

"Monty, I will not think anything, I will not laugh"--at this point I probably could have been heard a mile up and down the creek--"but I will take the broom to you in about half a minute if you don't tell me where on earth such songs came from."

He said, word for word:

"Angel Momma and the holy rollers."

Spirit

1892

The congregation was short on ecstasy, and Jones was having to bide time by dinning Deuteronomy into them.

"Give ear, O ye heavens, and I will speak! And hear, O earth, the words of my mouth!"

Sister Satterlie, usually the first to quiver with the posession of the spirit, was barely even swaying. Jones himself was trying his bottom-dollar best to will the outbreak, but you could never hurry the Lord. The jolt of exaltation would happen when it happened, that was the weekly history of it all the way back to their knotholed church in the mountains beyond Gatlinburg. Their Appalachian faces hung out from under Stetsons and catalogue bonnets these Sundays, but they kept to their strenuous religion here in the foothills of the Rockies where the whole passel of them had been shipped in as tie-cutters for the Great Northern Railway. Third- and fourth-generation sawyers back in the Smokies, the men were proud to call themselves timber beasts and the women had long practice in

making do at gulch logging camps such as the one up Noon Creek from here. They were God's patch pocket on this land where the ways of the world had sent them. Looking out over the small assembly, Jones as their lay preacher duly cherished every one of them, but he did wish somebody would feel the call and start thrashing or declaiming in tongues; he didn't have all Sunday up here at the portable pulpit.

"My doctrine shall drop as the rain! My speech shall distill as the dew, and the small rain upon the tender herb, and the showers upon the--who's out there?"

Every head in the room turned. "I feel the presence beyond the door," Jones boomed. He had seen movement through the window. "Who comes calling at this holy house?"

The door peeped open, then swung wide to reveal a Negro woman, lank as a carpet-beater. Down where her dress billowed, a wide-eyed seven-year-old clasped onto her. When Jones ^{peer}looked at the boy, the dirtiest face in the world was looking back at him. Jones was prepared to take umbrage on behalf of the Sabbath, but realized the smears on the small dark face came from exuberant eating of berries. If childish joy didn't qualify as wearing your Sunday best, Jones didn't know what did.

The woman gestured apologetically. "I don't want to bother, in no way. We been chokecherrying," she indicated the lard can half full of wine-colored berries the boy was shyly holding. "But I couldn't help but hear. Voices like your ones--I don't know what got into me."

"We're having church," Jones hardly had to point out.

"People I work for," the woman hurried the words, "I heard them say folks like you fought on the side of the North like they did."

"The sunrise side of Tennessee did not follow Jeff Davis to perdition," Jones stated with pride. No one in this room was ever going to forget the Confederate Army's clamp on their small-holding plantation-scorning corner of the South. The oldest of the congregation, Brother Cruikshank, had fought in blue at the battle of Stone's River and had the scar of a wound to prove it.

"My husband," the high-tan woman was saying, "he was a soldier, out here."

"That so? Auntie, who do you be?"

Angeline Rathbun identified herself while the boy peeked around at all the hawknosed faces. He wanted to tell the people about picking the chokecherries and where all he and Angel Momma had been along the creek, but it wasn't nice to interrupt grownups.

"Service in the uniform of our country, that's all well and good," the lay preacher allowed. "But if you'd excuse us now, we have the Lord's business to tend to yet."

"Mister? Couldn't I sing with you? Just sing? I could"--she swallowed-- "wait outside between songs, if you'd want."

Jones gave her fresh regard. The congregation had visibly perked up. The spirit making itself known, was this? Jones waited on his own words, wetting his lips. Then heard himself poke the question out: "Just what sort of singing do you know?"

"By your leave?" Angeline moved a ^{step} ~~little~~ farther into the room. She clapped her hands a few times to set a beat for herself, then began to carol in a voice dexterous as fine fiddling:

*"Take a mouthful of stars,
Set your ladder 'gainst a cloud.
Go hammer up Heaven,*

Oh hammer up Heaven,

Fixin' up Heaven,

Slickin' up Heaven,

Silver nails of Heaven,

Driven nails of Heaven,

Heaven, strong roof of my soul!"

Jones took a fresh grip on the pulpit. "We make our own singing, but this's a new one on us. Yours sounds like our spirit music," he mulled, "yet it don't quite, either. Am I right, brethren?" The congregation murmured affirmation. Jones felt a tingle. "Where'd you ever pick that up from, Mrs. Rathbun?"

"Slave days, when I was a bit of a thing like him here. In the war times. Every day before sun-up, what we called in Kentucky 'cain see'--"

"We call it that to this day," Jones could not help but put in. "'Cain see' to 'cain't see,' that's our working day in the woods."

"--my Momma and me had to take the mistress's white saddle horse up in the woods and mind him there."

"Nothing goes over the Devil's back that don't buckle under his belly," Jones chanted in contrary praise of those forced to shoulder the work of the world.

"The mistress was afraid the War Department was gonna see that horse and take him for the army," Angeline ventured on. "My Momma, she'd pass the time remembering songs, maybe make some up. Got me to doing it with her. Then when night come, she and me led that horse home in the dark--"

"In the dark," Jones crooned experimentally, "Satan's satin dark."

"Yes sir. And the mistress would go out and ride that white horse with a black blanket over him. And Momma and me still had to wait, to all hours. So

then we'd sing those songs we put together. Play we was a whole church, like your one here."

"Why are you not singing them this Sabbath, somewhere with your own people?"

"Mister, we're it," Angeline Rathbun smiled forlornly down at her fidgety son. "No other colored, not in all this county."

Jones brooded there in front of everybody, the congregants as still as the prayer-worn benches under them.

"She brings mighty fine ^{singing} ~~songs~~, brothers and sisters," he felt moved to put the matter to the general will. "What say you?"

"She been sent!" Sister Satterlie shouted, with a lurch that gladdened Jones's heart. "The Lord ever is mysterious in His ways!"

Brother Cruikshank climbed to his feet and testified: "I for one see no reason our congregation cain't have a colored auxiliary."

Jones turned back to Angeline. "You may stay," he spoke for them all. "We will together sing the songs of one tongue, Our Maker's. But there's another consideration." He pointed a not unkind finger.

"The boy here, he'll be fine," Angeline vouched. "He has a voice, too. Don't you, Montgomery."

Summer Nights

1924

"Ol' Snowball, he thinks the world's wagging its tail at him."

Dolph's elbow slipped off the edge of the table for the second time in as many minutes. Irritably he anchored it there again, determined not to let go of his Saturday night spree just when the whiskey was getting good.

"They're that way," the man across the table from him ground out. He topped up Dolph's glass again and then his own, and sat back. The two of them were by themselves in the back corner of the speakeasy, their conversation oiled by the bottle of ^{prime stuff} bootleg ^{good in} blend from Canada that the man sorely needed some company on.

"Monty ain't a bad sort, far as that goes." Dolph wanted this made clear.

"But he's latching onto too much of a good thing, if you was to ask me."

"He actually goes back to her at night? What manner of woman is she?"

Didn't Dolph wish he knew. Perpetually parched for women, cowboys tended to believe there must be winks of ecstasy waiting for them somewhere, if

only the circumstances ever would line up right. But tonight's perfunctory prostitute whom he had sprawled himself on in one of the rooms overhead was more like a blink. And the Duff woman, she seemed blind to her own kind. Dolph had to shake his head. Whenever a man met confusion in this life, it almost always wore a dress. How was it in any way fair for Monty to be the object of her eye?

"Like I was telling you, I suspicioned that something more than do-re-mi was going on. So I sort of checked up on it." The day he caught the string of fish, he came whistling back up to the house to find the two of them looking like they were ready to jump out of their skins. That evening he had sauntered over from the bunkhouse to Monty's room to try to find out what was what; no Monty. "Middle of the night, here he comes scooting back." Dolph walked his fingers along the table to show so. He fought through the haze in his head to see again the pinto saddle horse coming down the benchland from the North Fork, pale hide in the moonlight. "Puts his horse away real quiet. Goes to bed." Dolph widened his eyes in wonder. "Second time that night, I guess."

"And during these...music lessons?"

"I'm right there, ain't I? They can't git up to anything then, me around keeping my eye on them."

The man clucked one last time at the goings-on Dolph was forced to put up with and said he had to call it a night. He clapped Dolph on the shoulder. "See you in the funny papers."

The town of Gros Ventre, nippy even on a midsummer night such as this, lay tucked under its double blankets of darkness and leaf canopy. The man walked home with great care, taking to the deserted street rather than trust himself on the undulations of the board sidewalks forced up by the roots of the big cottonwoods. It had been a night's work, lubricating that homely mutt of a

cowboy. But even a common cowhand knew an abomination when he saw one, give him credit for that.

He tromped on through the dark, filled with a consuming urge to shout to the whole town about the Williamsons and what they spawned. But that wouldn't do. Late as it was, and quiet, he confined himself to humming fiercely the hymn of him and his kind:

*"Klansman, Klansman, of the Ku Klux Klan,
Protestant, gentile, native-born man,
Hooded, knighted, robed, and true,
Royal sons of the Red, White, and Blue."*

#

DROP CAP

Nightfall wrote itself across the hills of Helena, the rowdy downtown gulch as ever the first to be shadowed and streetlit, then the slow summer darkness gently inking out the superior slope-sitting neighborhoods around their punctuations of lamplight. Throughout the evening Wes glanced out now and then as if to compare the progress of the dark to his own. His desk was a ranch in the making--the Deuce W, incipient in the piles of title abstracts and livestock tallies and crop records and tax rolls of three counties its clusters of acreage would dapple like a prairie archipelago. A separate stack of paperwork high enough to be teetery held foreclosed mortgages, walked away from in the dusty exodus of the landed settlers these past half dozen years and lately bought from the banks by the Williamson agents for pennies on the dollar. Wes was sifting it all as if he were a monk among Alexandrine scrolls. Dyed into the documents, beneath the legalistic curlicues where it took a kind of second sight to go, rested actions of the past that changed everything caught in their path. The shaping hand of a Senator on the generous contours of the Fort Assinniboine military reserve, there in the act of

congressional appropriation that had created the great and needless fort. The decisive signatures of a handful of sodbusters, who had thrown in together to buy more tractor^{eg} than buffalo grass could withstand. Receipts that remorselessly followed the decline in rainfall, depositions that attested to the economic laws of gravity even in virgin land as flat and beckoning as a trampoline. If you were trained for this, and he by nature and imperative was, it was all discernible, under the ink. He paused a long while over a contested bill of sale for a pitiful herd of workhorses, depleted by half by the blizzard of 1906, which was signed by his own father.

Hallway noises roused him out of the watermark whispers of the papers.

"Busy, I tell you."

"Only take a minute, Mrs. Gus, don't get yourself in an uproar." The predictable barely restrained knock on the door.

"If it's who I think it is," Wes emitted like the warning blast of a foghorn, "come in and have your story ready."

It took a few moments for the doorknob to turn. Then Monty stepped in, ranch clothes on him but Saturday night readiness in his expression. "Major, bother you ^{just one} minute, can I?"

"How did you get to town?"

"Bummed a ride with the brand inspector. This way, see, I can take the driving off Gus's hands when you head back to the ranch."

Wes's ire stalled momentarily in the face of this tactic. It was perfect fact that Gustafson took the wheel of an automobile with the glumness of a lumberjack unfairly sentenced to pushing a baby buggy. "Wasn't that thoughtful of you," he at last responded to the all-too-ready volunteer sticking close to the ^{shelter} sanctuary of the door. "And other than that, what's on your mind this hour of night?"

tractor
singular

As if he didn't know? Going to be like that, is it. Monty might have been philosophical about this if he had time. But this was never any too much fun, dealing with a boss who wasn't in a mood to be dealt with, and he drew himself up some to stand his ground. "Mister Whit didn't have his checkbook on him, there at the stockyards. Say, he told me to tell you--let me get it exactly: he hopes your writing hand is in good shape come Monday, because there's one hell of a bunch of new cows going to need a ranch under them."

Wes let his brother's words pass without comment. Monty's next ones he waited for as if ready to lay down the law.

"I know it pesters you, something like this," Monty came out with it.

"But tonight being what it is, I need to go out for a little while."

"Can't you ever--"

"Don't even have to draw a whole month's pay," Monty hastened this in, "but just about."

"--steer clear of that?" With difficulty Wes kept control of his face, but his voice sharpened to a stab. "Monty, you have to think about these things now. What is it going to take, some drunken gandydancer beating your brains out in an alley? Hear me on at least this, can't you? Clore Street isn't the best place to be, any more."

Monty rammed his hands into his back pockets to hide his clench of dismay. As if he hadn't turned himself inside out thinking about this. As if someone who could take that district of paper there on his desk and Monday morning turn it into a ranch that stretched out of sight over the bend of the earth, as if anybody that mighty knew anything about the tight corners of a colored Saturday night in Helena. Three months ago, as Monty too well understood about himself, in this situation he would have turned turtle, pulled his neck back in and stood ~~plunked~~^{planted} there allowing as how the Major no doubt knew best. But the

Major and her, wasn't that what they were supposed to be at in all this, to help him shore himself up into something more substantial than a choreboy standing on one foot and then the other? Change his chances in this life, from squat to sky-high? And that took some doing like tonight's, if he could only zip across town and get it done. There was no way around it. He couldn't hope for the Major to give him his blessing on anything like this, but a bit of room to operate, out on his own, ought not be too much to ask by now. For about the hundredth time in one day, he assessed his chances with the man on the far side of that big desk. If things had really changed, his best hold with the Major was man-to-man.

