

"Mrs. Gus," she reluctantly called out, "thank you the world. That will be all until I give you a holler." When the broad stern of Mrs. Gustafson receded up the aisle and out the door and the curiously depopulated auditorium was theirs, Susan sighted back onto Monty. "It doesn't look like music on your mind."

He shook his head, meaning she was right. They both knew it was going to be that kind of discussion. "I'm still not getting any younger, at this," Monty set out. He surprised her with a commiserating smile, as if sympathizing that she didn't have a twelve-year-old prodigy here beside the piano to put her stamp on. "Look at that another way," he went on, "if I'm finally old enough to have some sense I better ask myself if we haven't given this our best shot. We plug along on these runthroughs, some of them aren't that bad, and others we wouldn't either one of us wish on anybody, would we. And maybe this's about the way it's going to be. Maybe this's as good as there is in me, you think?" He watched her long enough to see how she was taking this, then looked off as if something beyond the walls had caught his attention. "Besides, I don't know how much more I can take of Fort Skin-and-Bone."

That makes two of us. Aloud, Susan armored herself with the teacher's creed. "You're nearly there. True, there were some times this morning that we could have done without. That's part of the profession, though, learning to take the rough with the smooth." But then she halted, up against the actuality of what their time together on this old trouper of a stage amounted to for her. Monty saw her grasping for words, a shortage he had never expected she would come down with.

"Pretend you're not hearing me say this," she managed, "but I'd give anything if you could see yourself from in me. This auditorium has been the making of you. I've sat here putting you through a dozen predicaments a day, Monty, and while you still stew over them a bit much--we'll work on that--you've

come miles in your performance." Still grappling, Susan husked out as if it were a stage direction: "It has been a wonder to see. Bear that in mind, but not enough to pop your hatband, all right? Now then. We'll run through the rest of the morning without the aid of Mrs. Gus, what do you say?"

"Christmas come early, that sounds like to me." All at once under the scrapes on his patience and the wear on his equilibrium, he had the oddest damned feeling he was someday going to miss all this, the time on this monster of a stage with her.

"Ready then?" Susan fixed a gaze on him that told him he had better be, and down came her fingers on the accustomed keys white and black.

#

Fort Assinniboine shimmered in the noon heat, as if the brick buildings were bake ovens, when the Deusenburg nosed onto the long approach road. *What next*, Wes mulled as he began to come out of the fitful waking doze the miles had induced, *Beau Geste on the ramparts in a kepi?*

But when the car at last drew to a halt beside the Saharan expanse of the parade ground, on watch in the nearest tower per usual was a sunburned-looking agent, and coming out the door of the guardhouse Bailey himself, looking as spruce as a man in a dark suit could in such heat.

Telling Gus to go and reacquaint with the Mrs., Wes stepped over into the shade for the civilities with Bailey.

"No luck at the railroad," the investigator met him with. "But we're working on"--Wes's sharply raised hand cut him off. The two men stood motionless, listening. From across the fort, the soar of a voice lingered in the air like a long lovely alpine call, then followed the faint steps of a piano down, down, down to poignant silence. Throughout this, Bailey watched Wes with care,

wishing he could know everything under that expression. Finally he said,
“They’ll be at it a while yet. Major, I--”

“*Boss!*” Thunder from an open sky, the sentry’s roar clapped down on them. “*I see something!*”

Bailey ran hell-bent for the tower. Grabbing from the car the Zeiss binoculars that were a prize of war, Wes went lurching after him. The interior of the tower was like the tight twist inside a lighthouse, a narrow iron spiral staircase winding and winding to the portal of blue above. The binoculars thumping against his chest, Wes pulled himself up the clammy guardrailings by his hands two lunging steps at a time.

“Over by that coulee.” The sentry pointed south to a distant break in the tan sameness of prairie. “Some kind of white shapes, hard to make out.”

Bailey had his binoculars on the forms. “What the hell--? Major, can yours pull that in?”

“Yes.” He let the Zeisses drop on the strap around his neck. “Antelope rumps.”

Neither Wes nor Bailey said anything during their clanking descent.

At the base of the tower, Bailey glanced around and put this in a low voice: “Miss Duff and Rathbun--I think you ought to know. They have plenty to say to each other. Just to each other, sir.”

“I imagine.” Wes looked impatiently at the shorter man. Bailey shrugged. “Now that we know we’re not going to be attacked by antelope,” Wes rapped out, “let’s talk over our chances against the Ku Klux Klan.”

#

“Are you crazy? Why’d you come in here?”

“Can’t I have business, like anybody else? You ought to be gladder than that to have me show up.”

“In broad daylight? Step over here where the whole world can’t see you, at least.”

“Figured you’d want to know, I come across a way to git the goods. On Snowball and her both. Hadn’t ought to take too long, now.”

“Why didn’t you say so? Well?”

“Thing is, I’m tired of this nighthawk stuff. I want to be in for real.”

“I’ve told you and told you, we can’t induct you until--”

“Who’s all this ‘we,’ anyhow? Seems to me you pretty much run things.”

“If you really can find out where the pair of them are, I can stretch matters and make you a provisional. Wait until Saturday night and I’ll bring your--”

“‘Wait’ ain’t generally the way to git anywhere.”

“All right, all right. You have your dues on you?”

A happy nod from the little cowhand.

“Then show up at my place at noon. Come around the back. And for heaven’s sake, make yourself scarce around here.”

#

Feeling spent to dime-size after that morning’s runthrough of music and her as well, Monty came into his room ready to plop down on his bed. It was inhabited.

“Major. Didn’t expect to bump into you until chow time.”

“I thought I’d come see how performance is with you,” came the reply from the figure sitting as if carved to fit the edge of an Army bed. “Mind if I take the load off like this?”

Monty proffered the premises with a gesture and seized a rickety chair from by the table, straddling it so he could rest the top part of him on the chairback. With the Major, you never knew how long a siege you were in for.

Wes examined the room as though he had been thrust back through military history to, say, the interior of the Trojan Horse, but was smiling a little. "How do you like the accommodations?"

Truth to tell, the big high-ceilinged room that Monty had chosen because it faced out onto the full sweep of the parade ground practically whistled when the wind blew. But then, all of Fort Assinniboine seemed to be drafty. "This'll do."

The smile Wes could not keep off his face was oddly sly by now. "You're in officers' quarters, you know. Quicker than any of my promotions."

Monty gave that a dry laugh. "Ought to be some reward in this singing business, don't you think?"

"Speaking of. How's the auditorium working out for you?"

Monty skewed his head as if considering. Where to even start, on that? "I'd have thought I knew how to walk out on a stage, but she's--Miss Susan's been showing me tricks of the trade. I'll tell you, she's got them."

Wes perched in wait, but that seemed to be all that was forthcoming. Monty showing some independence probably was all to the good. Still, he needed a sounding on morale here, how long he and Bailey had. "Those loonies in their bedsheets--are they still making you nervous, with Bailey's bunch on the job?"

"I was born nervous, in that respect."

Wes started to say more, then swiveled one way and then the other in mystification. "I keep hearing something."

Monty leaned toward the woodbox, found a chunk he could heft nicely in one hand, and tossed it against the base of the far wall. "Mice eating the wallpaper paste." The smorgasbord of gnawing stopped. "You were telling me about the bedsheeters."

"Monty, we're working on them."

"Figured you were." Monty looked off out the window toward the barracks across the way, where every empty room was a hiding place for a cluck with a rifle. *Working on them, the man says. How fast, though? A bullet wins any kind of a race.* This next had been forming in his mind since that night of the burning cross, but even so he took extra time now to frame it just so. "Major? Do I savvy it right, that they don't have any love lost for you either?"

"A mackerel snapper like me?"

Shock showed in Monty's eyes. Since when did a Williamson use those kinds of words about himself?

Not looking up, Wes industriously kneaded his knee. "I've been after them," he said as if it was a satisfying memory, "back when I was in politics." His voice took a sudden turn that Monty was not familiar with. "The damned mongrels. Who do they think they are," it shot out of him in bursts, "to tell me what church I dare kneel in? Or to take in after you like a pack of bloodhounds just because they feel like it? Wholesale haters, is all they are. Scum who need to take out their own shortcomings on others. They're going to catch it for this, Monty. We're going to get a handle on them, don't worry."

The tone of the words, however, did not undo what had been on Monty's mind.

Onto his feet now, a passage in one motion from soldier to landholder, Wes was back to sounding merely brisk. "I'm going to have to eat and run, although that's not easy after Mrs. Gus's food, is it. Coming?"

"You go ahead, I need to change out of this rig and wash up."

Shedding the little tie and then the tailored coat, Monty watched out the window as the Major went down Officers' Row in that gait that wouldn't admit to being a limp but carried a wound. From this angle Monty couldn't quite see to the verandah of the commandant's house, but he knew Susan would be out there,

keeping a safe distance from Mrs. Gus's kitchen. He hoped she would light into the Major about why the pair of them at Fort Assinniboine kept hearing the Klan was being worked on when what they'd like to hear was some heads rolling, out from under those hoods.

