can come back tonight, on my own. Get Mister Angus here, can't you? His missus, too, if she'll come."

"Honestly, Monty." The rosettes were not entirely gone from her face. "If that's what you want, I can fetch them."

#

Angus contemplative, Adair indeterminate, and Susan grim, the three of them gathered on straightback chairs.

Susan leaned to the lamp and turned up its wick as far as it would go, casting more light to where Monty was standing tense as a stag.

"I'm still sorry about the need for this," she said delicately to him, knowing he was on simmer, "but I don't see any way around it. Now then. Please show us."

He stayed still, gazing across the circle of light to the jury of their eyes. Even the cat came out from between ankles and leveled him a green gaze, its pupils like black darts. Monty felt like the biggest fool there was. Why had he bothered to come back over here on his own? It wasn't as if he was able to trust white people, even these toned-down ones. Yet how could he get anywhere in this lopsided world without them, most especially her, sitting there as if she held all the secrets.

Hating the moment, all it brought back--*Memory is what we forget with, Monty*, his mother's baffling prescription whenever he pestered her too much about then instead of now--slowly he tugged the tail of his shirt out of his pants, unbuttoned, and pulled the cloth up. He looked at it with the rest of them. There

on the right side of his rib cage, centered on the dark bronze skin, the puckered scar where the horn went in was the size of a large tire patch.

Susan arose and came over. As if with her head down into an anatomy text, she traced spread fingers back and forth above the wrecked skin, careful not to touch him.

“Missed your sausage works,” Angus contributed. “There was a bit of luck.”

“Mister Angus,” Monty set him straight, “there’s been too many times when if it wasn’t for bad luck, I wouldn’t have any luck at all.”

Nodding to herself, Susan still was examining him. “Wait. Those scraped places--those are still healing.”

“Those were something else.”

“Such as?”

“Little difference of opinion.”

“At the level of your chest?”

Monty wadded his shirttail in his fist, then let out a weary sigh. “Couple of people jumped me, when I was in town.”

Susan’s face said she knew which town and which part of town.

“Poor old body.” Adair’s murmur surprised them all. “It’s all a person can do to rub along in this world, isn’t it.”

Not sure whether that was specific sympathy or ready-to-wear epitaph, Monty attended to the matter of his bare skin. He looked straight at the one who had put him through this. “Miss Susan? Are you happy now?”

Susan managed to meet his eyes. “Monty, hear me out. As much damage as we can see there, I can tend to.” He closed his shirt, dubious. “I promise you,” she insisted, “I see now how to build up your breath. A lot was learned

from the lung cases in the war, there's an entire literature on it. But there isn't one thing easy about it. You'll need to work at it until you're blue in the face."

He stared at her. Angus and Adair, their heads to one side in owl-like fascination, kept mum.

"Monty, I only meant--"

He allowed himself the smallest of <sup>grins</sup>~~smiles~~. "That could be quite some while."

**DROP CAP**

Ⓐir was at a premium. How had he ever outrun all those bulls but one?

Breed Butte loomed over him, he was barely halfway up its slope <sup>but</sup>~~and~~ pretty far toward done in. He gasped, trying to make more breath gust into him than was whooshing out. Both directions, it burned between the back of his nose and the bottom of his chest. The rest of his laboring body simply wanted to call it quits. His feet, in the shoes for this that were the Major's latest contribution, felt heavy as buckets of water.

Riding a dozen yards behind him, leading his horse behind hers, she called out: "A bit faster if you can stand it. The day is hotting up in a hurry."

Susan was having him run on the shank of mid-day, after his voice exercises but before the blaze of noon bore down on them. "It's merely roadwork of the sort Dempsey and Gibbons put themselves through all the time," she told him at the onset, sheer reasonableness. "And at the end, you don't have to do battle with either of them." No, only with her. Monty concentrated on the ground in front of him, picking out a stunted jackpine ahead alongside the baked set of wheeltracks and forcing himself to keep in motion that far, then taking aim on the weathered gatepost beyond that and closing his mind to anything but making it to that stout pillar of wood.

Water was the reward when he jolted into the yard of the old Barclay place at the brow of the butte and could at last pull to a halt. Susan swung down out of her saddle and proffered the canvas waterbag to him. She watched critically as he swished water in his mouth, spat it out, then took a few moderate gulps from the bag. They did not speak much, Monty generally too winded and Susan absorbed in putting him through his pulmonary paces. The Barclay homestead here was the halfway mark on the course she'd picked out, the steep half as he could have told anybody. The next leg was the old sheep trail angling west under the shoulder of the butte, across the dry cracked reservoir, and gradually down the long incline of the valley side to the road, where she permitted him a cooling-down horseback ride home to the Duff place. In Susan's mind it was a perfectly logical circuit, uphill at first and then coasting downhill. To Monty it was like running up one side of a Nile pyramid and down the other.

Barely visible back at their starting point, Dolph was hammering battens over the cracks in the barn walls, and Monty imagined that even at this distance he every so often could see him gawking up here and shaking his head in disgust over these jackrabbit games.