"Got to go do it," he said as if sentenced to it. "I'm not gonna gamble this time. I'm not. Honest." As usual, that word called into question any preceding truth, and it was taking all of Wes's effort not to turn that protestation against games of chance on its head with a sarcastic *I'll bet*.

"See, if I don't show my face there, before I start out as a singer," the rest of it was tumbling out of Monty, "I'm written off. Major? They'll think I turned uppity. Say I caught that skin condition: white-itis."

"And that would be too bad."

"It'd be attached to my name. And you never get rid of that."

For whatever reason, Monty could see, that hit home. The ~~puny~~^{mighty} Major for a moment looked like a boy accused. He of the family that had employed Rathbuns back to almost time beyond memory seemed to stare as if he had never seen such a stranger. Then his face set. The anthracite eyes of a snowman could not have been colder. With rough motions he shoved out of his chair and stalked to the dark-green safe in the corner of his office, half-knelt, twirled the combination as fast as fingers could move, and in an instant came up with a money caddy that held silver dollars as if they were bleached-out poker chips. He

grabbed out a full stack, then a judicious half of another, plunking them side by side on the parquet table by the window. "You might as well take the works."

My whole pile? All of a man's wages usually showed up in a boss's hand only when the words *You're fired!* or *I quit!* flew through the air. But the lord of pay, there by the safe, so far hadn't decreed the one and Monty had no intention of uttering the other. He hesitated, then went and scooped up the tall-standing coins. "I'll stay a stranger to trouble this time, honest."

Wes still didn't say anything. He sat back down to his desk, eyes into the familiar field of paper, as the door closed behind Monty.

It was not that many blocks to where Clore Street elbowed a gravelly hillside for enough room to cavort, but it was to the city limits of the world known by white Helenans. Among other parts, Clore Street immediately took a nighttime visitor by the ear and nose. ^{ONight bite!} ~~"Sandy man!"~~ the swooping chant of the street vendor echoed every minute or so among the hard-used few blocks of buildings, brazier smoke and smells of cooking wafting from his cart of savouries.

^{Night bite here!} "Baloney cold, molly hot!" ^{cart} ~~Sandwich~~ Supperless, Monty stopped long enough to devour what was advertised as a tamale. Laughter and protestations between women and men could be heard from second-story rooms overhead, and between that and the sandwich ^{cart} man's tabasco a considerable warmth began to spread in his middle.

Fortified in at least that much of himself, he quickstepped on up Clore to the destination that announced Saturday night with a good-time wall of noise. In the Zanzibar Club, which had taken on the Prohibition guise of a social card parlor that happened to have a bar still in place along one entire side of the room, the ^{permanently} bored barkeep greeted him with the usual:

"Look what the cat dragged in. Where you been keeping yourself, Sticks?"

cartman,
one word

"Home on the range," one of the nearby regulars furnished, "where the steers and the roping dopes play--that's still the stomping grounds of Wrangler Rathbun, ain't it?"

"Funny as a bunion, Hawkins," Monty said levelly. Ranch hand that he was accused of being and indubitably was, he stood akimbo a minute at the head of the bar looking over the situation before putting his shoulder to it. Pretty much the usual Saturday-night bunch of jokers, from all appearances. He could pick out the railroaders down the bar by their starched shirts with suitcase folds. Here nearer the door but leaving a newcomer enough space to get his buying hand into action, the customary ~~passer~~^{watch} of opportunity drinkers consisted of Hawkins, who had a mouth on him like a terrier but didn't mean much by it, and the more questionable pair of Loomises, unrelated except in an approach to life that counted on deuces being wild. The one from Petaluma in California was known as Petaloomis, and the one who claimed no fixed previous address was called Nowhere Loomis. Thirst cases that they were, the threesome sat with the patience of long practice while the barkeep did his part: "What do you know for sure?"

"Not a helluva lot," Monty went along with the ritual, resting his elbows onto the bar and pattycaking the wood as if he had all the leisure in the world.

The barkeep began drifting his direction, drying a glass as if wringing its neck. "Keeping busy?"

Here was the opening. "And then some. Been taking singing lessons."

"You guffing me?" the barkeep kept on mechanically. "You ain't? What sort of music you studying on? Blues? Hymns? Hers's?"

"Easiest thing to call them is spirituals."

"Singer of spirit-you-alls?" The barkeep chortled. "You been holding out on us, Sticks."

"Don't remember you ever asking, Jacob."

"So we going to see you famous around town, your mug on every lamp pole?"

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Monty said with seeming serenity.

The barkeep chortled again, his eyes moving off to check various customers' levels of liquid. "What does an about to be famous person drink?"

"Canuck beer, same as ever." ~~Monty did an estimate along the bar.~~ Give the Sunday school ^{here} a round, while you're at it." He took out a pocket change purse, leather still new to the touch, and reached in for a ^{couple} ~~trio~~ of silver dollars. Carefully he laid them out on the bar and pushed them one by one toward the bartender as if making checker moves.

Naturally his every word had been snapped up by the Clore Street telegraph of Hawkins, Loomis, and Loomis, so that was taken care of. He skated his beer bottle down the bar to join them and start fending with their boisterous questions about where had this singing racket come from and where he figured he was going with it. A bottle lasted no time, in the heat of such conversation. He throttled back on the next beer, telling himself *nursey does it. Can't keep my guard up if I don't keep my bottle hand down.*

It was proving to be one of those nights, tough sledding over and over the same ground. "I'm still feeling deprived of this heavenly voice," Petaloomis ragged him for about the sixth time with Nowhere's sly backing, "can't we have a taste? Come on, give us a little render."

"Aw, no, don't," Hawkins put in. "He'd set off every howling dog from here to Butte."

Monty's hand clamped hard as it could around the beer bottle as matters reached this point. Who would have ever thought being sociable was such exhausting work? The gibe from Hawkins was at least open teasing; the urging

expressions on the Loomises were about as sincere as crepe paper bowties. *God damn it. Why can't they ever say, like she does, "You're getting there."*

He slammed what was left of his beer to safety an arm's length away, Hawkins and the Loomises too startled to clear away from him in time. Turning his back to the bar, he boosted his rump onto it, then clambered to his feet on the slick polished wood. The three faces directly below gaped up at him like big baby birds, all the other heads were turning. It strongly occurred to him he had better give proof of ownership for the attention he was drawing, awful fast. He put out one foot and scooted Petaloomis's beerglass off the bar with a ringing crash. "What the goddamn hell you doing?" the barkeep shouted, charging toward him. Only to retreat with equal rapidity as Monty's workshoe booted another stein into the runway behind the bar where it shattered like shrapnel.

"Run me a tab on glassware, Jacob. You all wanted singing, I'll give you some."

As careful with his footing as if he were up there on ice skates, Monty took his stance. Remembered the litany, every lilted word of command, every push at his posture. Shoulders level and back, head up but not snootily so. Breathe, all the way down until the flanks registered it. He felt as if he had as many parts as a beehive, honeycomb after honeycomb to be minded, but he was doing his absolute best to tend them all. Every moment of it, he could hear that voice from the North Fork as though she was in this room. *"Lacking proof that you can't, assume that you can."* Talk about taking her at her word: this escapade had better be a high note, higher than any ever delivered from a mere chair, or he was going to have to battle his way out of here, ragmouth by ragmouth. Whatever the outcome, amid all else going on in him he burned with the sudden absurd wish, deep in him as the gather of his breath, that she could see him at this.

"My friends down at this end of the bar have requested a spiritual," he told the eyeballing crowd since he had to be telling them something, "and I can't stop it from getting on those of you at the far end either." Pouring forth for all he was worth, he gave them the song that his mind had been rehearsing ever since he knew he had to do this, his bold voice stilling the restless bay of faces around him.

"...one more soul down to bone,

Just another praying Jones."

When he was done, for ^{perhaps} ~~maybe~~ five seconds the only sound was the barkeep ^{or} nervously treading on broken glass. Overall, the Zanzibar Club was not quite sure whether to encourage this sort of thing. Then a goodly number clapped and called out, while others shrugged and let it go as one more Saturday night hijink. A few laughed harshly. Monty noticed, though, that the sharp operators--the tiger riders at the card tables; the hooch merchants; for that matter, both Loomises--were not among those laughing.

"Give us another," Nowhere's voice of insinuation floated up to him, "so we'll know that wasn't a fluke."

Perfectly ready to oblige, Monty smiled, cleared his throat, and from his Adam's apple on up, went blank. No such thing as another song seemed to exist anywhere in his frantically upended mind; right then, he could not even have done *Praying Jones* over again, even though it wasn't much longer ago than an echo. Dread filled him to overflowing as he sensed this bunch watching for him to go into a stumble, the way the rodeo crowd had been when he hit the ground in front of that bull. In a panic, he assumed what he hoped was an appropriately haughty expression and told the lesser Loomis: "Nothing doing. From here on, you can pay good money to hear me."

His expression still fixed, he hopped down. He retrieved his beer, took a single solid swig, and dug out enough silver to cover the breakage. The bar crowd turned back to the business of drinking now that he was down here mortal again.

The Loomises glanced at each other. "Wasn't that fine," Petaloomis provided, Nowhere nodding at his every word. "Now we got another situation calling for your talents. Serious shortage, over there at the game. We need a man."

"Not this one, you don't. What I need is my beauty sleep."

That was no way to be, they protested. They had listened, civil as anything, and now he was too good for a sociable game with friends?

Now this part. His heart was thudding harder than it had when he was up there singing. "I'll watch, little while."

The clocks of Danzer's Time-Repair Shop, on the next street back from Clore, were ticking toward dawn when he finally trudged back to the Major's place. Manor among manors, the darkened brick mansion sat coolly apart from its couple of streets of peaked and turreted neighbors. Big Helena houses like these usually carried some story about the original owner finding gold flecks in the mud on his boots out at Confederate Gulch or right downtown in Last Chance Gulch. It must be nice, the thought made its way to Monty through his weariness, to have the means to whatever you wanted volunteer itself to you up out of the ground. By the evidence of the big silent houses, a person could then afford sleep. He himself wasn't the only ^{bedless case} ~~one up~~ at this ridiculous hour, but close, ~~One~~ lone putt-putting jitney of starched waiters heading for the breakfast shift at the Broadwater Hotel seemed to be Helena's ^{total} ~~only~~ traffic besides his dragging feet. As he fumbled for the latch on the Major's front gate he felt done in, drained dry inside but the

shirt-drenching sweat of his hours beside the gambling table clammy on his back.

Wes lay dozing on the divan in his office, a pillow under his bothersome leg. The open and close of the back door brought him awake. "Monty?"

The footsteps in the hallway halted, then slowly approached the office. To the figure draped in the doorway, Wes asked as tiredly as if he had never slept: "How bad this time?"

The answering voice was exhausted but even. "I'm in one piece. No battle-royal, for a change."

After a moment of getting his bearings Monty stepped in, and in the dim light he crossed the room. Wes heard the clink of dollars onto the top of the safe.

"Stayed out of games of chance, too. Could you hang onto the rest of these wages for me? Good night, Major."



DROP CAP

Angus walked Susan to the car with a lantern, handing it to her to hold while he gallantly cranked the black-as-night vehicle. "There, the steed is onto its legs," he proclaimed as the Model T's engine coughed to life. "Have a care there at High Centerville by Allan Frew's gate, mind you."

"Don't worry, all Fords are part goat," Susan said loyally from behind the wheel. "Angus, thank you again. Go back in there and tickle that wife of yours in the ribs for me. I haven't had better deer steak since--"

--the last time you were here, Saturday night."

"The singing and the cards, smartypants, they came out different this time though, didn't they. You have to admit Adair and I cleaned your clock at both."

"I don't suppose you'd believe I held back out of modesty? I didn't think so. Good night and best of dreams, Susan." He held the lantern hoisted until she navigated out of the yard, then retraced his steps back inside to Adair.

Susan sang her way home from their place. Reliable night; how it always welcomed a song for company. The moon itself seemed to keep coming back for more, poking a plump encouraging ear from behind the blowing chintz of clouds every so often.

*"Had we never loved so kindly,
Had we never loved so blindly--"*

The old trouper of a song lent well to alto persuasions, if she did have to say so herself. Angus was right yet again: that rascal Burns knew how to pour the words. During the evening's spates of songs that Wes inescapably would have called heather-and-thither, the look on Adair's usually sheltered face became a girl's at Christmas.

*"Never met, or never parted,
We'd not sing now so broken-hearted..."*

"Bravissimo, Robbie," she accorded the plowman poet, absent from the evening by a mere hundred and some years, as she steered around the stretch of deep ruts Angus had warned her about. A jackrabbit jigged ^{in agitation} ~~wildly~~ in the thin corridor of her headlights, then found a sagebrush avenue back to its universe and vanished.