Stripped down enough to scrub up, Monty still was in a storm of thought as he stepped over to the washbasin. The water he dippeded from the galvanized bucket was tepid when he wished it was bracingly cold, but he doused himself with it like a man diving deep. That the Major had old tangles with the Kluxers was not exactly news, but the ^{blood-boiling} contempt was. He had been like a man suddenly off his rocker when he got going on the Klan that way. *And he doesn't even have a skin reason.* But was contempt enough to do the trick? Why wasn't the man tooth-and-nail into some session with Bailey about wiping out the sonofabitching Klan? Church was something strong, no question, but strong enough to stir up the clucks and the Williamsons like bobcats in a gunnysack? *And me--and her--just being used as catnip for the Klan?*

That couldn't be right. Monty looked the question to his dripping face in the mirror. *Could it?* If this was about church, it was going to be beyond him. Even Angel Momma, praying woman that she was, had joined in with the holy rollers for singing's sake, you couldn't say she caught the religion. The one time, as a boy, he had tried some hopping around when the rollers started their bodily commotions, as soon as he and Angel Momma were home at the washhouse she spanked the daylights out of him. *"Those folks can let fly if that's what they feel, but you aren't going to just to be doing it,"* she had whaled the lesson into him. In his life since he hadn't seen any reason to church himself to any one or the other: whatever was in charge of things of this world--more or less in charge, he had come to think--that's what the spirituals and her spirit songs represented to him. But Catholics, Protestants--could those kinds of people in this part of the

country where you could ride half a day without seeing a steeple, could they go at each other like his father and the Indians whenever they got the chance? Had the Major, maybe the Williamsons back to time immemorial, had to wait this ungodly long for a crack at the other side? Toweling his face furiously, he wished again he had Angus McCaskill around to talk to, he was strong on the past.

DROP CAP

Fenceline in decline waits for no man. The pair of dun workhorses switched their tails in idle resignation as Angus wrapped the reins around a wagonbrace, barely taut so he could talk the team ahead from the ground, and climbed down to his work.

He took another squint at the mountains as if hoping the sun was going to fool him and go down early for a change, but nothing doing. This time of year, there would be a good couple of hours yet for him to finish off this damnable fencing. The only thing working after supper had to say for itself was that it was out of the worst heat of the day. "*What's this old weather going to do?*" Adair had asked, quite on schedule with the question, as they sat up to the table. Drought having been written across the forehead of every day since sometime last spring, he hadn't known what to say except, "*Blaze on, I suppose.*"

Tools of the earthgouging trade arrayed in the back of the wagonbed like a crusader's cudgels, he readied, if that was the word, to take on his rocky north line one more time. The dog Bob, with the older wisdom of his species, scooped in under the wagon and took a position there with his head pillowed atop his crossed paws.

"Have the decency not to snore," Angus admonished the snug dog.

He honestly could have stood more company out of Bob, particularly this day-end. Susan's leaving was like air going out of a lamp chamber, a leak of life

he and Adair felt with each visitorless dusk. Not only that, but the valley somehow seemed voluminosely empty without Monty and that odd bodkin Dolph riding in of a morning. Scotch Heaven truly was on thin times, he reflected, when the only caller to be looked forward to was the paradoxical postman Wesley Williamson.

Taking his time about putting his barbwire-scarred gloves on and assigning his reluctant thoughts, Angus contemplated boundaries and their needs. He had fought this ground countless times, a shale shoulder of Breed Butte that repulsed fenceposts, heaving them out with frost and pinching off their strands of wire with contemptuous rust. All summer he had pecked away at repair up here, choring ~~away~~ on this stubborn sidehill an afternoon or evening at a time when not haying or shearing or otherwise carrying the homestead on his back, and to say the truth, he found it supremely tempting to let this last sagging stretch go until next spring. But the jog of fence here was where his land butted against the range of the Double W, and while he had never grasped how, the Williamsons and their invasive cattle could always sense any tingle of opportunity at a fenceline, much like that monitoring that occurred from the verges of a spider web.

Angus puckered in exasperation at this situation of perpetually losing ground by holding onto ground. He had to say for the old grabber Warren Williamson that Scotch Heaven at least had known where it stood with him; and Whit had pretty much filled his shoes since they came empty. Major Wesley Williamson, though--a piece of work of another sort he was proving to be, that dazzler.

He went to take his mood out on the first posthole. Feet splayed substantially wide of the target--"Ay, Angus," Ninian Duff had pointed out to him all those years ago when he was a greenling at this, "*you don't want to have to count your toes after a day of fencing*"--he hefted the crowbar and in a double-

handed thrust jabbed the point of it downward with full force and conviction. A chip of earth about half the size of his palm flaked away. He took a half-comical gander at the crowbar to make sure he was using the chisel end rather than its blunt top. This invincibly dry summer had left the ground harder than ever. And while he never would have said he might be getting a trifle old for this sort of thing, the crowbar had definitely put on weight over the winter. Excuses never counted for much in this life, though, as far as he had found; and hard labor generally led him to hard thinking. So, knowing he would have to go some to finish with this by dark, he hoisted the digging implement again with a grunt.

From posthole to posthole as he broke ground, shoveled, set fresh-peeled posts and tamped them in, Angus bothered the question. It had only been twenty-four hours now since he had contrived to bring telling shape to the story, but it felt like the majority of a lifetime. He went back over and over it like an apprentice minstrel, still disturbed, still shy of what he knew he ought to do. Maybe better not to have ever known for sure; but Monty Rathbun was not the only one with curiosity for a habit. Besides, after enough time suspicion gets to be even worse company than Double W cows.

Ceasing crowbar rhythm for a moment, Angus ran a finger around the inside leather of his hat, wiping the sweat out. It had taken the wearing of his other hat, his snappy dove-gray town Stetson to the county superintendent's yearly summoning of all the teachers at Valier yesterday, to funnel all this into his head. Just as soon as he could decently take leave of the teacherly gathering, he had beelined across town to the irrigation project headquarters. In luck, he found the ditch rider, Toussaint Rennie, just unsaddling from his rounds of inspecting canals.

"Angus. You have on your clothes for marrying or burying."

"It's one of those rare times I need to be presentable, is all. Have time for a gab, do you, Toussaint?"

Part Cree, part Canadian French, part seed of the loins of the Lewis and Clark expedition, part in-law to the Blackfeet by marriage, part roving ditch rider and more than a little coyote when it came to sniffing out what people had been up to, Toussaint as a one-man League of Nations possessed a memory as deep as anyone's in the Two Medicine country, and Angus had shopped there countless times before for delight and intrigue. This time, one of those would have to do, and it was not delight.

He could have ~~picked~~ ^{taken and shaken} himself for not seeing it before. But who knew how three-sided a picture this was? He'd had to alibi to Toussaint like a good fellow as to his interest in matters practically back to Genesis, in terms of the earliest days of landtaking here. But there ~~by damn~~ it at last was, clicking into place like the orbiting shards of a kaleidoscope. All it took had been to fit Toussaint's canny gossip about a long-ago shenanigan or two up there in Cree and Blackfeet ^{ee} territory onto that oldest rumor, distant but so echoing now, within his own compass of memory at this end of the Two Medicine country. Stopping again to blow, Angus rested his hands atop the crowbar and his chin on his hands. Still thinking full-tilt, he stared up the slope of Breed Butte to the falling-down homestead there and the now doorless house where he and Rob Barclay batched together when they first came. No more than six months old, that lingering indistinct whisper must have been, when the two of them rode in here in search of the land America promised. Straight from Scotland, Rob and he were the youngest young men there ever were, but between them they possessed brain enough to recognize something that probably was not wise nor healthy to pursue. Which did not lessen Angus's discomfort now that the old haunt of an incident was in apparent pursuit of him.

Hawk weather, like now, that first Scotch Heaven season of theirs had been, and Angus for another half-minute watched as an evening lift of breeze carried a windhover above him, around and around. The reddish tailfeathers of the sleek bird caught some last sun in the upward twirl of its flight. Under such seasonal spirals, all of Scotch Heaven had lived, when it lived. He had to wonder: did Wesley Williamson, coveting this valley in the glandular way that ran in his family, ever even bother to enumerate its inhabitants in memory, or were they just ciphers of acreage to him? Sharp-pointed Ninian Duff and genial Donald Erskine and Rob and himself counted as specific burrs, no doubt, for they had bothersomely tenanted the North Fork before the Double W managed to get its head turned in this direction. But the Frew cousins, George and Allan, hard to reason with as anvils and as sturdy. The feckless Speddersons, short-lived here but loyally selling off to their neighbors instead of the bank in town or the land hoggery on Noon Creek. The populous Findlaters; old sad bachelor Tom Mortenson. The wives, most of them formidable, who went the limits of their lives on these homesteads, and the cavalcade of children on horseback who descended on the schoolhouse down there at the forks of English Creek and madly recited their way through the schoolyears under the tutelage of Angus McCaskill. Scotch Heaven empty country? No country that has ever had human eyes pass over it is empty of memory. *What about it, Major--when you orchestrate this way, how many of us are words to your tune?* Maybe the man himself no longer knew. Not even a contortionist, Angus thought tiredly, could see all sides of himself at once.