"Ready?" she asked promptly as a metronome.

"Not so you could notice, but let's go," he said as usual, and set off onto the sheep trail at a lope. His gait improved with every long stride on the more level trail and by the time he was jouncing down the welcome incline toward the creek, you could see hints of the limber rodeo clown.

Susan would not exactly have said she was <sup>happy</sup> ~~glad~~ to be out here running him ragged, but there was undeniable pleasure in being on horseback again. She rode astraddle, in her comfortable old velveteen divided skirt, and sat as natural on a steed as only someone brought up on the back of one from the age of three could. The first day Wes came across the butte in his buckboard to take a

bemused look at this new regimen, she galloped down on him as if he were the buffalo and she the huntress. Whirling to a stop, she lit into him. *"Why didn't you tell me I'm dealing with damaged goods?"*

*"That's a bit strong, isn't it? Maybe Monty is somewhat beaten up around the edges, but--"*

*"His goring? That's more than edges."*

*"His what? When?"*

*"He told me it was during the--it was in 1918."*

*"Susan, I was overseas, wasn't I. All I ever heard from Whit about ranch doings in those scraps of letters from him were the sky-high prices of hay. I knew Monty had been laid up somehow from rodeoing. But he never told me he had caught a horn, I swear to you."*

She had looked at him as if she could not believe it. But neither could she doubt it. His brother's habit of paying no more attention to other members of the human race than if they were the Williamson family furniture seemed to irk Wes, she was glad to see. Meanwhile Monty, standing at a distance, panting, had his mind solely on the swimming bath he would take in the creek when this sweaty jaunt was over, the water as warm as fresh milk.

Weeks went this way, then a month, but time of this sort cannot be so easily summed. For there came a particular day when Monty did not plough to a stop and seize the reins of his horse from Susan when he reached the road but instead loped on for another quarter of a mile, the ease of it leading him on and on in astonishment at himself, until he finally spun around to her with the realization he had run years off himself.

#  
DROPCAP

① *must take care to put this down with every exactness, she wrote of their turning point. Angus would have the poetry appropriate to it, Adair its cockeyed*

essence, Wes would chalk it up to the wily ways of God and the reward of duty. I have only my pair of astonished witnesses, my ears.

It already had been a day to mark on the wall. Monty's vocal exercises had gone well--this in itself is like saying the earth took a turn around the moon--and his performance of the practice repertoire grows stronger as he does; it is the sort of leaping progress that a teacher always hungers for. He just then had ripped through "Moses" without evident effort (at last!) and I was about to call it good for the day when he announced: "I have me something of my own I want to sing."

I was surprised, to say the least. What could I say but, "Be my guest." Looking very determined he took his position in the middle of the room, studied off into nowhere--the next habit I need to cure him of--then clapped his hands a couple of times and out it came. I render it here on the page in as close a manner as possible to the way he sang it, for the lines were distributed in the air like poetry:

"Does the hawk know its shadow?

Does the stone roll alone?

~~Does the eye of the rainbow~~

~~Do the waves dance on tiptoe?~~

~~Ever weep like our own?~~

~~Is there wind before it's blown?~~

I am vexed,

I am hexed,

I kneel <sup>at all</sup> ~~before~~ Your throne. <sup>15</sup>

One out of many

Just another praying Jones."

That was the first verse of several confounding ones. The song sounded as old as the hills and yet unknown as the next heartbeat. Monty's is a propitious voice for such a song. In his new bottom range, he can put such resonance into

the "ohs" of "stone," ~~blown~~, "alone," "throne<sup>s</sup>," and that ending-line surpiser ~~CR~~  
 "Jones" that it makes one wonder, How could one throat hold that?

When he had finished I remember that I rested my chin on my fist until I could trust my words. Finally I managed: "I know most gospel songs. Why have I never heard the likes of that?"

Monty shrugged as if to say my musical education, or lack of, was no doing of his. "Just a spirit song I learned when I was little."

When he saw that the phrase threw me, he said: "What I always heard songs like that called. The spirit moves a person, I guess you'd have to say, and next thing they know, these words show up out of them."

"Why did you sing it now?"

He puzzled at that a moment himself. "It runs through my head sometimes, and this once I wanted to try out my new air on it, is all."

I hardly dared ask. "Are there more where that one came from?"

"Oh, some."

"Then let's have them." I at once got out music sheets, Monty as surprised as if I had produced a rabbit from a hat. By then Dolph was stomping around out in the yard, both their horses saddled and waiting, but I didn't care. I took down several--"Mouthful of Stars," "End of the Road," "The Moon Followed You Home," "Unless I Be Made To," all of them music up from the bones--as fast as I could write while Monty chanted or half-sang them, before I could stand it no longer: "How did you come by these songs, exactly?"

He looked as discomfited as if I had asked him where the wind keeps its nest. "You won't laugh?"

"Of course not."

"Promise not to think it's loco?"