Her mind itself was on the move, this night. Scotch Heaven could do that to a person, most especially on a proper night of summer like this, with the darkened buttes stationed up so close to the stars that sky and earth seemed one perfect geography, the willowed creek every now and then dappling in the car lights companionably to show the road the way. And the day had been of the same inspirational flavor. (She made a mental note to capture that phrase in the diary.) This morning Monty and Dolph had ridden up in improved moods--men and their Saturday nights--and the day's session had gone like a dream: she would gladly give her all to pupils for the next two hundred years straight if each lesson

could go like that. And she would have bet a considered sum that Monty had been bolstered by the day's progress as well. Only ~~a few~~⁹ rough edges remained to be taken off, the main one his tendency to lose himself in what he was singing at any given moment with no strategy beyond the song's last syllable. (Presentation, she made a further mental note, was another; bless him, he still tended to introduce a song as if he were addressing a chicken-thief joke to the back row of a rodeo grandstand.) *"You can't just pop out with one song,"* she had explained. *"A careful program, a repertoire, is needed and you must have it in mind as clear as a list at all times."* At that, he tilted his head and looked ready to say something. But all that came was one of his ~~deep~~^{inchlong} nods, and on they went in fashioning the creekside spirit songs into some sort of order. Now to her own somewhat surprised ears she heard herself experimenting with one of those.

"This old pig-iron world

Keeps trying to put its mark on me--"

She didn't carry it very far, merely tasting the song with her voice, curious how it clung. Monty's inherited trove all carried that immemorial pungency, made up of his mother's washboard life and the misery-whip labors and testifyings of those itinerant sawyers, as if each song had been aged in a kind of smokehouse. Steeped in sing-to-get-by as Burns's were in peasant prance of rhyme. *"People are gonna like those old things, you think?"* Monty had guardedly asked her. People were going to have to grow used to having their ears in love with the words and music of Montgomery Rathbun, if she knew beans about it.

A pang came with that knowledge. Monty's time under her tutelage was now down to a matter of mere weeks rather than the infinity when they started at this. Her calendar of herself was going to have to change again as surely as that moon would find a next phase. But to an unexpected degree--she had been a teacher more than long enough to know that every pupil took wing--she found in

this case she was resenting that, resisting it even. There was something beguiling about Monty, even when he was in his worst snits about the exercises. The storm before the calm, she had come to think of those heavy-browed moods. By now she was convinced he had the mental substance to go with that extravagant gift of voice, and while she was having teacherly longings she let them carry all the way to the wish that she could pick out the stage for him to debut on, the acoustics where the spirit songs could so wonderfully linger. No, though, pretty soon Monty's career was going to have to be up to Monty, and she and Wes would only watch from the wallpaper. To herself as the Model T made the turn into the gateway of the homestead almost of its own accord, Susan smiled one of the harder smiles: she and Wes had taught each other all there was to know about losing an object of the heart. Or had they.

As her car trundled into the yard, she did away with the headlights to begin to accustom her eyes to the dark between the Lizzie's usual spot and the house. The thin clouds actually helped, sharing out what the moon had to offer without stark shadowpatches of black, and as she went humming her way up the brief path she could even dimly make out that someone had hung a sack on her door. More than likely the latest unsought generosity sent over by Wes, a gunnysack of the past week's newspapers and, who knew, another helping of picnic makings?

She would have to make sure to tease him about his Williamson bag of surprises, she was telling herself as she stepped to the gray shelter of the doorway and reached her hand to the hanging shape, and touched not burlap but cat fur.

The realization struck her like a hot spatter. Jerking her hand away from the blood and hair, by instinct she stifled outcry with a gagging swallow, not give whoever might be out there the satisfaction of hearing her scream. She backed away one step, then reached around for the doorknob from the side of the

doorway and waited to a count of ten. Breathing with greatest care now, she pushed open the door with the cat nailed to it, and hurriedly stepped over its puddle of blood on the threshold.

She sensed, as much as saw, that the kitchen had been disrupted. In moments she managed to feel her way to the silverware drawer and had the butcher knife in her hand. Every ounce of her knew she had to get back to Angus and Adair's at once, but she also had a furious need to know how much had been done here. She felt along the wall by the stove to the matchbox holder. In the flare of the first match, she saw that the kitchen table had been kicked over. Carefully lighting another, she sighted in on the spare lamp on the sideboard and brought it to flaring life. Corners; the kitchen suddenly seemed to have many. No one but *as tight as her fist could go* shadows there, though, and she was drawn, lamp high and knife clutched *like life* ~~itself~~, to the doorway to the next room.

Then she saw the white paint across the music room wall, using the worst words about her and Monty.

His door erupted open, bringing him blinking out of a jumble of bedclothes and dreams. He swung his feet onto the cold floor, meaner chill whiffing in from the doorway but, further confusing him, a flicker of flames candled somewhere out there above and behind the figure bulking over him. Then his hearing picked up the gunfire, quite a way off, the kind when a hunting party gets into a herd of something.

"Stay put." The Major wasn't there much longer than his words. "The men are around the place."

As if in a trance Monty shed his nightshirt and put his clothes on, his eyes never leaving the window looking south where the distant flames branded a cross onto the night.

"Reynolds didn't sound in any hot hurry to get here, when I telephoned him," Whit conferred with Wes as soon as they had the ranch crew deployed in a fireline on the ridge. They would wait for daylight before going to see what the toll in cattle was from all the shooting the nightriders did in the vicinity of the east pasture.

"So, on top of it we have to shop for a new sheriff."

"Looks like. Firebug bastards," Whit let out, one more in a litany, whapping a patch of smoldering grass with a wet gunnysack. "They could've set the whole country going, dry as it is."

"We're lucky they only had guts enough to play with matches around us, this time." The moon was fully out now, too late; Wes slid his rifle under the seat of the buckboard, then climbed in and took up the reins. But before turning the grays toward the house, he scanned again the terrain that made it so easy for the Ku Kluxers to sneak onto the Double W and then race off east to wherever they hid in their everyday lives. In whatever crevices of themselves; in whatever hideous kinks of the soul that caused people like them to despise him and his simply for the church they were born to, Monty simply for the complexion he was born to, Susan simply for the habit of adherence she was born to. A cold poise took Wes over as he considered the nightscape of earth out there and the dips of life where such creatures might go to cover. Then, like a man coming to, he brought himself back to the trace of themselves the Klan had left behind. He sat fixed into attention a few moments more, staring down at the pattern of char and embers where the sizable wooden timbers had fallen. As much to himself as to his ash-smudged brother, he murmured: "What are they thinking of? They burn it, the cross."

KEEP the last sentence, which you questioned. It's an odd one, but Wes is grappling with something incomprehensible to him & his attempt at language shows it.

"I wouldn't say they're absolute bundles of brains," Whit responded.

"What we have to worry about is what kind of push they find to put on us next."

"If I have to fill Hell with them, Whit, I will."

"Suits me. But there's our musical auxiliary they're after, too."

"Don't rub it in."

"I never would, Wes."

#

"I'm not supposed to let nobody by."

"Would you care to tell that to either or both of the almighty Williamsons, with whose blessing I'm here?"

"If I get my ass chewed--"

--it will grow back, plumper than ever. Man, will you look out over that field for incendiary lunatics and let me be about my business?"

Listening so ^{intensely} keenly he could about hear the angry disturbance of the air as the visitor tromped past the cowboy sentry, Monty was ready for ~~the~~ call at his door. "Hello in there," Angus's voice sounded as if he had trooped here from one of the ends of the earth. "Can you stand a boarder, for whatever's left of the night?"

As quick as Angus was in and the door held their words in the room, Monty feverishly put the question. "They're at her, too?"

"Trying, in their miserable way."

~~In a crushed voice, Monty managed to gulp out the next:~~

"She all right?"

Even in the murk of the lampless room, Angus could discern the anguish of the man. "So mad she can't spit, but other than that, I'd say Susan is in working order. Don't worry your head on that score, she and my better half are ^{here} up at the house, probably in a canopy bed." Warily Angus told the rest of it, the

Model T flying back into their yard after he and Adair had gone to sleep, Susan with a butcher knife on the seat beside her, then the ungodly drive cross-country over the benchland. "Susan at the wheel gives no quarter to badger holes," Angus reflected, rubbing the base of his spine. He squinted around in the gloom hoping for accommodations to be offered, but the perfectly still figure across the room kept on staring out the window toward the bluff where the last glow of the fire was vanishing under the stomp of Double W boots.

Angus sidled across the room toward him, bumping furniture as he came. When he gauged that he was near enough, he reached with one hand and gripped Monty's forearm to insure full attention.

"Monty. Odds are that the commotion is over for now. To get at any of us those dunces would have to come through the Major, on his own ground, and I don't think anybody who hides under a sheet wants to do that."

Monty swore with a force that jarred Angus. Then swung away from the window so they were face to face, his words so heated that the taller man flinched backward an inch or two and let his hand drop. "How the hell come they're out after her and me? It was nothing but singing lessons!"

In response Angus's burr was measured but carried everything he had. "Why are there maggots like that in the world, you're asking? It's been a long time since I thought I was bright enough to figure that out. But I do know we've all lived through the night, and that gives us another start against the likes of them."

"People who could have been left off the face of the earth," Monty gave vent to. Like a shot he broke past Angus and halfway across the room, but then spun around toward to him again. "Can't even give the sonsabitches what for," his voice was low and seething. "I have me a 30.06 and used up my last shells on a coyote yesterday, can you beat that?" He made a furious swipe with his hand as

if to bat away the door and get at the sentry on the other side of it. "Tony won't give me any, either. Major's orders, he says."

Angus already had his own indictment in on the Major this night. Once Adair and Susan were headed upstairs to whatever ^{refuge} ~~sanctuary~~ a Williamson bedroom constituted, he had steered the Major aside for a few words. *"If you let anything happen to Susan or Monty out of this, I'll deliver you to Hell personally."*

"I know the way by myself," the damn man had answered as if that was another thing they taught at Harvard.

But importing that to Monty's presence wouldn't help the situation any. Instead Angus suggested: "Let's let some daylight on the issue and see how this stacks up then, all right?"

Sounding a great deal more distant than he was, Monty spoke back: "You putting up here till morning--you don't have to, you know."

Angus sighed. "If I have to snuggle with a Williamson or with you, it might as well be you. Probably you at least can carry a tune when you snore."

It came to Monty then that setting foot on this ranch had put this man behind enemy lines. Ordinarily, Angus McCaskill would rather have eaten dirt than come to the Double W for anything. And all the Major or Whit or their father before them ever wanted to see of a North Fork homesteader was the back of him, quitting the country. The Klan couldn't have kicked everybody more cockeyed tonight if it had tried. *And her, why'd they have to get after her? How'd they even know to?* Not that there was any sorting this out, but he reluctantly gave in to the fact that daylight was a better time to try. The man here was right, all you could do was stand the gaff and see who else ended up with you. "All right then," he told Angus heavily, "let's get you installed. I'm gonna make a light. Just as soon catch a bullet as live like a mole."

"It's at least a philosophy," Angus concurred, "but I'm going to be a rude guest and bring down the shade."

With the greenblind firmly down, he turned as Monty lit a bedside reading lamp. Everything that could be done with the sparse room had been, he saw; cloth ceiling carpet-tacked to the rafters, beaverboard put over the walls and painted a resounding aqua-green. There was far too much furniture, belongings of all kinds, for the size of the room but not, Angus realized, for a man's full life lived in its confines. Picture calendars, the freest art there is, rioted on every wall. Across the exact center of the ceiling stretched a wire where a cloth curtain could be drawn to divide the room in half; on one side of that was a mussed bed and on the other was one neatly made up with a quilt of many colors atop.

Monty went across and untucked the covers, then made an awkward take-it gesture. He said gruffly, "My mother's bed."

"I'm honored."

As played out as he had ever felt, Angus deposited himself on the edge of the bed and took his shoes off. Then looked up; Monty still stood at the curtain line, hesitating.

"Mister Angus?" he finally brought out. "I've always done my level damndest to watch my step, here on the place and out in town. But tonight tells me there's people who think I've stuck my foot in it and I'm not even sure what ^(it) is. Can't even be in the same room with a white lady, while there's Dolph riding herd on us right outside? I better get myself woke up about where all this comes from." He eyed the graying temples of the man seated on the bed. "You been in the Two country practically forever, haven't you, about like me? Both of us, longer than Montana itself has been around?"

"A dead heat, in my case," Angus reflected back. "I lit in Helena the day of statehood. But you're pretty much right, I was on the North Fork by the

ital

spring of '90, why? And if you don't pull up a chair, I'm going to keel over from exhaustion watching you."

Monty sat, but like a coiled spring. "These hoodoos, tonight, what brought them on? Butte and places like that, I know they have trouble with them, but I'm pretty low to the ground from a couple of hundred miles off, aren't I? All I even know about the bastards is what my mother would tell me when I'd complain about some half-ass thing some white person did to her or me. 'This is a flea bite, compared,' she'd always say. Then she'd get going on how the Klan clucks would light their cross on fire to get themselves stirred up, hang some colored person if they happened to feel like it, cut down the tree and paint the stump red as a reminder. She saw all that, when she was only a bit of a girl. But that was back in the South, all those years ago. And now here's this." He wiped his temple with the palm of his hand as if trying to move elements of this around in there. "You hit here in early '90, you said? You must have just missed my old man, wherever the hell he took himself off to."

Angus stirred. "When was that?"

"What I remember is"--Monty scanned his mother's side of the room as though it might help--"we didn't make it to the statehood celebration in town. I was all excited that my mother was gonna sing for the people, Mister Warren had arrangements already made--the Rathbuns were gonna strut their stuff every which way that day. But right before, there went my father."

"Come here to me, Monty. Momma is sorry as anything we can't be going to town, but I'd just cry in front of everybody if we did. They'll need to put Montana on the map without us."

"What I'm driving at," Monty persisted, "things don't always reach ears like ours then. Yours maybe are a better shade for that." Monty jerked his head

toward the window that had framed the cross as it blazed. "Was there anything like *these*"--he spat the bitter word--"around here then?"