Never mind that. Just make up his own mind whether or not to speak up. He could not believe that the cat's cradle of Susan, Monty, and the manipulating Major would hold together if he were to sidle up to the right one and murmur, "*I hate more than anything to say this. But for the welfare of all concerned, you*

ought to know..." Could even do it by note delivered by the silky hand of Wesley Williamson his very self, a notion that brought Angus a fleeting grin. But he sobered back to the question: spell out or leave lay. It was one thing to let bygones be gone, allow the long silence over this to keep its seal; but hellishly another to hold your tongue when some inflamed dunce hiding under a hood but able to peep through a rifle sight could yet get Susan and Monty in reach.

Despite the nearness of dusk, the sweat still rolled from him. He slammed the crowbar into the making of the next posthole. A piece of Adair's dried-fruit pie and a sip of coffee would be uncommonly welcome before bed. He hadn't said anything so far, needing to think, but tonight would need to be a war council with her. Adair couldn't read the weather, she had not much more notion of the ins and outs of the Two Medicine country than when she was deposited into it thirty-five years ago, but she knew more than he wanted to admit about the wear of living with silences.

Angus glanced west. Nearly to the corner-post now, one post in between to go. He clucked the horses to attention, and they dutifully paced forward with the workwagon until he called "Whoa." He felt more tired than he should, but it was worth a bit more strain if he could put this fenceline away for another year and rewardfully head home to--

The spasm hit him dead-center in his chest, and he knew. Clutching himself there, he tried for all he was worth to catch his breath. His arms felt afire. All the wonder he had ever had about this tipping point of life coming out of him in gasps, he lurched his way to a cutbank. The dog came and nosed at him urgently. Angus hunched there, holding hard to himself, but slipping and slipping in his wrestle with the last pain ever.

Ominous.
Something
we don't
know about?

No, just a
side remark
about the
often-wordless
state of their
marriage.



DROP CAP

Monty was the first to hear the Duesenberg pull in, the next evening.

Looking not at all like a man who again tonight was cleaning out the Gustafsons and Susan at poker in the parlor, he had just ruefully flicked in his next ante from his heap of winnings. Kitchen matches. Where was this run of luck back on those silver-dollar paydays when he could have really put it to use? On the other hand, the Zanzibar Club's poker habitues generally had not placed as much faith in a pair of treys as the Gustafsons tended to, or for that matter shown Susan's abiding sense of conviction that she could fill an inside straight on a two-card draw. At the moment, she was vowing what she would do to him if she ever got him in a game of rummy.

He and Gustafson peered at each other in confusion at the sound of the big car. After driving the Major to the Double W the day before, Gus had hitched right back with the campending truck. Major's orders; one more sign to Monty that there was still was nothing but delay ahead on the Klan front.

All four of them around the table heard the click of a rifle being cocked by whatever bruiser was on duty on the verandah. Then Bailey's call into the dark: "Major? Is he one of yours?"

"It's all right. He drove me, is all."

Bailey and a couple of hastily summoned operatives came in first like sweepers before a procession. Looking compelled, Wes stepped in, Dolph immediately behind him as if in tow.

"Monty, kiddo. And Ma'am." These salutations hung there, until Dolph managed a further blurt. "How you faring?" Eyeing around, he seemed to be in awe of the contingent it took to tend Monty and Susan here, when he had managed it single-handed on the North Fork.

For all Monty knew, Dolph's only transgression was his bad case of mouth when they'd had to ride across there together. When his yap wasn't open,

he'd do. "Just ducky, Dolphus," Monty gave him back generously enough, "how about yourself?" Susan only sent him a distracted nod, focusing on Wes and whatever had put him on the road this late in the day.

Wes's eyes stayed steady on hers.

"You'd want to know--Angus McCaskill passed away. I'm sorry, honestly."

Frozen there in her chair, she looked the question to him.

"He was fixing fence," Wes told her as much as there was, "his heart gave out."

Monty sat there helplessly next to her, hands doubled to fists under the table so they couldn't touch to her in sympathy in front of all these. After a moment Susan broke through the awkward pall they had all retreated into:

"The funeral is when?"

"She's not going."

"Hold off a minute, Bailey, *He's right though, Susan,* It's not the best idea, *Susan,*"

"Don't even try," she halted that from Wes. "I'll make my goodbye to Angus if I have to crawl to get there."

It took none of the accumulated detective powers in the room to know that she would do just that. Wes seemed to be shuffling mental papers and not finding the precise one he was looking for. Bailey appeared ulcerous. He began, "We're still not--"

On the instant, Monty decided. "Miss Susan, I hate to butt in, but if you're going to be away--suppose we could work in that night runthrough you promised, first? Tonight, yet? The evening's still a pup."

The faces in the room were a silent ring around him after that came out. Even to himself his words had sounded as cold as if chipped out with an ice pick. But right now he figured that was what it took. Susan looked as if she wanted to

hit him, but while he watched, silently willing her, her expression came around to consideration. "Maybe we had better," she said in a tone no warmer than his had been. "It would get that out of the way, wouldn't it. We'll need the auditorium lit." She tore her eyes from Monty to seek out Gustafson.

After a moment Wes stormily seconded her look. "I get the coal oil lamps going," Gustafson vouched and left the room.

"Excuse me, all," Monty said hastily and went out behind him.

Wes's brow still held thunder. Susan's words came before he could say anything. "Leave us to this. Monty is at a point where this means quite something to him."

"It must." Mustering himself, Wes looked around to where the fresh arrival to their midst was standing there looking fidgety. "Dolph, I know you're new at this. Just hold on here, while Bailey finds you a bunk."

Wes waited up for her. The fort had quieted. The moon was at its most tentative--the crescent of its new phase, thin as thin can be, mingling with the almost-circle of the darkened waning one like an escape of light from a shuttered portal--and delineating only the outlines of buildings, their details staying hidden. With only the general night for company this way, he thought back over everything.

"You went on late," he called out when he at long last heard the screendoor slap closed behind her.

"Sorry. What we're at takes time, too." Susan sounded done in. She came through the scarcely lit hallway out to where he was, surprised him with a touch on the shoulder, and navigated from that to the wicker chair next to his.

"I hope he was in good voice, at least?"

"He's always that, it's the rest of him that takes the work."

They were on the big screened-in rear porch of the commandant's house. A brick wall enclosed an oddly prim garden area back there which the Fort Assinniboine seasons probably had always rendered more theoretical than botanical, but it did provide a place to talk in private. This night itself seemed a kind of seclusion. The soft dark gentled everything except the sound of the graveyard shift of sentries as they called out now to the coffee caddy making his middle-of-the-night round with a hot pot in a bucket of coals. Wes listened, checking the arithmetic, until the shouts matched the number of towers. "Quite a collection of people Monty has in his entourage now," he mused. "Even me."

"You brought it on yourself, remember."

"You know what road they say is paved with good intentions." He could sense her attention rouse at that. To head off what she might ask, he hurried out his own loop of question: "Monty out of sorts, that way--how close are you to done with him?"

Susan seemed to consider this from numerous sides, until finally replying: "He's nearly there. I'd say another week of practice and he'll have everything down pat."

"Do you think that could be made two weeks?"

"What then? Does Bailey count on the Klan flying south with the swallows?"

"Susan, he--we're doing our damndest." He rubbed a hand along the wicker corrugations of the chair arm, whetting what he wanted to say next. "I know you're bothered by a lot tonight. I wish it didn't have to be so."

"It's ghastly to me, Angus gone," she said, dry grief in her voice. "From girl on, I looked to him. For everything from the ways of words to justice in our fights at recess. But do you know what's odd? I spent all those years in his classroom, I can tell you the exact part in his hair and every mood of his

mustache, yet when I think of him it's at the schoolhouse dances. He and Adair could shine together at that, at least, and at every dance the time would come when people would make him step out on his own." A remembering laugh unsteady in its sound, which increased Wes's ache for her. "He wasn't the inflated breed of Scot," she tried to lighten this with a mock chiding, "like you Highlanders. But somewhere he picked up the Highland Fling." Wes could just see her profile as she looked up into the night, gave a hum to find her note, then softly sang:

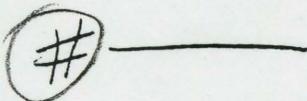
*"I saw the new moon, late yester e'en
with the old moon in her arm--"*

She ended the chorus with a croon that swept upward like the flung hand of he who danced to it: "*Hiityuhhh!*" The drums and pipes of Edinburgh came to Wes's ears, the similar cry of the Black Watch drillmaster drifting up to that balcony that had held the two of them. The medley of it all, the coarse beat of time mixed with the magical lilt of Susan's voice then and now, overpowered him. "I didn't mean to carry on like this," Susan's strained speaking voice broke that memory. "I realize you and Angus had your differences."