Angus took his time putting an answer together. When he had the past assembled as best he could, he set in. "I was fresh from the old country, ~~green as~~ ^{a pea} and Two Medicine life all was a startlement at the time, mind you. Sit in town there trying to have a ~~quiet~~ ^{restful} drink and you'd probably have to dodge a traveling fistfight over whether aces chase faces or vice versa. There was a shooting or two in Gros Ventre before I came, cowboy life as it is in the books, but things had already tamed down from that. And that was the extent of it, I'm sure as anything. These ninnies were't kiyiing around here then, Monty, if that's any help."

"Maybe not just like this." To Angus, Monty looked as bleak as any human could. "Story's always been, my old man pulled out on my mother and me. Now I'm wondering."

#

Life marched in long review in Adair's nights, and thanks to Susan Duff, this was one of the more restless processions of thoughts her mind had ever set out on. ~~Not~~ ^{It} Not all that many hours ago the familiar dark of her bedroom wall had been lit with a pale frieze of shadowvines, the climbing rose at the window sketched into motion by the headlamps of the approaching automobile; only trouble took to the road at that time of night, and with held breath she had watched the trellis design grow and grow into the room before she undertook to shake Angus out of sleep. And now here in a Williamson guest bed as large as a barge, she lay open-eyed nearest the wall while the ~~sound~~ ^{deep} sleeper in the lump of covers at the outside of the bed was Susan.

It ~~was~~ ^{had} ~~astounding~~ ^{ed} ~~how~~ ^{Adair these thirty years} life reacted to Susan. ~~Adair had long ago~~ ^{She} concluded that Susan was like a hot poker into cider. A savor came from her,

which, whether it was to your exact taste or not, boilingly changed the flavor of a situation. Adair lay there bringing back that most distant day when she and Angus were wed and all at once a great unforgettable goose of a schoolgirl with the majestic neck she had not yet grown into and those sinewy Duff shoulders stood up tall and in the finest voice gave the one gift that, even then, Adair knew would last:

*"Adair Barclay, she was there,
Gathering a lad with red hair...
Angus McCaskill, he was there,
Paired with a lass named Adair...
Feel love's music everywhere,
Fill your heart, fill the air,
Dancing at the rascal fair."*

She tensed now as Susan stirred, hoping she had not unwittingly hummed her awake. But Susan simply gave a bit of a dreamer's groan. Angus so often did the same. Down through the years sleeplessness had given Adair ^{more than enough} ~~all the~~ experience ~~there was~~ at sorting sounds in the dark. Sentrylike she lay there, her thoughts obstinately marching back over how it was that here they were, Susan and poor wishbone Monty, Angus and herself, under Williamson roofs while ^{those high and mighties} ~~them~~—she was pretty sure it must be the Major—every so often could be heard making the rounds of the guards put in place against those who tormented the night.

#

The morning came haggard, with waterless clouds in the way of the sun, and the burnt patch on the slope above the Double W ranch house emerging to Wes on his dawn round of inspection as incontrovertible as a tender new scar. By the time he was an hour into this day, he had kowtowed to the McCaskills with

the loan of a buckboard to go home in and accompanying apologies for the night in harm's way, held Whit back from several precipitous^{ant} actions, had it out on the telephone with the nonfunctioning sheriff, and now was faced with Susan.

"I don't think I heard that," she was telling him with the type of enunciation he wished she would save for waist-high pupils. "Call it quits?" Her gaze cut back and forth from one burly Williamson brother to the other, Wes the office master untanned as fine stationery, Whit on the permanent brink of sunburn. At the moment the pair were anvils for her words to strike blue sparks from. "Nothing of the sort. You're surely not going to let Klan imbeciles make mincemeat of all our work, what's the good of that?"

"She can't be back over there on the North Fork by herself," Whit spoke as if ~~Susan~~^{she} was not in the room. "Monty can't be scooting over there for any more lessons anyway. Some loony up a coulee with a .30.06--" He stopped, at the expression on Wes.

Susan gave up on Whit with a glance that told him so, and set out to surround Wes. "This is new of you, Major. Since when do Monty and I have no say in this?"

Wes had never thought of himself as someone trouble follows around, but if Susan was any evidence, that seemed open to question right about now. "Last night you escaped a whipping or worse," he tried to keep it crisp. "Lord only knows what they would do to Monty if they get the chance."

"And you're going to put it to him that he has to take off out of here."

"I didn't say that."

"You were about to. He's not yours to ball up and toss somewhere!" By now her words were practically molten. "Can't you see, you're taking away exactly the chance you wanted to give him. Monty and I still have work to do, and it can't be done if you simply throw him to the wind."

"Didn't mean to lay you open to trouble." Staying standing, Monty put his hands on the back of a chair and kneaded the leather. "I never thought, with the Major and all--"

"Shush about that."

The chair leather still was receiving a going-over. "No, I've got to make you know. Whosever bright idea, I wouldn't have opened my mouth on that boat if I'd known this was coming."

"Don't let me hear anything of the sort from you, now or ever." Anger spots as round as dollars had come to her cheeks. He cocked a look at her. *Ever? Where does that come into the picture?* "Your music," she was saying as if to drum it in, "is worth whatever the Knighty-nights hiding under their stupid sheets try to put any of us through. Never mind shaking your head, I know what I'm talking about when it comes to a voice like yours. Climb over them with it, you have to--Monty, it's the only way for you to leave them behind. Up in life is the best distance to be from those who want at you." For all she knew she was the first person from Scotch Heaven ever to be in the Double W's inmost lair, but she gestured to the office and its furnishings and its shelves of the royal maroon ledgers of the Williamsons as if showing him around. "You don't have to ask very far around here to discover that."

Monty could not hold it all in any longer.

"'Climb,' that's right in there with 'breathe' and 'enunciate', is it?" He accidentally kicked a leg of the desk, startling her, as he set off around the room. What could only be called grief for all the hours they had put in and now lost coarsened his voice. "But how's that supposed to happen if I get grabbed onto as quick as somebody decides they don't like the look of me? Look at us here, all I wanted was to sing and all you did was to try get it out of me--"

"We'll only know 'all' when we hear it from you on stage."

--and we're treated like a pair of sneaks. Whoever those were last night, some of them had to know me a long time, from town and around. I've lived here all my life that counts any. Never drew a second look when I sloped along doing the chores or driving the Major around. Why's it any different when I try to make something of myself? If I was yay-high"--he put a spread hand at the height of a seven-year-old--"and you were giving me lessons, everybody'd think it was just cute. Or if you were--" his words ran to a halt.

--dried-up as a prune?" Susan provided.

--a lady older than what you are, there wouldn't be no problem either, would there." He drew a breath. "But there is."

"Those, last night." She hammered the point for him again. "They're in no way entitled to decide your life or mine either."

"Doesn't seem to stop them from trying. Last night gave me the definite impression that if I don't watch my every step, I'll end up leading St. Pete's choir. And in your case, they don't just have it in for cats."

Impatiently she waved that away. Monty wished she had done anything but that. He had stepped in here as primed as he could be for goodbye, and here she was ready to take on the Klan to both of their last drops. He let it burst:

"All right, you can stand there and say you're not going to let them put the run on you. It's different for you. You're--"

--white and female and possessed of a singing voice about half the quality of yours."

"Will you stop!"

"I don't say we can go on as if not a thing happened. But idiots of the world aside, sooner or later you'll still have to get back to work if you're going to live up to your voice."

He furrowed up, which she took as a favorable sign. "What on?"

"Presentation, stagecraft, adjustment to audience," she immediately ticked off on as many fingers and stopped as if running out of capacity.

He studied her for the long part of a minute, then shook his head.

"Then what's your next stop?" she asked tiredly.

"Really trying to figure that out, I am. Where am I supposed to go?" He circled the room as his sentences came out like stones being slung. "Down south, where they maybe won't even take to time to light up a cross before they fling a rope around my neck? Talk the Major into some la-de-dah job at his New York place and still never amount to anything? Quit the whole country? As I savvy it, those old tickets from Africa were one-way."

Susan let it all roll out of him. He came to rest across the room from her, facing away.

"Monty. Monty?" she said until he would look in her direction. "Just so you know. I had a rope around my neck once."

"You don't mean the business end of a rope."

"Oh, don't I? A lasso. With a noose at its end. All right, a loop, but it very nearly came to the same."

Is she making this up? flashed into his mind. Just as rapidly followed by: *Be the first time. She has about as much guff in her as that inkwell.* His mouth dry, finally he managed to say: "Probably shouldn't be, but I'm here listening."

Monty watched her try a smile that did not quite catch hold. "It was in Havre, rodeo time. That's always risky, isn't it." Then she rushed on. "During the campaign for the vote, this of course was. We won over the mayor's wife to our side, and so three or four of us who could ride were allowed into the parade. Little knowing." Bit by bit she had been pulling this out of herself, onto the score sheets of the operetta. "Banners across us, of course, with slogans sewn on. I remember mine was, 'Eve was his equal, why can't she vote?'" She gestured as

if the next was inevitable. "A cowboy bunch down by the depot took it into their heads that it would be fun to rope the suffs. They were drunk, stupid, hateful--some of all, I suppose. The one who threw in my direction didn't get it all the way onto me." She drew a hand across the top of her chest. "The loop settled there, and then my horse spooked. It yanked up tight on my neck, the fool was too drunk to let go. It hurt like anything, and I couldn't breathe until someone jumped in and caught the horse." Her hand traced the slender column of her throat, then dropped.

He stared over at her. "Lucky you're still on this earth."

"There was a week when I wasn't so sure. I couldn't sing, Monty. Could barely even croak, and didn't dare do much of that. I had to write out anything I wanted to say. You can imagine--"

He could. The flaming words on paper if this woman could not speak, let alone sing.

Godamighty, no limit to the things they do to us when they get the least little chance. All at once he put his face in his hands. Susan started across the room to him, but did not know what she would do when she reached there. A grown man she had driven to tears; she hadn't wanted this. But when she tentatively lifted Monty's hands away from his face the worked-leather cheeks were dry, he had his expression set. He spoke as if into the teeth of a grit-filled wind:

"Say we keep on. How would we? Where, even?"

"That's the Major's department."

Medicine Line

1924

Was he losing his marbles, Monty wondered every little while, or did this constitute the exact last place on earth he could have expected to be plunked down in and told to set up housekeeping? And the music that came with it wasn't helping any.

"Jake and Roany was a-chousin' along

And Jake was a-singin' what he called a song--

Oh-da-lay-de-oh-da-lay-de-ooo..."

"Now there's homegrown music for you," the announcer's voice again crackled out of the radio set with professional enthusiasm. *Not in my book*, Monty grumbled to himself as he made his bed, the only chore he could find left to do. *Call that a yodel?* "That was the Medicine Line's own Prairie Troubador, Andy Olswanger, singing a traditional cowboy song," the announcer rattled on, "right here in our studio. Well done, Andy! Say, friends, we here at station CINE, the voice of Medicine Hat and the province of Alberta"--a gulp of distance, then the sound wavered in strong again--"bringing you the finest listening that

radio has to offer, from the Medicine Line to the High Line, all across these splendid wide open spaces where two nations meet in--"

Bunch of open spaces between their ears, Monty fumed as he stepped over and pinched off any more yowling from either the yodeler or the announcer. *Putting that on the air.* Yet, it had only been last night, late, when the radio set swept voices in from anywhere, that he had come across Roland Hayes singing from ^{Minneapolis} Pittsburgh. He had nearly shouted across to Miss Susan to come over and hear, but that was complicated, even here.

As he had been doing all morning, he told himself to set his face for it. Complication was not going to leave either of them alone for awhile now. Glancing around the strange room, he did not feel beckoned by any of the well-intentioned motley furniture and sank himself down on the freshly made bed. His mind ticked on their situation as steadily as the unhelpful clock beside him. The Major had better be on the mark about this crazy hidey-hole, or the clucks would come night-riding again, ready to scorch the life out of more than grass this time. *Flock of bastards them anyway.* Lying there trying to be calm as he could, the thought of the Klan pack kept setting off reactions like a string of firecrackers in him. What he wouldn't give to take on those Klan buzzards one to one, he didn't care whether with rifle, jackknife, tire iron, name it. On the immediate other hand, what he wouldn't give to be a thousand miles from here about now. Somewhere that he wouldn't stick out like this from rubbing up too close to white people.

But her, cooped up here with him. These Klan hoodoos had her on their bent little minds, too, and she was about as white as they come. So maybe that wasn't the cure either. Tired of trying to calculate it all, right now he would settle for the most temporary of medicine; he half-hurt all over from his desperation to get back into the swing of singing.

Once again he checked the three-legged clock on the apple box that was his new bedside stand. He could scarcely believe it, but it was still twenty minutes yet before his lesson could happen, under her decree that it took two hours for breakfast to settle. Privately he figured she was underestimating the staying power of Mrs. Gustafson's stiff hotcakes, but he wasn't going to broach anything that produced more waiting.

Too restless to stay on his back, he rolled onto his feet and prowled back over to the window. The windowglass was the old wavy kind. The sprawling parade ground, the tired old barracks across the way, the windbreak of skimpy dried-up cottonwoods that had never quite died and never quite flourished here, all had a waver to them, as if flowing in place; as if the air still held the slightly turbulent rhythm of parading cavalry.

#

~~Drop~~

The afternoon before, they came to Fort Assiniboine in a cavalcade of horsepower and dust, with Monty driving Wes in the Duesenberg, Susan in her tin Lizzie, and three clattering Double W trucks of furniture and provisions. Out on the paintless verandah of what had been the commandant's quarters stood the Gustafsons, Vikings of the prairie, awaiting them.

"Sit tight," Wes instructed Monty, "while I get our marching orders." Ignoring how stiff his game leg was from the long car ride, he pegged his way to Susan's car and told her the same. A man none of them knew had come out of the guardhouse on the far side of the expanse between officers' row and the barracks. Pulling on his suitcoat and walking carefully around the patches of cheatgrass that infested the parade ground, he advanced to them. Not looking forward to meeting him, let alone spending the time ahead under the eyes of him and his, Susan

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scanned around at the gaunt files of empty reddish-brown buildings, as sudden up out of the prairie as ruins scoured free by a shift in desert dunes.

"What, Wes, no sense owning a fort if you can't put it to use?" her astonishment spoke for her when he singled out this as the refuge for her and Monty and his voice-in-training.

"Something new in the history of amortization," he admitted with a trace of amusement inadvertently showing on him. Sober-faced again in an instant, he looked as if there was more he wanted to tell her than what she heard in his

→
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eventual words: *"It's remote, up there. It wouldn't hurt for the two of you to be out of sight for a while."*

"Why not good and far out of sight?" she had demanded to know, unsure as ever why he wanted to play his cards this way or even what game they were now in. *"Let's think about this. If I had to I could quit Montana until we're done, and you know after the other night Monty would, that quick."*

"Not until"-- Susan caught the hesitation there in him again-- *"we settle some scores. If we don't, neither of you will ever be rid of these pests. Susan, something like this is supposed to be up my alley. Trust me on it, ^{can't you} pretty please?"* Which would have been easier if she hadn't recognized the public-speaking pirouette he then performed with his tone of voice: *"Besides, you'll all but be out of the country. The Medicine Line"--*the old Indian phrase for the boundary with Canada and the prospect of sanctuary there, she knew as well as he-- *"is just about in sight from the fort."*

"That's guff, Wes. It's not like you to count on the Mounties riding to the rescue, rooty toot toot."

Unexpectedly he had smiled again, but with grim lines in parenthesis around it this time. *"We'll have some troops of our own. You'll see."*

The main one of these was finishing his roundabout trek to them now, looking apologetic for the time it had taken him to negotiate the weedy parade ground. Susan saw that except for the way his eyebrows were steadily up like little hoisted battle flags, he seemed mild enough, the kind who wouldn't say boo to a goose. She understood perfectly well, though, that what she had caught a glimpse of while he was shrugging into that suitcoat was a shoulder holster.

"Bailey," Wes met the man and introduced him to Susan with that single grated word. He sized him up, although there really was no need. *"As you know, Miss Duff and I have had a taste of how well you do your work."*

"I'm in the business I'm in, Major." To Susan's hot stare, he seemed impervious as anyone could be who ferreted out trysts in hotels for a living.

"Why else would I want you?" Wes observed drily. His gaze was fixed past the private investigator to the weather-worn guardhouse where the small fleet of cars with Butte license plates was parked. "All your men solid?"

"They know their stuff. Busted enough miners' heads for Pinkerton, in their day." Bailey put the next with surprising delicacy. "They're all Catholics, just to make sure they remember what side they're on in this."

"In that case, come meet our other interested party." With Susan next to him but willfully silent, Wes led on to the sun-catching Duesenberg where Monty had been taking this all in by rearview mirror and applied ear.

Act like you know what you're doing, fool, he counseled himself and climbed out trying to look as if a private eye was assigned to him every day. Bailey went along, and from the grave way he shook hands with him Monty might have been footing the bill instead of Wes. Wes liked that. "Give us a look around," he instructed Bailey ~~moderately enough~~ *then we'll let you tend to your knitting.*

"Rattlers," Bailey reminded everybody even though his cautious tread already had, and without a further word, the man led the three of them back over toward the guardhouse. Along that side of the parade ground, brick barracks stood lined up for what seemed half a mile, a number of them gutted by fire, the surviving ones looking rundown and rough to the hand from pockmarks made by decades of blowing grit. Monty chuffed a rill of dust with one foot; it more than likely was left over from the dust storm, and he wondered how long it would be until the next one. Out here like this where the tallest thing to break the wind was sagebrush, the buildings of the fort were like morsels on an immense platter for the weather to pick at. Even on a comparatively benign day such as this, restless

squadrons of soft-edged little clouds dragged disconcerting shadows across the prairie anywhere he looked.

He reluctantly resigned himself to a climate only rattlesnakes could prosper in. His eyes joined the others in trying to take in the mass of deserted habitations over these arid acres. Ranked across from the ramshackle barracks and seeming to squint toward them in disgusted inspection stood prim old house after house of officers' quarters with randomly broken windows and shutters half gone. And down the middle the wind blew, the parade ground its permanent right-of-way.

Bailey gestured to the barracks building closest to them as though shoosing it out of their way. He murmured, "My fellows picked this one for themselves, because of," indicating upward. A three-story tower, its parapet crowned with castle-style battlements, buttressed the near end of the building. Susan, Monty, Wes, all three goggled at this. Rapunzel could have let down her golden hair perfectly in character with the odd medieval aspect, except for the mat of buffalo grass beneath. Bailey whistled through his teeth, and a lookout carrying a rifle peered down at them through one of the battlement notches. "That's Ned," said Bailey, and left it at that.

Susan drew in her breath, as if she had stepped by mistake onto the stage of some fantastic opera.

Wes fell into logistical conversation with Bailey while the four of them trooped off toward further batches of buildings. Monty thus far had no sense of recaptured past such as the visit during the dust storm had whirled up for him here, his mood too heavy for memory to make any headway. Behind the backs of the other two, Susan and he exchanged a look as castaways might have. They had compared, and in the session of argument each of them had with the Major against being made to hole up here, the Major could not have been more highly reassuring: "*You're just going to the other ranch.*" Some ranch; you could lose

track of cows for a week just in the jumble of these buildings. Although right now, both of them saw, a couple of the hands were down at the road putting up the set of gateposts where the freshly done Deuce W sign would hang. The Williamsons never wasted any time in putting their brand on anything.

A wrangling corral, holding a restless new saddle string of mares and geldings, loomed into their path now, and beyond it, a tumbledown blacksmith shop for horseshoeing and enough stables for a major racetrack. Susan was impatient to scoot on past these, but the men were not.

"Barns aren't in any too bad a shape," Monty at length was moved to remark to the Major, one connoisseur to another.

"That was the cavalry for you," Wes assessed, "the horses lived better than the troopers."

Susan was not growing any more patient. "Wes, you said a fort." Directly ahead there was another tower, and ^{doubtless} ~~probably~~ another Ned, in a further contingent of barracks and other buildings beyond the stables. "This is like a military city."

"They did go at it a bit strong," he could only agree. "Maybe the War Department thought it was making up for lost time. Custer would be cleaning spittoons at West Point right now, if all this had been wangled in here before the Little Big Horn."

"But what were they thinking of, building all this that late?" Susan persisted as if the prairie deserved an explanation for all this intrusion on it. She



ran a hand through her hair, which the wind was fashioning into knots. "I was only little at the time, but even as early as we lit in this country, my father said the Indians long since had no more fight left in them than a dog's breakfast."

"Your father would," Wes said, lightly enough to take any sting out of it. "But he more or less had the right of it. The tribes here were already on the Reservation," he gestured off to their route here where they had passed any number of small Indian ranches that looked as if they were all corral. "I hate to say so, but this wasn't the most popular post that ever existed. It had more than its share of deserters. The saying was, you could always count on one thing on the menu at Fort Assinniboine: 'Desert.' So," Wes summed, "fetching back their own troops, and there'd have been some chasing of Black~~foot~~^{feet} horse raiders once in a blue moon, and of course handing runaway Crees back over to Canada"--he glanced Monty's direction--"in between parading. Garrison duty was the only way this was put to use, really."

Monty had been listening thoughtfully. The Major seemed to know a remarkable lot about the soldiering that went on here. What did they call that, osmosis?

"Wes, Monty," Susan called over from where she was peering into a higher-standing boxy building a little apart in this next cluster of structures. "Look at this, will you."

They joined her at the doorway, Bailey trailing. Inside was a shambles, but it perceptibly had been an auditorium. The quite sizable stage, complete with bandmaster's podium, lay under a snowlike coating of dust from fallen plaster. The seating area was full of trash and broken seats. Up in the backstage rafters a community of pigeons lifted off in panic. The men protected their hats with their hands as the flock exited over them.

"You're not seeing it," Susan pointed the matter up for them. "Here's just what we want."

Her version of exactitude brought a wince from Monty--he was putting his neck on the line for *this?*--and a considerable scan from Wes to make sure she was serious, before he dubiously turned back to the maze of awry seats and general mess. "Susan, it's pretty badly out of commission."

"What it is is a *stage*," she overrode that, "with an actual proscenium, and there can't not be acoustics." She sailed on into the audience section as though dilapidated auditoriums were her first love. "We need a few of these seats in working order, is all. Here...over here...and back there. The rest can be, well, imaginary audience."

The three men edged in after her, twenty years or so of seeping dust and the droppings of those pigeons meeting them. Wrinkling his nose, Wes estimated: "This would take days on end to kick into shape."

"By tomorrow will do fine," Susan answered absently. "My, how the regimental band must have lifted the roof off in here." She put her head back a bit and sang out as a test: "*A capital ship for an ocean trip/Was the Walloping Window-Blind.*" When the sound of the downward-tripping range of that seemed to satisfy her, she tried its higher end: "*No wind that blew dismayed her crew/Nor troubled the captain's mind.*" The return on that too met her standards. "Quite nice. Monty, see there, even a balcony. We'll have you projecting your voice like Caruso before you know it."

"I shouldn't wonder," he managed to give that.

Wes backed out of the squalor in surrender. "Oh, very well, have your auditorium. As quick as they have the trucks unloaded, I'll put everyone at this. Bailey?"

"Mine won't like it, but I'll have the ones who aren't on watch pitch in."

They moved off back toward the housing. Susan stopped by where things were being unfreighted off the trucks and made sure that the radio set offered by Wes would go to Monty's quarters--he would need whatever company he could get, here--and she would take the Victrola. Then she girded for the face-off with Mrs. Gustafson over territorial rights within the commandant's quarters.

Similarly trying to square himself up against whatever was to come, Monty went with Wes over to the Duesenberg to get his suitcase and bedroll out. Once his things were on the ground, he looked around as if trying to remember which way to head, in the multitude of ghost-buildings. Over there stood the empty-windowed post hospital and the laundryworks tucked behind it, but he could pick out nothing of the tyke, him, who had the run of the place. *Gone downhill since I was three, that's some life.*

"I'll leave you to it," Wes was saying to him, already occupied elsewhere from the sound of it. "Gus is driving me back to the Double W." Seeing the expression that drew, he tacked on: "Don't be that way. You're in another calling now."

"That better be the case," Monty muttered, spit-rubbing a dab of dust off the door panel of the automobile.

"Oh, and these." Wes reached into the backseat and presented him a plump bundle wrapped in butcher paper and twine.

"What's this then?"

"Tailoring," Wes spoke as if the brown-paper bundle could not be anything else. "Susan's orders. You didn't think you were going to make your Fort Assinniboine debut dressed like a ranch hand, did you?"

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The clock finally having to confess to the appointed hour, Monty hustled out of his quarters dressed in concert gear, drawing deep practice breaths as he

went. The mid-morning light here where there was nothing any higher than those stunted cottonwoods to break it was already hard on the eyes as he gingerly navigated his way to the auditorium. He felt more than medium ridiculous at having to try to keep the cheatgrass out of these silk socks, but he had decided that if any of Bailey's bruisers snickered, they were welcome to do so until they choked on it. He wasn't the one sitting on his ^{tail}~~butt~~ day and night up in the drafty second-story ^{ice}~~ice~~ of Fort Skin-and-Bone guarding them.

When he stepped into the ^{capacious}~~big~~ horseshoe-shaped room, which was cleaner than it was yesterday but still not clean, naturally she was already up there in possession of the stage. Ensconced at the piano, she was writing furiously onto a sheaf of paper held in her lap. Looking things over, he did have to grant that the piano, by whatever method it had been manhandled into here, added surprising serenity to the scene of harum-scarum seats and lath walls with bare ribs showing. But everything else within the confines of the gaping performance space seemed in what barely passed for working order, and he had a growing feeling this included him.

Susan halted her scribbling to herself to take in his appearance. The tie was not quite flying level beneath his chin but at least it was proportionately tied, and the tails of the tuxedo draped as suavely as any ambassador's. His boilerplate white shirt would have wakened the blind, and from the way he held his wrists out from him as if they were newly precious, she would have bet that Wes had thrown in a pair of those mother-of-pearl cufflinks he so favored.

"My. If clothes make the man, you've certainly been overhauled."

"Miss Susan, I feel like I have doilies plastered all over me, all right? Now do you suppose we could get going?"

Acting to himself as if this was just another chore, he went up on the stage, which creaked as he came. To his surprise, she did not launch into

whatever point of a lesson that happened to be at the front of her mind, and instead patted a weathered chair next to her piano bench. He scraped it back--every sound in here seemed to live on and on--and sat, on edge in more senses than one.

"Monty." He could tell she had deliberated this, and his attention sharpened accordingly. "Do you know why I nagged so for this next dose of lessons?"