"We were born to them, let's just say, Susan."

"This is a night I'm not made for," she concluded as if regarding herself from a distance. Across it, across the years stretching back to those other nights, her hand found his. "Keep me company? As before?"

For a moment he thought he had imagined those words. But this was Susan, imagination could not begin to keep up with her. They rose, not exactly steadying each other but needing to feel their way together, and went to the bedchamber where, in the courses of other lives, commandant and lady had lain together under a mingled moon.



Does what we were at give off some spoor he picks up? Or has he had enough experience of bedsprings that it amounts to an instinct?

Breakfast was in every conceivable stage, knives and forks still in action among those of them left at the table when the morning shift of tower guards scraped their plates into the scrap bucket and tromped out while over at the stove Mrs. Gustafson was forcefully dolloping hotcake batter onto the griddle in anticipation of the graveyard shift coming in hungry.

Susan met Bailey's eyes again across the table, over their coffee cups. She was as sure as in any performance she had ever given that she showed no outward sign of last night, and Wes was managing what she thought was a perfectly passable impersonation of himself as the fated officer who had drawn the duty of the morning. But Bailey knew. All the way since the ^{infamous} Missoula hotel room? she wondered. Did he read forward into people's lives, that clear-as-glass gaze of his more certain than any crystal ball, that they would again and again be caught at what they had done before? *We'll see.*

Bailey settled his cup to the table and turned back to Wes. "With the funeral on Friday, that doesn't give us enough time to get our ducks in a row, Major. The number one thing I don't like about this is it splits our force. We can maybe--*maybe*--keep her safe if we put half our men around her there at the graveyard. That leaves us thin here. What would help like everything would be for Rathbun to lay low, keep in his room in case of any snoopers. No prancing around the parade ground on a pony, just for instance."

At this, Dolph looked up from spearing a bite of hotcake into the yolk of his fried egg, wagging his head chidingly in the direction of Monty's place at the table. Susan again wondered about the inner workings of someone like him, human equivalent of a shirttail on Wes or Whit, whichever one on any given day tucked him toward a back pocket of ranch life as needed: milk this, saddle up that,

which this time happened to be a Duesenberg. Perhaps the little man simply saw all this as something he could tell endlessly in the bunkhouse. Certainly he had been sopping in everything that was said since he alit here, far and away more attentive than he had ever been to chores for her. She tried to set aside her irk at his witnessing this; there was enough else strumming away on her nerves.

Now Wes glanced at the empty plate waiting for Monty. "I know he's entitled to sleep in after singing half the night, but he ought to be in on this." Bailey left the table, stepped out and said something to one of the guards coming off shift, and was already laying out the plan by the time he sat back down. "McCaskill would have belonged to the Woolgrowers' Association, I figure we can put three of the boys in the crowd as a delegation from the Helena office of that. Myself and one of the others, anybody asks, we can say we're stockbuyers he dealt with--

"Only if you say it in gabardine, Mr. Bailey," Susan informed him.

"I'm afraid she's right," Wes said impassively enough. "You can't show up there looking like you're dressed for a Butte wake."

Grimacing, Bailey jotted into a notebook a shopping trip to the haberdashery in Havre. "All right. So. The five of us can cover the funeral, just. Now to get her back here in one piece, we'll need to make like she's heading to Helena, then swing off--"

"It's Rathbun!" The guard who had been sent to fetch Monty half tumbled into the room, his footing out from under him in more ways than one. "He lit out of here! Bedroll's gone!"

"How?" Bailey looked swiftly at Susan.

"Goddamned if I know," the guard said as the others from his shift scrambled to their feet and crowded around him. "I was in the tower but could

hear them both in the auditorium there, her playing and talking away and every so often he'd let out with a song--"

"Or somebody would play a recording of Roland Hayes, would she, Susan?" This came from Wes, and was not impassive at all.

Bailey's agonized forehead made her take pity. "Oh, if it makes that much difference to you. Once we were in the auditorium, all Monty needed to do was to go up to the balcony and slide down the fire chute."

"He'll be horseback, with plenty of head start. The whole damn prairie he can choose from." The way Bailey spoke it, Monty had gone to ground and pulled the hole in after him. "Major, how many people am I supposed to protect who won't let themselves be protected?"

"He knows what he's doing," Susan told them as if she did too. Hard as it was, she faced Wes directly. In front of the others, he had to hold in the arrowstorm of questions, the sudden entire nightfall of them. She alone saw in his shaken expression the depths of their time together it came from; motives off the map left a person that way. "Wes, if we take care of our end of things"--the sweep of her words was not lost on Bailey either--"Monty can handle his. You'll see."

Gruff as she had ever heard him, Wes said back: "Try to be reasonable, Susan. We'd know better about that if you'd tell us where he's gone."

"You'll have to take it on faith."

It became the frieze of Fort Assinniboine ever after for those of them in that room, the faces spaced around that table then. Susan had been in front of skeptical audiences before, but these were ready to pucker with it. Bailey could be seen to be revising her, for better or worse she probably would never know. In back of him, the men on shift when Monty ghosted away into the night looked as if the same case of distemper had swept through them all. Dolph appeared to

depths?

No - 'depths' has more implications - a lot more dictionary shadings - than the more measure-implying "depths"

be in tattler's heaven. Wes had the look of a man whose hand had been forced. Still bleakly turned toward Susan, he intoned to Bailey: "Ready or not, now we have to."

You have the day for it at least, Angus.

Scrubbed by yesterday's local rain, a piece of weather the rest of the Two Medicine country would have paid hard cash for, the valley of English Creek and the beveled benchlands around it showed a surprise blush of green. Beyond and more than a mile up, the reefs of the Rockies were standing rinsed in the sun, blue and purple in their cliffs. Along with her sense of loss Susan felt the distinct touch of the day, the vast old clockless surroundings playing tag with memory.

~~As~~ ^{you} ~~could~~ ^{eat} ~~the~~ ^{air} ~~here,~~ her father liked to proclaim on such rare fine mornings. *We'll need to,* her mother would have ready, *if you don't butcher one of your darling creatures.*

With one of the Neds beside her and others of Bailey's crew drifting nervously nearby, Susan had detached from the other earlycomers towards the rows of markers. The graveyard here on the hill overlooking Gros Ventre held more people than she knew down there in the town, any more. She visited for ~~some~~ ^{several} minutes among the stones and their epitaphs. The names, the names. They filled the years of her younger self. Now, with Angus, every family of the Scotch Heaven homesteads was incised, a member or two or all, in this knoll. She stepped last to the graves of her parents; stood there held by the thought of how much the world had turned over in the ~~five~~ ^{handful of} years since their deaths.

At her back she heard the slick whisk of gabardine pantlegs approaching. Bailey was gray-sheened as a dove from head to toe, his dandy new Stetson and boots matching the cut of everything but his eyes. "The family's arriving," he said as if introducing himself. "So's half the country, it looks like. It would help

if you would take yourself over there"--he was gazing around at the Two Medicine country's sculpted perimeter of buttes and peaks and benchlands but only, she knew, as far as a rifle could carry--"and blend in with the others. What do you say?"

"I'll be where Adair wants me," she told him. "Give them a minute to sort themselves out and then I'll come."

Bailey sucked his teeth as she stood there, tallest woman for miles around, sticking out perfectly for any Klan gunsight.

"Mister Bailey? I do hope you know, there's movement down there in the brush every once in a while."

He rapidly checked on the brushy line of the creek as if to make sure it hadn't crept closer to the cemetery. Then turned and sized her up again, and this time it had nothing to do with her height. She either had extreme guts or pure lack of common sense.

"Double W riders working the brush, is what you're seeing," he told her, hoping that was a hundred percent true. "The Major had Whit take ~~a couple of~~ his best brushpoppers and sift through in there, just in case."

"It's nice they're being put to use on something besides cows," Susan commended.

"What would be really nice," Bailey put his professional best into this, "would be to know whether Rathbun is anywhere in the neighborhood. Just for instance, do we have to worry about the Klan siccing itself on two of you here today in these lovely surroundings, would you say? He's not going to pull some stunt like popping up here to sing a hymn over this gentleman, is he? Miss Duff? Is he?"

She calculated for some moments more and decided she could safely say: "I'm the one whose singing you will have to put up with. Monty will be here in spirit only."

"That's something, at least." No less gloomy than before, Bailey cast another put-upon look around the general scenery. Sighing, he signaled with a tug at his earlobe and as quickly as the nearest of his men tagged onto Susan in the rotation of protection, he himself trudged off to keep an eye on the crowd. In his considerable experience, trouble could happen so damn many ways. You never knew.

Susan watched him move off, to have someplace to keep her eyes occupied instead of trying to stare through clumps of brush. As best she could tell, so far she seemed to be up to this role, but the curtain was not very far up yet, was it. She marked in herself that she did not feel anything resembling brave about being here; stubbornness would have to do. The inescapable question rose in her again: terminally stubborn, if it came to that? Her Duff blood was answer enough. If so, so. She was not going to let lunatics who tromped around at night with their heads in pillowcases have their way. If this was what it took to bring the Klan out where they could be got at and propel the Baileys and the Williamsons of the universe at them, she could play the lure.

She waited a bit longer, tensed as if taking on music she did not thoroughly know. The day seemed to rest its weight on this exact plot of ground, on her. The air was still, the canopy of cottonwood leaves motionless as a pale-green roof of domes over the town, down at the base of the knoll. Somewhere there, Wes at his business, surprisingly coldblooded about matters of that sort over this one. He had dodged like a Nijinsky when she wanted him to attend Angus's funeral. Dealings to be done, he intimated; it would do no good for him

to be on hand, he protested, Bailey had set everything possible into place. Under her unquitting stare, he put it at its simplest:

"I'm not wanted there."

Susan levied that back at him. *"You know, don't you, I'm probably not either, with the exception of the McCaskills."*

Wes had digested that in silence. The past couple of days of tension between them--held off from one another by the forcefield of unsayable motives but in the pull of what each still needed the other for--showed on him as if a mask had slipped. She knew it was all he had in him to tell her when he said at last:

"Some dealings won't wait."

Speaking of. Susan bolstered herself and crossed the cemetery to the graveside. By now people were pouring in. Maybe it was just as well for Wes's vanity that he hadn't come, this was a crowd befitting a governor. This entire end of the county had passed through Angus's South Fork classroom, and she catalogued faces by family resemblance. Some, such as the wrinkled bard Toussaint Rennie, gave her a nod of recognition. A good many carefully gave her nothing.

When she reached the McCaskills, Varick as the new head of the family shook her hand and thanked her for coming. Beside him, Beth was resoundingly pregnant. The boy Alec was too old to cry but too young to stand still in the family grouping. Then Adair, eyes glistening, turned from the Bible-holding minister--*Oh, Angus, surely they'll balance that off with a helping of Burns*--and clasped her.

"You sang in his schoolyard, you sang at our wedding," Adair ^{sports} ~~said~~ as tranced as if telling a fortune. "I knew you wouldn't stop short now."

Delicately as possible, Susan hurried out the necessary as the minister began to thumb into his Bible: "Dair, is there a particular hymn? Or do you want me to pick--"

"A ballad, I'd like," Adair's voice held no doubt. "He was something of one himself, wasn't he." Susan blinked her way from hymnal considerations to far different ones. What unpredictable bits and pieces we are made of, Adair was causing her to know anew. "Do a bit of old rhyme for Angus," Adair was saying, "do this one," with sudden softness humming the air of the old song that went:

*"World enough, world enough
Did I search till there was thee.
And at last, oh at last,
The discovery of your charms
Is world enough for me."*

After the bit of hum Adair braced back from Susan, dabbed away the tears which had joined the freckles beneath each eye, and looked off as if for the missing. "Fickle old wind. Angus would laugh, this is the one day it didn't come by to pay him its respects."

#

The town looked as if it could use a customer, any make of customer, this morning. Wes checked his watch, although he could have told the time by looking at the street: the customary point of day when funerals were held in the Two Medicine country, late enough after morning chores to dress up and make the trip to town, time left for work in the afternoon. He felt some relief now that he could mentally put matters into operative categories, thinking back over the war council he'd had with Whit and the handpicked Double W squad before tending to this other. Patting his pocket to make sure of the day's documents, he climbed out of his backseat workspace in the Duesenberg, parked as discreetly as something like

it could be behind the Sedgwick House hotel, and walked on up the empty main street of Gros Ventre. Still making his calculations but careful of the off-angle set of steps into the Valley Stockmen's Bank, he went in. He could see Potter riffling papers of his own, and he headed on back.

"Well, Major," the banker said cordially, looking up over his desk.

"Business first thing in the morning?"

"That's why daylight was invented, George."

"With me, the only crack of dawn is my sacroiliac as I roll over in bed."

Wes was sure his father had heard the same ritual joke from Potter in one financial go-round or another in this same room. "But that's how the Double W gets the jump on the rest of us, hmm? Have a seat, and what can I do you for?"

Through the open door of the banker's office Wes glanced out to where the tellers were going about business as usual. He asked idly, "Why didn't you close for the funeral?"

#

Holding her head high, standing tall there at the brow of ground in front of them all, Susan sang the closing verse as if it could reach over horizons.

"Long enough, long enough

Were my heart and I at sea.

Now at last, oh at last,

The circle of your arms

Is world enough for me."

She took a step back from the graveside, and the stiffly-dressed crowd watched somberly as Varick sprinkled a handful of earth slow as salt into the grave.

#

“Whose? McCaskill’s?” Potter had the air of genial sharing that he employed on everything from foreclosure notices to remarks about the weather. “We can’t shut down every time there’s one less homesteader.”

Wes stepped over and closed the office door. He said as though it had only now occurred to him: “Do you realize there’s only one letter’s difference between *skulk* and *skunk*?”

“You lost me there, Major.” The banker rocked forward in his chair, staying attentively tilted.

“I’ll bet.” Wes reached into the breast pocket of his suit and brought out the documentation. *Realm of Pondera County, Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan*, each of the membership-and-dues cards in the packet was headed. Each was about the size of a schoolchild’s report card and was thorough down to height, weight, color of eyes and hair, and date of oath. They were alphabetical, and he riffled rapidly to the *Ps*. He flipped a card across the desk.

Potter’s glance rebounded instantly from the card with his name on it to Wes’s confronting eyes. “Where did you get those?”

“Don’t make me tired. At your house, where else.” Wes watched him as he would something that crawled. “Not me personally, of course, but someone who knows how to deal with firebugs and cow killers and would-be assassins.”

“You Williamsons always think you’re good at running a bluff.” Potter’s mettle as a hater was fully in his voice by now, but so was last-ditch cunning. “I would imagine you’re a clubman yourself, Major--you must know there’s no law against belonging to a fraternal organization.”

“Maybe not, but then there’s trespass at our place, breaking and entering at Susan Duff’s, malicious destruction of property, reckless endangerment--”

“You want to get giddy citing laws, try the one against miscegenation. That woman and that horse cock you keep around.”

Wes in that instant wished bayoneting was legal without a congressional declaration of war. He looked at Potter as he would a gob of spit on a dinner plate. "Even if there was anything to it, you yellowbelly," the words snapped out of him in pellets of cold rage, "there's no witness." Dolph, for safekeeping, by now would be halfway to Chicago on the cattle train, his conscience long since ~~mended~~^{repaired} -- "Major, I better tell you, there's some bastards in town trying to git me in on their funny stuff" -- and his wages handsomely upped for stringing the Klan along while the Williamsons readied their fist. His Klan card, Wes would tuck away for him as a souvenir and reminder, but the one on the desk stayed pointing at the pale-faced banker like a deadly warrant. "And don't count on any others of that skulking bunch you head up. They're busy being reasoned with."

Potter glanced involuntarily at the clock behind Wes. "That includes that henchman of yours," Wes took extreme satisfaction in letting him know, "the one you sent off into the brush with a hunting rifle. It's not hunting season any more, Potter, particularly that kind." Caught and hogtied and ready for delivery to the sheriff, the Klan's second-in-command was in for the rare privilege of having a Duesenberg serve as his paddywagon. The rest of the pack were having the run put on them. Whit and his men right now were going name to name from those cards through this town. The remainder of Bailey's force was doing the same in Valier, the rejuvenated sheriff and muscular deputies were spreading the gospel of persuasion in the town of Conrad. Across the state at this hour, Wes's old political allies were hitting the Klan with what he knew would be varying effectiveness, but some of it was sounding effective enough; the sheriff at Butte had put out a public declaration that any Klan members caught lingering would be shot like wolves.

The specimen across the desk from Wes made another try at dodging. "I have standing in this town, you're dreaming if you think you can turn people--"

P. 254 A follows →

254A
~~289~~

"Potter," Wes said as if instructing the clumsiest member of the awkward squad, "half the banks in this state have gone under in the past couple of years."

p. 255 follows →

I'd only need to lift a finger to push yours over that edge. And the bank examiners would pretty quickly find out if any depositors' funds went to pay for white sheets and rednecks and Klan rifles and ammunition, wouldn't they."

The man sat very still, trying to see beyond the corner Wes had him in. He moistened his lips enough to speak. "Maybe I got swept up in this more than I should have."

"Fine. You get to tell that to whatever hooded fools are above you. Now I suggest you close this bank for that funeral, even if the decency is a little late. Then go home and pack a bag, and get out of the state. I'm sure you can find a rock to live under, somewhere else."