He could not help but grin this off, all they had been through beyond any other summary. "So you could have the pleasure of hearing me breathe like a tea kettle?"

"There's that," she laughed the way she only rarely did during lessons, low and earthy, the kind of laugh that he happened to like to hear from a woman. "When we started at this, I had no intention whatsoever of taking things this far," he heard out of her now. "Tune you up, so to speak, and that would be that." She delivered him a look as if he was solely at fault for this next. "Then you had to go and get worthwhile. Don't bother to puff up, there are still any number of kinks to be worked out of your hide. But the way your voice has come along would knock over any teacher, and I'd be a traitor to the profession if I didn't give you whatever seasoning I can for actual performing. That's why I wanted us to practice, even here, in full getup from now on." No wonder she seemed so primed and pressed, he realized; she had on an aqua-green gown long enough to pass muster at a fancy ball. Now that he looked, she was even in womanly war paint; face powder, touch of rouge, something done to the lips. Her hair fixed a way he hadn't seen it before. If the imaginary audience grew tired of his performing rig, it could feast attention on the accompanist.

Those cobwebs of thought she swept right through. "What we're going to do are called runthroughs. Done right"--she gave every appearance of being in

charge of that nationwide--"these will help to put you at ease no matter what happens when you're actually performing."

Help put him at ease, none of her *I guarantee?* And what was ~~No matter~~ *what?* Monty discovered a longing for the old days when she only drilled the daylights out of him about breathing.

Shifting on the chair, he sounded out his doubts: "Something like that really have to be in the cards, here? I guess I figured I'd pick those kinds of things up when I have to stand out there and behave myself in front of a bunch of people."

"You're going to need a flying start." From her warning tone, any sugar for the day was over. "In your, you know what I mean, situation, you must be better than good from day one. Knock their ears back from the moment you open your mouth, you absolutely must. And you start at that"--before he knew it, she had him upright and being steered toward the back of the stage--"by knowing every pore of the theater."

For what seemed an hour, she trooped him back and forth through the whole enterprise, the considerably mystifying workings of backstage, the angles of getting on and off the stage without becoming encumbered in the curtain, the exact unarguable line of sight necessary between accompanist and singer, the carefully considered plank of the stage that should be his mark to sing from and that she chalked an unmissable X on, protocol after protocol that he tucked into so many corners of his head that he began to wonder if he would run out of space. Each time he thought they were done, Susan would rattle off some more. This auditorium turned her into something like a schoolma'am administering a spelling bee, it seemed to him, but with all the words as tricky to remember as those French ones in the newspapers during the war, Ypres, Passchendaele, Douaumont, so on and so on.

Eventually she swung around to him, the edge of her gown flipping just short of his ankles, and informed him, "Then when you've instilled all that in yourself, you can relax and let your performance take its course." She stood out there at center stage--on the exact plank she had chalked for him, he noticed, without ever so much as having glanced down--looking lit from within. With all the reassurance in the world in her voice, she confided: "There are only two rules of being onstage, doubtless since Shakespeare: remember your lines, and don't bump into the furniture." He managed a laugh, which echoed back at him from the wing of the stage as if from a big empty rainbarrel.

Susan straightened his tie, then went over and fluffed herself into place at the piano. "Let's give it a try. Don't worry, I'll provide the audience when needed as we go along. Today let's just hear how you sound in a room this size. *Mouthful of Stars*, first? It has nice range to it."

Toeing the mark there at center stage, Monty fought the flutters that had accompanied him all morning. Try as he had, the thoughts dogged him at every step toward this mournful relic of an auditorium, then in every square foot she checker-moved him through. In the feel of this fort, its blind grip into the prairie, he sensed how it was that the Rathbun family began to flake apart, back there in his first years. The spectral rubble of this place somehow held them yet, maybe invisible to see but outlined as if by firelight in his imagination: Sergeant Mose Rathbun, rough-hided veteran of the Tenth Cavalry, sent trotting here to fight Indians who no longer needed fighting; Angel Momma, imported to do the linens. And in here would have been the one gathering place outside of duty, back when this fort was manned. The regimental band--Miss Susan had said as much--would have held forth in here, every-so-often concerts of rowdy-dow marches. But that was the kind of tumpy-tump his mother had hated--"*They might as well beat it out with a spoon on a washtub, parade theirselves to that.*" This must have

been where what Sunday services there were got held, too. His father the absconder, sitting here listening to hymns of faith? Somehow he could not picture that either-- "*Your daddy wasn't ever what might be called churched.*" Even here, desperate temple of music it was supposed to be, he saw how those lives sundered. Other imaginings rose to him like fever vapors from a swamp. The lordly white officers, probably not a one of them a patch on the Major or they wouldn't have been shelved out here, they'd have filled the front rows like a streak of calcimine, wouldn't they. And in back of them, the uncomfortably unhorsed cavalry troopers in Chinese-checker rows where every marble was black. All of them, swept west like so much dust, to this fort which constituted a military wild goose chase, it and everything it came in touch with an epidemic of failing, failing--

"I said," Susan's voice notified him this was time two and that was about enough, "we'll start again. Ready now?"

Monty jerked a glance to her that would have to do for an apology, and made himself concentrate on getting his breath ready. After a few moments he nodded, and the start of the low croon of *Mouthful of Stars* issued from the piano.

But the auditorium would not let him issue sound of his own. He stood there as if in the grip of a slow strangler. He could not account for it but he could not break out of it either: the gaunt wooden canyon out there, empty yet not, simply swallowed him, held him in dazed suspension like some Jonah on the verge of going down in a great gulp. In turn, nothing of any more substance than a gasp showed any sign of ever making its way up out of his own throat. It was worse than when he had gone blank up there in front of the Zanzibar denizens.

"No, I am not ready this time either," he choked out an answer to her question before it came. "Just give me a minute and I'll try to get that way." He

retreated to the side of the stage, feeling her eyes on him. He ~~sat down in the~~ ^{dropped onto} chair there, his arms onto his knees and his head out past his toes. If he was going to throw up, he didn't want it to be on these clothes. The prompter's chair, she had said this was, when she was showing him it all. Then how about some promptitude with these songs, any damn one of them, that he had supposedly known ever since ears were fastened on his head?

Good grief, is even an audience that isn't there going to bother him? He isn't afraid of his shadow in any other way, why this? Susan clasped her hands in her lap to keep from flinging something at the musical fates. "I'll tell you what," she brightly offered, to give him a cloak of time to reassemble himself if he possibly could, "let me play a piece. Just to put some music into this room--it hasn't had any for a good long while."

Monty sat back, passed a hand over his face, and made an effort to look like someone who belonged in the vicinity of an auditorium. Then, just like that, music filled the place, solid to the roof. The fancy brand of melody, for sure--her fingers racing all over the piano keys--but everything new that kept coming into it tiptoed back to meet the main tune. Then off a wonderful trickle of music would go again, eventually to shy back to the melody. It had its melancholy side, but the piece stayed full of exalted tricks like that, and as many of them as his ear could catch, Monty followed with stone-still attentiveness. He couldn't not. This was music that savvied the way into the darkness of mood he had come down with, but lulled it into thinking better of itself. Showed the mood how to console itself, so to speak. Curative music, all the way. Mesmerized, he watched her fingers in their minute acrobatics along the keyboard, *forth and back*, as the Major would have said. How did she know to pull off a stunt like this?

When the last elegant notes had faded up into the rafters like setting stars, he shook his head to indicate he couldn't come up with what such music deserved. "What's something like that called?"

"Chopin. *Nocturne in F sharp*." She was tingling from the playing. It had been a long time between auditoriums. Abruptly she announced, "Here's mine," and began fondling from the keys the opening bars of *Prairie Tide*.

This music too rose and rose, finding its way as if riding a breeze, then taking delicate steps back down, raindrops would they be? A beat, a beat, another beat, and the piece took on storm next. But glided at the end into harmony so perfectly lovely it seemed to settle the air of the room.

He was thunderstruck. When she had finished, the best he could do was whisper, "You're up there with him," meaning Chopin.

Susan frowned, hiding pleasure. "Nowhere close. That's the overture, then it gallops off to be sung to, like so." She demonstrated, the music bounding out of the piano now, but still as sure of itself as anything as he had ever heard.

The clatter of a chair going over backward cut that off.

Monty was up, but leaden on his feet. "And you're putting in all this work on me? What for?! Holy God, woman--Miss Susan, I mean. You've got yourself to try and pitch to the top of the heap!"

This had turned around more than she intended. "Monty, no. There's every difference. As the old fiddler of Ecclefechan said when he heard a Stradivarius being played, 'Ay, mon, there's knackiness and then there's geniusness.'" But she saw he would not be joked off from this. With all the firmness she could muster she told him: "I had my run^b at it. Yours now."

And if yours played out, where does that leave mine? He stayed planted there studying her with something between revelation and despair.

A Bailey agent had popped in through the doorway from his post outside.
“Everything hunky-dory?”

“Rehearsals are like this,” Susan took care of him, and after he backed on out, she lost no time in turning teacher.

“Now then. This matter, Monty, of you here”--she was briskly over by him, and with a twirl like a top, aimed herself around to the audience area--”and those out there. They will try your air.”

Monty lost the meaning of the saying in the fierce roll of *r*'s. Susan indicated out to the farthest reaches of the auditorium as though it was full of something besides howling emptiness. “They’ll snatch the breath right out of you, they’ll wreck your concentration, and even if they’re sitting out there sucking cough drops with the best will in the world, they can stop you cold if you let them. And every audience is different. One night there will be little dibdabs of applause,” she patted two fingers into the palm of her hand, an exaggerated prissy expression on her. “And the next, they will beat their mitts until they hurt,” she clapped her hands above her head like an overwrought aficionado at a bullfight. Her tone softened substantially. “It’s odd. A singer needs people to come hear, and they seem to need the music. But they’re a--I don’t want to say a threat, but they’re a force to be reckoned with.”

Monty hugged his sides as he listened. He could not quite feel the horn scar through the fancy coat and shirt, but he knew vividly its exact place beneath his palming hand. *It about got me killed, remember*, his response simmered just under the surface, *trying to reckon with people that way at the rodeo*.

He found he had to tell her all of it. “The time that horn went in me. Not just everybody in the crowd was bothered to see a colored person get it that way. I heard some things while I was laying there.”

"Then you know what I'm talking about," she instantly flipped that on its side. "That's why you have to get as good as there is at what you do." She rammed past him, gown crackling like a comet's tail, and swooshed down onto the piano bench. As fast as she could make them go her hands wove the ravishing music of the nocturne again. It took only a matter of seconds to transform the auditorium into a glorious chamber of sound once more, and she broke off to peer pointedly over the top of the piano at Monty. "Chopin was one of the silliest men in Europe in person," she told him as if there was going to be a test on this. "But nobody called him a moonstruck Polack after music like that."

Maybe that works okay for Chopin. But... Soberly he swung his head, in an indicating scan of the auditorium's populace of seats, as though an invisible multitude were out there crouched and waiting. "It still sort of shuts me down, sometimes."

Susan fixed him with a stare that ignored that and told him he had better declare war along with her. "If you don't dominate the audience, the audience will dominate you. You have to overcome them," the words drumming out of her like separate sentences.

He realized she was not even remotely talking rodeo, on this. The stumble that sent him under the horns, she didn't put that up there anywhere close with letting himself be crippled in his throat. So she knew even when she didn't know first-hand. She had might as well have been in the Zanzibar that night when every word left him, when those faces all at once focusing hungrily up at him had dried the voicebox right out of him. Still bunched to himself by his arms the way he had been, he stood looking down at the X chalked on the stage, the spot where something all too similar happened here.

All Susan could do was to hope he would not turn away.

Finally he gave one of his quick waterdipper nods and brought out:

"There is this about it--I could stand to have songs written out and on one of those, those music stands. Even the spirit ones I know by heart. Just sort of in case."

"A sound idea. I'll tend to that, and then we'll get started, all right?"

#

good Canadian whiskey

The bottle of ~~blend~~ stood right there handy on the desk, but if the Klan chieftain was not going to reach for it another time, his second-in-command certainly wasn't. He already was nervous about this nighthawk session, just the pair of them here, not the entire Klavern. Funny kind of way to operate, it still seemed to him. He had to accept his superior's reasoning that it was up to the high ones like them to single out nighthawks, recruits who if they proved themselves could be inducted as Knights, but somehow it was a lot easier to go through with things when you had the hood and robe on. This wasn't the secret meeting place, either; sure, it was after hours, but even so, he flinched at sitting around smack in the middle of town like this. No telling who might--

He jumped some when his leader spoke up. "You fellows played hell with cows easily enough. Too bad you missed the woman ~~the~~ ^{at} other night."

"Would have been best of all if we could've caught both her and the licorice at her place," the other said as if cheated. "We'd have dragged the pair of them behind the horses together until you couldn't tell one from the other, you can damn well bet."

"It didn't turn out quite that way, did it. The Big Horn County boys are one up on us now, you know." They both knew, all right. Across the state at Crow Agency the other night, the sole Negro in town had been killed and his cabin set afire with his body in it.

sneaking
"Not our fault the ~~goddamn~~ pair of them quit the country."

"I don't grant that they have. Our lookouts who work the trains at Havre and the Falls haven't seen them. Even trying it by car, he'd stick out. They're tucked somewhere, I'd say." He studied his fellow Klansman as if wishing for better material. "How do we stand--do we have anybody on the ranch?"

"This Williamson bunch is no cinch," the other man complained. "They cut loose the couple of boys out there I had in mind."