#

The crowd began to disperse from the cemetery, back to common day. "This mother of mine," Varick was saying to Susan at his first chance to do so without being overheard, "has her own idea of one last thing you could do for Dad. I think it asks a hell of a lot of you, frankly. But I said I'd try it out on you."

"Anything," said Susan.

"Let me go get Fritz Hahn," Varick said with a ghost of Angus's smile.

"He's head of the South Fork school board."

#

The convoy of cars, Susan's dust-caked tin Lizzie in the middle like a ragamuffin caught up in a royal parade, pulled into Highland Street as ^{Helena's} dusk was turning to evening.

Bulked into the passenger seat, Wes had ridden with her so they could talk. Words had been abundant on the trip from Gros Ventre, understandings less so. "You feel you have to?" he had pressed her when she told him she ^{agreed to} had taken on the South Fork teaching job for the year. "Have to, and want to," was her

DROP CAP

double-barreled response to that. "*For once they go together.*" Eight grades: she knew that she would be running up and down the stairsteps of lessons like the keeper of a mental lighthouse in the months ahead, but she could always come back to the mark of the presence she was standing in for. While she could never be Angus, she would have no shortage of notions about how he would have done things.

Wes wondered wearily whether the two of them were always going to be like people on passing trains, her chronically in the West and him chronically due back East, coinciding once in a while in the middle of nowhere as in their Fort Assiniboine night together and then the distance doubling between them, over and over, from the split second the engines of their lives flashed past each other again. *Silly*, a word he wasn't used to using on himself, came to mind along with such thinking; he hadn't been in mental sweats of this sort since Harvard mixers. But there Susan sat in the driver's seat, set on her own course until school let out next spring. "*All right,*" he'd finally said in a tone to the contrary, "*step in Angus's schoolmaster slippers if you must,*" and in return she'd given him a look that seemed to say they might try each other on again after that.

At the moment, though, he could not let her vanish into that house taking Monty's whereabouts with her.

"I give, one more time. Where is he, up Houdini's sleeve? Susan, I'm begging you. ^JBailey and I can't swear we nailed every last Klan thug, Monty may still need whatever protection we can give him. And what if he's out there laid up on the prairie somewhere--a horse can break a leg in a gopher hole, any number of things can happen riding alone--"

He broke off, at the slight sidelong grin on her. Until that moment he had never counted cunning among Susan's ^{many} talents. She said simply, "Come in."

As they got out and Wes looked uncertainly ^{toward} ~~at~~ the other cars where Bailey and his crew awaited orders, she told him: "We won't need Mister Bailey's services."

He handled Bailey as diplomatically as circumstances allowed, then went over to the Duesenberg and told Gus and the Mrs. to go and open up his house, he would be along later. Susan had waited for him at the front door and let him do the honors with the key.

They stepped in to apparent emptiness. Wes did not know whether to feel vindicated or crestfallen. Helena had been searched these past days, the one Negro policeman on the force shaking Clore Street by the heels, Bailey men casing other parts of the city, and Monty had not turned up. Nor did he now. Susan, however, was everywhere at once in her downstairs, opening a window to let fresh air in, putting a shoulder to the music parlor doors, asking Wes what time it was as she set the grandfather clock and wound it back to life. Catching sight of herself in the hallway mirror, she abruptly stopped everything else she was doing. Wes looked on, the apprehensively fascinated way men do at women tending to themselves, as she plucked out hairpins unerringly. Her hair flowed to her shoulders.

"Come up." She was already on her way to the stairs.

Wes swallowed hard. *Have mercy for once, Lord.* If she was hiding Monty in her own bedroom and word of it ever got out--

The long loft room was so full of belongings it took him ^{several} ~~a few~~ moments to be certain none of them was alive and breathing. Susan was making her way through them on some course known only to her, trailing fingertrips over some, the cupped palm of her hand on corners of others as she passed. With Wes watching as if trying to learn the secret of the ritual, she bypassed her desk to a

cabinet along the wall. A crackling noise took over the room. She tinkered with the radio set until the static quit.

#

Monty watched the clock.

He squared himself up, attentive now on the figure almost shoulder to shoulder with him. Somebody else made a pointing motion, which after the workings-over Susan had given him in the auditorium he would never have to think twice to recognize as a cue.

“Now for your listening pleasure here on station CINE, our latest troubador of the Medicine Line, Montgomery Rathbun.” The announcer looked at him sidelong but kept his mouth aimed at the almighty microphone on its spear of stand between them. “Welcome to Evening Encore. For those of you not fortunate enough to have been introduced to him through his music earlier today, Mister Rathbun’s background is an unusual strand in our prairie background. Your father was a member of the colored cavalry down in the States--the ‘buffalo soldiers,’ as they were called, I believe?”

“He was,” Monty said easily into his hemisphere of the mike. The first time, he had worried he would need this written out, along with the music, but talking on the radio was proving to be a snap; an invisible audience was just right. “Sergeant in the Tenth Cavalry, right across the line at Fort Assinniboine. He was in charge of troopers, my mother was in charge of laundry, and I seem to be the result.”

“And a lucky outcome it was for music-lovers,” the announcer orated from inches away. “For those of you who do not know the Fort Assinniboine story and the part it played in our Medicine Line past”--here he resorted to a script of what these radio people called canned history, for what Monty knew would be the next two minutes.

Making sure of his music sheets, in that noiseless way they'd shown him so the rustle of paper wouldn't make ten thousand listeners think their radio sets were on fire, Monty drew everything of the past half week into him for the effort to come. That feverish after-dark conference with her as soon as they were by themselves in the auditorium, in absolute agreement that they had to get the Major and Bailey into gear somehow. He had left her in loud conversation with herself and the Victrola version of a night's singing, thrown her a wave from the balcony, and gone down the ^{fire}chute. Led the saddlehorse out of the fort with the blanket over it. Reins in one hand, the 30.06 in his other; take some of the bastards with him, he would, if he met up with any of the Klan out there in the dark. The long ride north to here, couple of days' worth; it had been like riding in the roundup again, except he couldn't remember ever being so saddle-weary during even the longest loops out after cattle. By the time he was across the border--the section-line roads he had been following ran out at Canada, the only way he could tell--and sorted out the town of Medicine Hat to find the radio station, he was feeling hard-used. A hot meal and a scrub-up at the hotel, then presenting himself in full singing rig to the station manager ^{exactly} just the way she had said to do. The man had been intrigued enough to try him out on a few songs in the back room, and then excited enough to sign him on, a full week to start.

All that was lacking was her. He wished like everything she was over there governing the keys for this. Wherever the station had dragged up this accompanist, the woman plowed around on the piano like she was doing Sunday school. But he would make up for it. "Oho! *The first perfect singer there ever was?*" As perfect as he could make it, on this.

The announcer was finishing his scripted patter. "And now, out of that historical heritage, here is Montgomery Rathbun to sing the ballad of the Tenth Cavalry."

Monty took the cue, and out into the air, out over the Medicine Line and the weedy parade ground of the old fort and the time-browned washhouse of the Double W and the silent homesteads of Scotch Heaven, his voice began to travel.

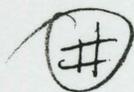
*“Forty miles a day
on beans and hay.
Scenery all the way
on cavalry pay.*

*When I was young and in my prime,
I dabbled my X on the Medicine Line.
Suited up blue, and since that time,
Boots and saddle have suited me fine.*

*Forty miles a day
on beans and hay....”*



As the piano accompaniment went into a romp that made Susan wince, she said: “Even I’ll admit, Monty is full of surprises. I thought I knew all his songs, but I’ve never heard this.”



*“Buffalo soldiers, that’s our lot.
Midnight sons of the Medicine Line.
Prairie life is all we’ve got,
I’ll stand your guard if you stand mine.*

*Forty miles a day
on beans and hay....”*

It had taken him any number of nights, with a stub of pencil always within reach on the apple box bedstand, to bring all the verses back. A dab at a time all the way back in memory to the parades, the band rattling out the turbulent tune

that his father practically horseback-danced to, man and mount in flourish there at the head of the rank of blue coats. Other bits remembered from the drifts of song from the barracks nearest where he and Angel Momma and his father lived, when the troopers would pass the night with songs he knew his boy ears were not supposed to be hearing, but always ending up with this one. The chorus--even his father would bellow that out if he was in a good enough mood, slapping the sides of his belly in rhythm like beans and hay were battling it out in there. When Monty eventually had it all down and softly crooned it in his quarters at night--he had intended to surprise her with it, whenever their finale in the auditorium would have been--the old song seemed to bring him the feel of the dark displaced men who had been stationed there at the farthest north edge of the American prairie, singing to keep their spirits up.

On oldest maps, a cloud maestro blows benediction to those who travel the edges of the world. Now Monty similarly gathered breath and all else into the last of the song:

*“Sergeant Mose and old Black Jack,
They make you toe the mark on the Medicine Line.
Trot you to Hell, gallop you back,
Seat of your britches take on quite a shine.
Forty miles a day
on beans and hay....”*



“It’s a rouser,” Susan appraised, patting hand into palm in contemplative applause. “A bit off the spiritual side, but he can make good use of it in his program as--Wes, do you feel all right?”