The leader resorted to the whiskey bottle now, pouring them each a strong splash. "One of them kind of a runty sort, gimps a little when he walks?"

"No, that don't fit any of our likelies."

"All right then," the leader said in relief. "Spread the word to the Klavern that we're going to lay low for now. Let me see if I can nighthawk us a certain somebody when he gets enough of this"--he flicked a finger against the bottle--"in him on Saturday night."

#

Monty popped awake. By reflex his near hand reached out and made sure the rifle was there. Every bedtime he propped the 30.06 against the apple-box bedstand. And every morning he got up and slid it and the couple of boxes of ammunition--thoughtful parting gift slipped to him by Angus McCaskill--out of sight behind the woodbox, as nicely hidden as when he'd brought them here in his bedroll. The Major maybe didn't want him doing anything crazy against the Klan, but it wasn't the Major's skin that was on the line with those maniacs, either. Just now he'd been dreaming about them again. One of those jumbled dreams, there was a rodeo arena in it, and Dolph standing up on top of the saddle showing off while his horse moseyed around and he himself was the announcer but could never find the megaphone and so had to keep cupping his hands and shouting to the crowd ^{at the top of his lungs} and while he was trying to do that the clump of white hoods and sheets down around chute number one kept opening and closing the

chute gate, like they were getting ready for an event. He touched the cold metal of the rifle barrel again for reassurance and rolled over to drift back to sleep, dream or no dream. Dreams were one thing and a 30.06 was another; if any of the hoodoo bunch came after him--her, too--here at the fort, he would show those nightriding bastards this wasn't eeny meeny miney mo.

#

In Susan's room, a light still burned and the nocturne repeated softly on the Victrola.

#

Wes noticed nights now, more than at any time since those he had spent with Susan.

Ordinarily, dark amounted to a change of clothes. Dressing up, in New York, because with Merrinell's situation it seemed proper to meet her for the evening meal looking as lustrous as possible. ~~Times when she felt well enough a few days on end, he would know to go to the next notch and cram the table with dinner guests, desperately getting the black-tie entertaining done in big doses. Society nights at the Symphony Hall or Carnegie Hall she almost always felt well enough for those--meant full evening wear. The grandmother-of-pearl cufflinks, he mused to himself now, as he dropped his business shirt ones into their sandalwood box in his dresser.~~ Out here, fashion ran the other direction, downward with the sun; even alone here at the ranch, as now, he did not feel right until the day's tailored suit was hung away. After supper both he and Whit liked to be in fresh comfortable britches and old corduroy shirts soft as chamois. It was a habit caught from their father, and as he dressed into it this evening, Wes wondered as he sometimes did whether he and Whit would end up like their father and Teddy Roosevelt, chesty men with years and weight piling up under the fronts of their shirts as they sat back talking ranching, on into the prairie night.

perhaps
some
cuts
through
this
section

If, Wes amended the thought, *they don't burn down us and this house first.*

They. ^{He} ~~Wes~~ took those phantoms downstairs with him now, much as he once shared room in his mind with the German officer who commanded opposite him in the trenches. The adversary always held a certain fascination, particularly with the polish of darkness. ^{still} Thinking on this, ^{he steered himself toward} ~~Wes~~ gravitated to the office off the kitchen, ~~taking care to steer clear of Gustafson, chauffeur-conscript broodily nursing a cup of coffee at the long crew table, and the touchy Chinese cook closing down his own day with discharges of pots and pans.~~

With the office door ^{he} ~~safely~~ shut behind him, ~~Wes~~ paused as if taking a reckoning on the familiar old room of maroon ledgers and manly furniture, as steeped in itself as a cigar humidor. At some point tonight he had to make himself settle there at the desk for a good long while. His lips twitched at the thought that while he may have avoided his father's exact footsteps in life, the familiar indentations of the seat of the pants awaited significantly as ever in the aged leather cushion of the desk chair. Warren Williamson after each day of roaring around the ranch at a pace where you could have played cards on his shirttail--Whit had taken naturally enough to that headlong role, thank God--had then settled in here nightly at the constant arithmetical puzzle of adding acres to cattle and vice versa. *Too bad the old boy didn't have these nights to occupy him.* Wes well knew that the legerdemain that now needed to be performed at that desk was beyond anything his father had ever tried to conjure. The WW Cattle and Land Company had more than its fair share of money, and Wes himself had married another substantial helping, but doubling the ranch holdings the way he and Whit and the eventual Wendell were ^{attempting} ~~doing~~ would have put a dent in Midas. Coming in here tonight, Wes felt oddly like an officer reporting for duty after a furlough--particularly odd to think of the grapple with the Ku Klux Klan as amounting to

that--once again. Assembling the Deuce W was turning out to be like fitting together jigsaw puzzle pieces made of layers of paper, and the next of those layers had to be currency. *We'll tap a duke or a lord*, his father airily said in the early years when overseas investors had faith that cattle on the endless open range of America were a bonanza. Those days were gone, and now it was banks, banks, banks. There were rounds of nameplated loansmen to be made, and before then financial figures to be put in trim like a troupe of acrobats.

Not yet ready to nest at the desk, Wes crossed to the outsize mahogany breakfront which Whit, like their father before him, regarded as the height of furniture manufacture. There he poured himself a decent but not overwhelming amount of brandy and, still following the motion of his mind, circled on over by the big west window ~~with the drink~~. It had never bothered him to nip at people's heels, so he had no glimmer of doubt that the thoroughly notified ranch foreman had men on watch every minute since the nightriders slung up that cross and brazenly set it and half a pasture ablaze. In any event, damned if Major Wesley Williamson, possessor of enough combat medals to clank when he walked, was ever going to hesitate to stand at his own window, whatever white-sheeted pack might be skulking out there.

~~A self-conscious crooked smile at that met him in his solitary window reflection, there under the dark wall of the Rockies and the just-readable early stars above the jagged horizon.~~ He knew he wouldn't be playing to an audience of himself and imaginary Klansmen like this if Whit were around. But Whit was in Great Falls for a cattle auction, although about now he would be with a woman in one of the upstairs rooms along ^{first} ~~Fifth~~ Avenue South. Wes felt more alone at the thought of that. Maybe he who owns the land owns all the way up to the sky, but that didn't increase the companionability of a night such as this. "If I'm going to

be alone in life, it might as well be with myself." That's a strong prescription, Susan.

He did justice to the brandy and sent a chiding look around this room that had known nothing but males for all these years. Not that the rest of the ranch house was any better--something like a hunting lodge with a stockmen's club thrown in. Antlers penetrated from every wall, any furniture that conceivably could be enveloped in cowhide was. Whit's one concession to decoration in here was a ~~Charles~~^W Russell painting of riders with a square butte in the background while the foreground was, of course, all cattle. Unfortunately, Wes mused, the female half of the human race did not seem to share his father and Whit's opinion that decor ought to begin on the hoof. His brother's young wife from Memphis had lasted here barely a year. ~~(Whit had merely said "Good thing I tended to business right away with her and got the kid started" and used Great Falls from then on.)~~ Merrinell had been here a total of once. Not for the first time, Wes pondered whether the place was a deliberate no-woman's-land that the Williamson men had strewn in self-defense, like concertina rolls of barbed wire between the Western Front trenches, or whether women of a certain social cut simply couldn't be bothered to try and civilize the Double W.

Well, one had had her say here lately. He thought again of Susan holding forth with that ferocity of hers, that night last week. "*Wes, you're going to be the ruin of us all,*" she let out in exasperation when he suggested she break off Monty's lessons. (It had not helped that Whit for an instant looked as if he sided with her in that general sentiment.) He glanced around obliquely as though her presence might have somehow lingered in a corner of the room. He would have given considerable to know what magic she worked on Monty, in here. Enough that they now were all on war footing, surplus fort included, with the damnable Klan.

Knowing he had to get at the work waiting on the desk, Wes even so stayed a while more at the window and the questions out there in the dark it framed. The adversary, the unknown, the other side of the spinning coin of fate. What faces fit onto the Klansmen? Who was the main push behind them? Because he was all too sure it was somebody sharp. Some one man or at most two, spurring the others--the usual bigots and misfits--^{powered by hate}into this. Someone who had been sent in, perhaps. On that possibility, Bailey was giving the railroad workforce another scouring, but Wes would be surprised if that turned up the answer. *This doesn't have the marks of some out-of-sorts gandydancer.* Beyond that avenue, there was town after town to sift and the Two Medicine country abounded in distances. It all took time. What most bothered Wes in the meanwhile was that these Klansmen were not surfacing. Elsewhere they were showing off in the open, a couple of hundred gathering on Gore Hill at Great Falls the other night to burn a cross. Those 'peaceable assemblies' provided a chance for the Baileys of the world to ferret out identities, and when the time was right, those Klan members would get a rude cure. But these. Crucify a cat, kill off some cows, hurl a dead skunk onto the hood of the Duesenberg as someone had done the other night--the Two Medicine brand of Klan picked away just nastily enough to worry a person. So that he had to notice the night, even a quiet one such as this. It reminded him of the too innocent stillness before a barrage.

#

DROP CAP

This was the morning Monty was able to give the auditorium what for, showing it no mercy, the free and easy force of his voice all but making its walls bend outward, each syllable-scrap of song plucked up off the music stand, no trouble, and sent with perfect dispatch to the farthest seat of the balcony where Mrs. Gustafson stoically sat.

He was putting his voice around a triumphant chorus when, with a yawn like a box canyon, Mrs. Gustafson rose to her feet and walked out, bumping every seat as she withdrew.

Thrown by this, Monty stared out from the stage. "Where's she going? We aren't but half done with the runthrough yet."

Susan sent him over that look that said the spelling-bee was in session.

"You put her up to that," he sputtered.

"Of course I did. Mrs. Gustafson has just played the part of the audience you weren't holding with '*Unless I Be Made To.*' Now then, what do you do? We went over this only yesterday." She pattered the toes of her shoes against the hard floor of the stage to suggest the sound of a stampede toward the exits. "Quick, quick. The audience isn't getting any--"

"--less restless, I know, I know." He still was peering huffily at the balcony doorway where Mrs. Gustafson had steamed out of sight, but Susan was pleased to see him get hold of himself and begin to grapple. "Fit in '*Praying Jones,*' next," he calculated promptly enough. "It's livelier."

"Good." She still sat there with her hands in her lap instead of on the piano keys. "And?"

"Cue-the-poor-confused-accompanist-of-a-change-in-the-program," he recited as if at gunpoint. He cleared his throat and all but trilled the code phrase, "We shift now to a different hue of the musical rainbow," then dumped in the new song title and barely had time to think *Rodeos were nothing compared to trying to keep up with her* before Susan's fingers came down on the keys.

#

"I'm telling you, I don't know where they got them hid out. The Major is a bearcat on something like this, he wasn't a big officer in the war for nothing. Off he goes, somewhere, sure--but the rest of us on the place don't know zero."

Trying not to sound exasperated, the man across the back table repeated what he had been saying the two previous Saturday nights. "We can't take you into the Order just like that, not until you prove out. Can't you find some way to give us some help on this?"

Dolph preparatorily rubbed across his lips with the back of his hand. "Speaking of proof."

The man tipped the bottle of 80 proof whiskey once more toward the waiting glass.

#

Another day in a diary page, another session of music made (well, hammered at) in this old flat Gibraltar. Here we sit in confinement, Monty and I, and for that matter Mr. and Mrs. Gus and Bailey and his no-names, while the Klan chameleons can openly go about their daylight lives.

I lay awake on such things: is he one, I think back over someone I once saw be so terribly mean to a horse; or the slyboots woman in town we always called "the common carrier" because of her chronic gossip, would she press the sheets for her husband to wear and pat him out the door to hunt us down? Whoever they are, I live for the moment when Wes can get his foot on the throat of this bunch.

She whapped the diary shut with good-night finality, but held onto her pen as if she never went unarmed. Her clock had been banished beneath clothing in the deepest drawer until bedtime--she agreed with Monty that the tick-tock here was crazily more loud than elsewhere--so she leaned sideways far enough toward the window to check the progress of the moon. High in the sky; if this long night had a meridian, the moonlight should be close to shining down on the morning side of it by now. And she still was not one bit sleepy. She sighed, and chuckled at herself because she knew she was not much the sighing type. "Get a grip of

yourself, lass," she mocked in the burr that had been burnished by her Scotch Heaven stay. Drawing out a sheet of stationery, oddly fresh in this barn of a room where gloom hung in the corners, and an envelope, she put ink right back to work.

Angus and Adair, hello you two--

I am promised this will reach you by favor of Major Williamson. How odd to be resorting to this method, as if we were all back in the era of passing billets-doux (or as Samuel expressed it when he would have to collect his trenchmates' love letters and deliver them to the continually shocked censoring officer, bill-et-coo) from hand to hand. But the Major has cautioned us against trusting our whereabouts even to the post offices.

We are biding as well as can be expected. Our surroundings are the opposite of plush, but Monty and I have been afforded all the accouterments needed to continue with his lessons. Adair, I can hear Angus now: "The calibre of money the Williamsons have, they ought to be aiming high." Ought or not, the Major seems set as can be on providing Monty the polish he needs to stand forth as a singer, and I am oddly flattered to be the applying utensil. A voice such as his comes along about as often as the dawn of time.

Refining that voice, confining it to the magic spot on the stage where someone gifted takes sudden root as a true singer--that is another story, which the two of us work on until we are sick of the sight of each other. Not really. Since that dreadful night it has hit me like a slap, what Monty is up against in life. I thought I knew--no, I imagined I knew, if that will pass your classroom inspection, Angus--what it must be like to be in his situation. Something akin to the unwanted singling-out a woman is sometimes subjected to when men have the full run of things, that was my imagining. But that notion was stupidly pale, in all senses. What Monty is doomed to if Klan thinking (to flatter it with that) has its

ad
"billets-doux"
correct plural
form?

no hyphen;
"s" is correct
plural form

way is a kind of imprisonment forever painted right on him. His only key out of that, so far as I can see, is his voice.

But this is overmuch for a note, that was merely meant to say I miss you like mad. Who knew, when the rules(?) of chance deposited me back into Scotch Heaven, that you two would so take me into your lives that I now regard myself as an honorary McCaskill.

With all the affection there is,

Susan

—————

Susan, rascal you--

Adair and I were heart glad to hear from you. Wherever you be, take every care. The hooded ones no doubt will eventually trip over their own monstrous trappings, but until then--

Scotch Heaven of course is lame and wheezy without you. I see to your place, and will batten it for winter if it comes to that. Beyond the whistle of the days going past, we have little news ~~that is new~~. The summer tutorials I am giving as ever lack toot. Varick and Beth are still awaiting their addition, any moon now. The hay is at last up, the sheep will soon come down.

I must break off--Petey Hahn has forgotten the head of the discourse, and is leading his report on the episode of the Trojan Horse off into the personality of his own pony, Bloater. Do tell Monty for us that we listen with cocked ear for when he will make a gladsome noise in the world.

Fondness from Adair, too.

Angus

—————

DROP CAP

Monty did his running on the worn wagontrack around the parade ground, in the cool of the evenings. Loping there, on the long oval that moved him counterclockwise past the troopers' barracks, then the married men's quarters, then the hospital and its washhouse again, he circled to the slapping of his footsteps like thinnest echoes of the cavalry parades that had coursed across here. ~~That kind of longing must have given rise to centaur dreams among pedestrians on the Peloponnesus two thousand years before.~~ He waited until after a good enough session in the auditorium and they were on their way across the blowy parade ground for lunch, to try her on this ~~particular yearning to hear~~ ~~hooves going.~~ "I miss being on a horse, any."

Susan stopped short, the better to weigh the dimensions of the oblong field--untrotted on for so many years--hemming around the two of them. "You know, it would be about like being on a merry-go-round, but let's ^{add} try."

When she went to Bailey, he instantaneously said: "I'll need to ride with you."

"Whatever for? We know you'd all hemorrhage if we set a hoof outside the fort. We just want to canter around the parade ground."

"So my men don't see you and him alone together any more than they already do."

"What a remarkably hateful line of work you are in."

"Miss Duff, my business right now is to try save your skin. Not to mention *his* skin."

The next day when the worst of the noon heat was past, Monty whistled as he saddled up for the three of them. Once they were on the parade ground, Bailey rode between Monty and Susan like an extra shadow of one of their horses, until she spoke up.

"Mr. Bailey, as much as we appreciate your company, there are matters I must talk to my client about in confidence. Secrets of the singing trade, shall we say. It would be worth it to us to put you in for a bonus with the Major."

"Miss Duff, I go deaf when I have to. If you have things to say to each other that you don't want the light of day on, I can ride ahead a ways and you can talk soft." He spurred to a short distance in front of them as if his horse was too frisky for theirs.

Susan and Monty kept their voices at a murmur.

"You worked that pretty slick."

"Loyal to the last dollar, our Mr. Bailey. Well? There was something out here you wanted to go over with me, you said."

"Promise not to think I'm ready for the bughouse?"

"Monty, please don't start that. I'm already putting up with riding circles in a weedpatch."

"All right then. You know how sometimes a person pretends? I'm at that, an awful lot."

"Would I know a case of it if I saw one?"

"Not if I have brains enough to grease a skillet with. The bruisers already think I'm the oddest thing going." She watched as he tugged his hat down to a sharper angle, for more shade against the sun or the speculating eyes of Bailey's men. Barely moving his lips, he went on: "I don't mean pretending like an actor or some such would do. Just in my head. Trying to figure out how things were to my people, here."

Susan encouraged him by not trying to herd him with questions. Monty rode alongside her in the easy slouching way a cowboy could go all day, hands resting on the saddlehorn and the reins idly held, but he wasted no time in indicating toward the old hospital and the washhouse in back of it.

"You take, over there. Put my mind to it a ~~little~~ and I can ~~just~~ about tell you how any of Angel Momma's days went. From the night before, actually-- she'd butcherknife some pine shavings off, leave them on the oven door so they'd be dry and nice to start the fire in the morning. Did that all her life." He squinted in concentration, as if to see this next more clearly. "Quick as breakfast was off the stove, on went her irons. Then had to carry her own water, for the washing. She was swimming in laundry and ironing here, and me to handle, besides. And all the time having to prop her clotheslines"--the memory was one of those that stood out like a tinted picture in an album, of himself darting around beneath the poles she used as though he was loose at a circus--"so the wind didn't take them to Wyoming. All that, she must have been one hard-put woman, wouldn't you say?"

"*Man's work is from sun to sun/Woman's work is never done,*" Susan responded rat-a-tat-tat. She patted under her horse's mane to steady the animal as a charge of hot wind came from nowhere and a tumbleweed skittered by. What Monty had depicted sent her thoughts in a loop, out across this prairie to the ruts into homestead after homestead, the suffrage campaign's flivvers quivering to a halt in front of yet another shanty where the blue-gray scab of ground in what passed for a yard told of washings done with water hard as liquefied mica. "I'd say your mother was very much of her time, out here, in being worked to death, yes. Go on."

Monty took a minute in piecing together the next. "Then there's my father, here," his words rushed when they came, almost as if he and she were riding up on Sergeant Mose Rathbun in horseback prance ahead of them instead of the blue serge back of Bailey. "He was away soldiering so much of the time, it's harder to put myself in his place than hers back then. But I've been having a pretty good go at it." He slid his eyes her direction to gauge her attention, and she

nodded, a single keen echo of his own usual manner of acknowledgment, for him to keep on. Glancing away toward the gapped wall of long barracks along this side of the parade ground, he began in a low ripple of voice:

"The Tenth Cavalry most of its time was never anywhere but down in the desert, Arizona, New Mexico some. They fought Comanches and Apaches and whatnot--I pestered this out of the Major once. Then all this gets built, some outfit is needed to man it, and the Tenth lights in here, four or five years before my mother does. Middle of a blizzard, naturally. Summer here isn't any too wonderful either, is it." The hot wind found them again, making them duck their heads to fend it off with the slant of their hats. Monty checked from under his hand clasping his hatbrim: no dust storm riding this wind, at least. As soon as the elements would not whisk his words away, he went on with his spoken thoughts.

"So there had to have been hard going for my father, too." Susan watching, the handclasp on the saddlehorn was a fan of fingers lifted one by one now as he named off. "No way up, sergeant was as high as somebody like him could ever go. No war to really fight. No other colored anywhere around, except his troopers." He laughed softly. "Angel Momma always told that she was barely off the steamboat at Fort Benton before here's this Sergeant Mose Rathbun making eyes at her. But that's after he's already been at Fort Skin-and-Bone those years. And that's kind of interesting to me."

"You had better spell that out for me."

skip off out of here
 "All kinds of reasons to ~~fly~~ the coop, and he never did," came the reply.

"Didn't desert. Upped and re-upped. When the last enlistment they'd let him have was over with he had a good discharge--my mother hung onto that one piece of paper of his, that and the bugle. So, something here held him, even before my mother and me came along." Anxiously: "Miss Susan? You still with me?"

He was badly aware how far beyond common sense he was venturing. But he had no one to go to with this but her. If they were bound together in this godforsaken place like a pair of people in a three-legged race, what better time to take this on? *You're good and smart*, he put across mutely but he hoped legibly; either those eyes that doled it out only as she pleased were registering every line of him or expertly hiding how well they kept their distance, he couldn't tell which. *You had a soldier in your family, too. Music aside this once, can't you give me some help on me and mine?*

"I'm here listening, aren't I," Susan provided and no more.

Monty ~~nodded as if that made up his mind to something~~ ^{Monty} Spurring his horse lightly on the near side, ~~he~~ ^{Monty} made the mount shy around in a well-reined pirouette. Startled, Susan watched man and horse turn into a tableau that needed only the sound of bugles behind it.

Bailey glanced back at the brief fusillade of hooves, then away again.

With the horse under perfect control but edgy about the sudden authority on its back, Monty held the high-headed parademaster pose just enough to be sure it registered on Susan. He sidled the horse back toward hers, his voice coming lower and quicker than before.

"Maybe it was something like this parade ground. Could be this was his auditorium, you think? It took something to run soldiers--we know that from the Major and his decorations, don't we. I can pretty much see my father out here, bossy as you can imagine"--this drew him a deep look from Susan--"to make his troops look sharp. I don't have much memory of it, but from what I do, the Tenth liked to put on a show. I'd bet anything their inspections and parades were pure spit-and-polish. And he had to have been front and center at all that."

She did not say *While a white officer stood right over the top of him on everything he did?* Nor its corollary *Until he had to go out on his own and leaked*

away into the landscape at the first opportunity? Monty's family pangs peeled her heart. But they also worried her sick. It didn't matter one spark to her what was behind his father's evaporation unless it ran in the family, and she had natural resistance to that prospect. Or unless--worse yet--Monty let himself be eaten away at by example: that whenever a man of the color passed down to him by Mose Rathbun stepped across a certain line, the world was always going to be too much for him.

"So here he is," Monty said in a near-whisper as if the conjured sergeant again was about to gallop up and inspect the shine on their buttons. "Parading when he can, hanging tough when he can't, and in either case he never cuts and runs from here. But over at the Double W, he didn't last hardly any time at all. Doesn't that sound sort of funny to you?" Susan knew a question that did not need answering when she heard one.

The fingers on the saddlehorn already were enumerating again. "A better wage and all; whole lot easier place for Angel Momma and likely him too; rider all his life with a chance to shine at a riding job--and he couldn't hack it? Why was that?"

Monty paused to consider. "Angel Momma didn't give him the benefit of any doubt," he at last said in an outbreath. "Got himself in some kind of scrape, she'd always tell me, and that was enough for her. Nobody else at the Double W would ever say scat about him, because of her, I suppose. But when you think about it, here's a man fought Indians all his life--what's it take to spook him out of the Two Medicine country, if that's what happened? I can't see the Williamsons catching him at something either, and kicking him out and hiding it from Angel Momma. No," he shook his head decisively, "old Mister Warren would have given him one hell of a talking-to, excuse me, and fobbed him into some job in Helena, packed us off along with him so breaking up the family

wouldn't be on the Double W's conscience, that's more their way." He pondered off to the perimeter of prairie beyond the far end of the parade ground. "Lately I had to wonder if something like this Klan bunch got him. But Mister Angus would have picked up on anything like that, if it'd happened. If anybody would ever level with me, he would."

Susan knew it was her turn to try. "Just hearing all this, I would have to line up with your mother. Some kind of scrape."

"Which puts him back to being a quitter."

"Monty, this can be argued flat as well as round. I don't see why he couldn't have been a worthwhile trooper"--

"Striper. He was an old-hand sergeant, that's what the Major says they were called."

"That, then. I don't see why a man can't serve as a good soldier," this did not come out of her easily, Samuel's stubbed-off service life to be gotten past, "and be whatever else he is, besides. What your father was faced with here, obviously a lot--if it makes you think better of him, I find nothing wrong with that. I wouldn't say it necessarily wipes out your mother's rendition of him after that. People are the full alphabet, none of us is just the ink-teardrop on the *i*." She watched for any accepting of this in him, but he had gone to that expression where you couldn't tell much. "You did want my opinion."

"Knew I'd get it, too. How about we race Bailey to the stables?"

#

Against the evidence, Wes hoped Whit had only had a bad night's sleep. Chances of that diminished with every step as Whit came hotfooting for the house. By now he had all but flown across the yard from the Double W foreman's quarters, and Wes with alert dread turned from the office window to await him.

"They hit us again last night, more dead cows," Whit came in saying, breathing heavily. "Somebody got into them up in the Marias pasture and cut the throats of fifteen." He looked at his brother as if pointing out arithmetic on a blackboard to him. "That took a pretty fair number of men, to work over that many cows. Wes, this isn't pattycake with ^{this Klan bunch} ~~these bastards~~. And don't tell me the war wasn't either."

"I never would, Whit." Wes whipped his coat on. "I'm going to the fort to see what Bailey has come up with."

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"Godamighty, Mrs. Gus, you ever hear of an invention called the cough drop?!"

Mrs. Gustafson's phlegm spasm ceased and she beamed triumphantly up at him from front row center.

"I see the picture," Monty said with resignation. He turned and faced the music, Susan sitting expectantly at the piano and wearing her surely-you-can-spell-Passchendaele expression. "Sorry I let it throw me off. I know, don't let anything short of kingdom come take my mind off the music."

"Once again, this is the place to get mistakes out of your system."

"I'd like to run out of those, at some soon point."

"Oho! The first perfect singer there ever was?"

He quit gripping the music stand as if he wanted to shake it and walked over to her, holding the sheaf of songs as a pretext. In a businesslike murmur that would not carry clearly out to the seats, he said: "Need to ask you about something. Just us if we could."

Susan eyed him. She had been expecting this, but that did not make it the least bit welcome.