“Just my knee taking a fit.”

He had risen from his perch on the bed and gone over to the window alcove as Monty's next song was ^{enthusiastically} introduced. Stood there full-front to the night so Susan could not read his face. He did not want to know himself what was written there. *Susan may think the Scotch know something about sin-eating, but--* Mose Rathbun resuscitated by Monty's balladry. *Lord, what next?* The scene that no longer would stay put away suffused Wes. The Tenth Cavalry parade song had set it all off again, like a phosphorus recon flare freezing into light that particular pounded ground of memory. The day of the medal from Pershing. Small talk from lordly Black Jack himself, surprisingly companionable with his entourage restless around him, strung along the edge of the St. Mihiel town square. Did Major Williamson by any chance know the Medicine Line country there in Montana? *"I know it quite well, sir. Some of our range runs nearly to Canada."* Coincidence, said the general. Had an interesting piece of service at a Medicine Line fort himself in cavalry days; there was nothing like the Montana prairie as horse country, was there, except of course in the instance of that vapid gloryhound Custer. Anyway, Fort Assinniboine: known as the Presidio of the north then, but was that before your time, Major? Wes, startled: *"I was not aware you had served there, sir."* Most decidedly; colored troops on station there at the time, but it was a truth of war that soldiers were all the same shade in the reddest part, wasn't it. Had a bit of adventure out of his first command there at least; escort duty along the Two Medicine Trail, over west of the fort, to put a band of Crees back into Canada. Queer sort of chore, the great man went on now as Wes had listened with everything in him. Like trying to carry water in a basket; the Crees would leak away into the brush of every creek his Troop D forded with them. Pershing laughed the driest laugh Wes had ever heard; he had about worn the stripes off his ruffian of a sergeant siccing him after them.

Striper

1888

“Sergeant, close up their ranks again. They don’t need to smear themselves across the entire prairie, this isn’t one of their buffalo hunts.”

“Yes, sir. Good as done.” Drawing on his long experience at the pretense that all orders from a white officer were created equal, Mose Rathbun spun his mount from beside Lieutenant Pershing and spurred off to pass the word to his men as they endeavored to herd Indians. The line of march of the captured Crees, to call it that, had funneled nice as anything through the single street of Gros Ventre, but out here north of town the Indians were dribbling off again. The few good wagons with Little Bear and ^{other} ~~his~~ chiefs were drifting out of line, already almost side by side across the grassland, and behind them kinked the long train of limping buggies and scraggly travois and even a few groaning Red River carts, with the spotted herd of horses fanned out behind. From past episodes of rounding up Crees, Sergeant Rathbun figured that the Indians gravitated out that way so as not to eat each other’s dust, but this new lieutenant could be a stickler

when he wanted to. Pershing in fact reminded him of the bristles on a grooming brush, with that brisk cookie-duster mustache and his parade-ground way of sitting in the saddle even out here on the march. *Not gonna cost me my honorable if I have anything to do with it, though.* This was the big roundup, Little Bear's band, and Mose Rathbun's last before his retirement discharge at month's end, and he was trotting along through it with a short-timer's determination not to get out on skin ice with his commanding officer.

"Tinsley, Goggins, all you," Mose called to his corporals and his troopers, "poke them up in here, or old Black Jack's going to have you cleaning the stables until you're gummers." He stood in his stirrups and made a bunching motion to the trudging mob of Crees, not that he expected it to do any good. "Ride herd on those women and young ones, too," he warned his men, "next creek we hit. They'll light off out of here on their own, quick as anything."

The greenhorn of his complement of men had the misfortune to catch his eye. "Bovard!" Mose bellowed. "Shove them together there, or I'll curry your head with a quirt." From everything Private Bovard had heard, it would not be the first such occurrence. He threw the heavy-shouldered sergeant a flustered salute and began swatting the nearest Indian pack ponies with the ends of his reins.

Mose knew he was going heavy on his troopers. But it paid. Their blue field uniforms were never more crisp, every buckle and button on them gleamed with polish, they wore their campaign hats cocked just so. The men naturally groused about it but by making them snap to, he pointed them up in the estimation of the white officers like Pershing. Call it a personal conceit, but here on his last time around he most definitely did not want any man of his written up for sloppy behavior. And the entire troop was doing him proud so far; they looked like saddle soldiers ought to look, if he did say so himself. Give those play-pretty

Mounties something to see, when Troop D handed these godforsaken Crees back to them yet another time.

Trotting back along the column to keep everybody on their toes, the sergeant impassively scanned the miserable parade of Indians for broken-down wagons or any other contrivances of delay that the Crees seemed to be so good at. Truth be told, he still rather would have been fighting this blanket bunch than shooing them back across the Medicine Line like a flock of chickens. Days of the prairie campaigns seemed to be over for good, though, to his regret. It was sad, sort of, for tribes like the Crees as well as the cavalry, in his estimation; having to trudge along in each other's dust like this instead of scrapping it out in a whirl of horses and whooping. War was hell but peace was boring; what was a man to do? His sympathy for the Crees stopped about there, though. Canada and the U.S. had been flinging these vagabond Indians back and forth across the border like a game of Auntie-I-over ever since the Riel Rebellion, up north there. Louis Riel had found himself on the wrong end of Her Majesty's rope and the Crees had found themselves on the losing side and without a homeland. The sergeant knew the iron rules of fate when he saw them, and he had seen them more than enough. Down here, if the South had won the big war, the Tenth Cavalry as a frontier regiment of freed black men would never have come into being and Mose Rathbun right this minute would be in some hopeless procession himself, with a hoe on his slave shoulder.

By now he had busied himself all he could in putting the troop on its toes, and the line of march had accordioned into a better semblance of order. Still restless, wanting to stir his blood more than escort duty allowed for, he rode rapidly back up the column to where Pershing was conferring with Lieutenant Hardeman of Troop C, which had drawn the candy end of this assignment, lackadaisically strung out around the Indians who were herding the tribe's horses.

Two West Point shavetails in one spot; Mose made sure his salute practically sang through the air. "They're bunched better, sir. Permission to reconnoiter on ahead to that next creek? Corporal Tinsley can see to the men, be good for him."

Pershing cast an eye over the long winding procession and decided to call it tidy enough. "Very well, sergeant," he granted. "While you're at it, find out if that provisioner is making any progress on our rations for this bunch. Tell him the company commanders said we could all stand some slow elk on the plate for a change."

Mose galloped off ahead of the column, toward the next flat-topped ridge to the north. *Black Jack's handling me with a loose rein, that's interesting.* Couldn't always be sure with this lieutenant. That had actually been pretty funny from him, picking up the troopers' lingo for opportune beef the way he did; but he was a stiff looker for good reason. Mose gave thought again to the day of departure from where they had been holding the Crees, when Pershing went on foot through the whole camp of crying women and wailing babies and sullen braves, patient as paint while he tried to sort out the pandemonium. In the hubbub none of the soldiers noticed one of the Cree men, said to be wanted for something in Canada, emerge from his tent with a rifle, sit down, pull the barrel end to himself, and jam his big toe against the trigger. Blooey, and the slug tore on through him and just missed Pershing about a dozen feet behind him. When Mose and his men came rushing over, the lieutenant said as if to himself, "*That very nearly canceled out West Point.*"

Mose laughed harshly at the memory. It took a fairly hard hide to shrug off a close call like that. Pershing was not an easy one to figure, but he seemed inclined to give a man room to operate, and that was all Mose ever asked.

As the sergeant topped the ridge now, the first sight that met him was the snowcapped line of the Rockies, on a march of their own, extending on and on

into what had to be Canada. He pulled up and simply stared. By damn, you could see from here to Judgment Day in this bench country. With a practiced eye he studied the lay of the land, the swales of grass in the creek basin to the west and the dark droplets that had to be cattle, no more buffalo in these parts. He spotted the provisioner's supply wagons down ahead there where a road led off to ranch buildings quite a ways in the distance; a place with some real size from the looks of it. The saddlehorses and little cluster of people by the wagons must mean the cattleman and the provisioner were in the midst of dickering over the price for slaughter-beef. What he had to put his main attention to, however, was the thick ribbon of willows and cottonwoods that wound out of the ranch and across the prairie ahead. *Another damned one of those already*, a grimace coming with the thought. At each of these creek crossings, Indians who had been taking prairie squats all their natural lives suddenly were overcome with the need to go modestly in the brush. *And when they go, they keep on going*, the grim humor of it did little to lighten Mose's disposition where brushy creeks were involved.

He put his pony into a ~~nic~~ prancy trot as he headed down to the wagons. Never hurt to show people like these that a real rider was heading their way. When he reined up in front of them, the provisioner paid him all the attention he could have asked for, and as far as that went, so did the blocky man wearing specs who stood next to the provisioner, and the pair of highly interested boys next to the man they resembled down to their well-made boots. Mose noticed the older one, maybe eleven, watching him more gravely than the grownups were, while the younger brother simply looked like he was itching to get his hands on Mose's horse. The little misters of that ranch, he would have bet his month's pay.

Greetings were exchanged, and to Mose's total surprise here came a white mitt of a hand up to shake his. "How do, sergeant," the voice that arrived with it was as chesty as the rest of the cattleman, "I'm Warren Williamson. It's a

pleasure to see a man who knows how to sit on a horse. I wish more of my lazy crew did. Phil Sheridan always drilled it into my old outfit--put some spiff into your riding even when you're only on review to yourself." He indicated to the youngsters hanging back, trying to stay out of adult range but not miss anything. "These are my boys, Wes and Whit--I only get a crack at them when they're not in boarding school, but they're picking up on their riding. They know they'd better."

Mose guardedly took in the unexpected conversationalist down there by his stirrups. Every once in a while he came across a white man of this sort, slightly better disposed toward him than most because they had both straddled a cavalry saddle. Williamson's eyeglasses rode high on one ear, maybe giving him a cockeyed view of the world. On the other hand, the man evidently owned this spread where cattle were grazing halfway to the horizon, and that must have taken some fairly clever sighting in on. Forthcoming as the man was, Mose figured there was no harm in a bit of conversation.

"I have me one of my own," he nodded in the direction of the boys, "little stinker back at the post. Keep a fellow hopping, don't they." He gave the young gentlemen a solemn salute, his dark brows mischievously pulled down in a parade-ground glower; then provided a broad smile to lighten things back up. The younger one grinned back, the older one still studied him.

"That lieutenant of yours," the provisioner was heard from now, "is he gonna march these right on up through Blackfeet country or take the branch over to the Whoop-up Trail to keep from mixing Indians with Indians? Makes a couple days' difference in figuring out how much beef Mister Williamson here gets to hold me up for."

Rather needlessly, it seemed to Mose, he had to admit that the commanding officer did not spell out his every intention to him. The provisioner nodded in disgust as if he'd expected that, and muttered that he'd better find out

the lieutenant's thinking for himself. "I'll try talk him into the long way. Help out my wallet and yours too, Mister Williamson, if we can put that much more beef into these so-called wards of the government."

"I don't care about that," the ranch owner retorted, ice in his voice all of a sudden. Both boys went quite still. "Just so the cavalry operates the way it's supposed to and clears them out of this country so they don't get to build their shacks and pony corrals in every damn coulee any more. Good riddance." There was a great deal more boss in his gaze than there had been when he looked over at Mose now. "Sergeant, how long before the column will be at the creek crossing?"

"Close onto noon, I'd say, sir"--it never hurt to add that, Mose had found, even to a civilian.

"Gives me time to get these boys home and working on their suitcases for stagecoach time," the rancher said crisply. "Don't pull such a long face, Whit, the rest of us didn't rate any Easter break." The men laughed at that. "I'll fetch up with you there at the creek," Williamson told the provisioner, simultaneously nodding an offhand goodbye in Mose's direction. "Wouldn't miss seeing this parade."

#

"Sergeant! I want that man's name!"

Bovard. Mose knew it before he could even swing around in his saddle and put the best face on the situation for the lieutenant. He and several half-drenched troopers were trying to use lariats to tow out a grievously overloaded wagon which had bogged in the axle-deep water, and he had posted Bovard on the south bank meanwhile to push the Crees farther downstream where the creek crossing wasn't so jammed up; that should have been simple enough. But Mose had to look twice to even spot the beset young trooper in the mess of people and

Indian ponies and what-all crammed on the bank now. Amid it all, Cree women and kids and apparently even their dogs were setting up a fuss about not being allowed to take a squat in the bushes. Mose swore under his breath. Either in spite of Bovard or because of him, the whole procession had tangled to a halt there next to the brush. And here came Pershing like his stirrups were on fire.

The lieutenant's shout had come from the far bank where the beef dickering was still going on, but to Mose's dismay the officer and his horse were amphibious now, Pershing parting the water in uncaring sprays in order to corner him there in mid-stream. "Have you gone blind, sergeant? They're taking to the brush again. After them."

Mose was burning with indignation that this had to happen here, in front of that rancher and the provisioner and the rest of the troop and ^{that} for matter the damnable Indians. "Yes, sir, right away. I'll detach Tinsley and send him--"

"By now you ought to know an order when you hear one, sergeant. Am I going to have to put you on report along with that fool trooper of yours? Gather up that squad and chase those runaways down yourself, grasp that? I want the point made to these Indians they can't just take to the brush and expect to get away with it."

"Yes, sir. We'll fetch them, sir."

Strenuously ordering his other soldiers to take up the slack at the creek crossing, Pershing watched the sergeant and the corporal and seven troopers, dark as shadows under their jaunty hats, peel away from the column and fan out west along the creek. The sergeant was jawing hard at them, he was glad to see. Old stripers like Rathbun could grow lackadaisical because of those comfortable chevrons, and that's why you had to light a fire under them every so often. By now the lieutenant knew that this particular one was not averse to fiddling with a duty roster or a supply consignment if there was a bit of side money to made from

it, but he also had been a decorated platoon leader piling into the Comanches on the Rio Grande before John J. Pershing was even a plebe at West Point. Skin or otherwise, the lieutenant had nothing against Rathbun and nothing for him: it was merely a matter of rank. All he cared was that the man made sure to do his job on horseback.

#

The Crees did not have much head start, Mose was sure, but in the brushy bottomland it did not take much. He was mightily upset at the turn things were taking. All of a sudden even the time of year was against him, the cottonwoods and willows leafed out fully so that he and his men could hardly see an inch into the thicket.

He deployed Tinsley and half the squad to the opposite side of the creek, and took the rest to scour the near side. Everybody assiduously crashed through the brush. Even so, it must have taken an hour before a shout came from Tinsley's direction. Mose and his troopers fought through the brush toward there and waded their horses up to a muddy patch of bank near where the Crees had been found hiding. *Damnation*, he thought as soon he saw them. Only a woman and two children. *This all we're gonna have to show for it?* He shook his head, letting his troopers know what he thought of their ability at pursuit.

"This don't sit right. Where's the mister?"

"These are all we seen any sign of," Tinsley managed to protest and sound subdued at the same time. He pointed down at the batch of hoofmarks in the mud along the creekbank. "Tracks are a hellish mess, can't make anything of those. Could all be theirs, Sergeant."

"Or could be the man of the bunch rode into the water here." Mose on his horse pushed in close to the Cree woman on hers. "Your husband. Your man. Where is he?"

“No man.”

“Like hell.” Mose had been through something like this before, the Crees making a sort of game of it: the man sneaking back to camp later to create a commotion by spooking the horse herd and spiriting his family away again. He spun around to the squad. “Tinsley, you and Squint and Roscoe take these back. Bovard, you’re coming with me. The rest of you, start sifting through this brush. Two on each side of the creek and what I mean, give that brush a looking. He’s in there somewhere.”

Mose applied the spurs to his horse and headed up onto the nearest rise to where he could take in more of the creekline ahead, Bovard barely managing to keep up. From the height of the benchland, Noon Creek could be seen winding into the foothills a few miles off, jackpines joining brush there for the Indian to hide in, and between here and there beaver dams complicated nearly every course of search along the creek channel. Not too far ahead, though, there was an oxbow bend, and a wide-open stretch of water beyond that. Mose somehow knew. “C’mon, knothed,” he growled to Bovard, “he’s holed up in that clump by the bend.”

The Cree had seen them coming. He sat motionless on his pony until the two soldiers forged through the willows to the stand of cottonwoods that grew large in the bow of the bend. Then, looking straight at them, he swung off his horse in a tired way and went over and sat crosslegged by the trunk of the biggest tree.

The sergeant and the private stared. Maybe the Indian was played out, maybe he had given up on it all, maybe any number of things, but it was plain they would have to handle the man like a side of beef, truss him up and sling him on his horse, to get him back to the line of march. Glaring at him sitting planted there, Mose had the awful supposition that he had more than likely rounded up

this particular Indian three or four times before, and if the Indian was everlastingly sick of it, he was too. He did not even think about what he did next. He slid his carbine from his saddle scabbard, drew down on the Cree, and shot him in the center of the chest.

Bovard surprised Mose by having the presence of mind to grab the reins of the Indian pony while the sound of the single shot still echoed off. The horse would have to go back with them as proof to show to Black Jack. Not necessarily the deceased over there, though, Mose decided in a hurry. He wasn't about to ride back into several hundred Indians, even Indians as whipped as these, leading a horse with a dead brave draped across it. *Be just my luck he's some kind of Indian Jesus.*

He started instructing Bovard. "Let's tuck him under the brush back of that beaver dam, best we can do." He had no doubt that Bovard, already in enough trouble, could be made to go blind and dumb about this. He knew how to handle it with Pershing, too. *"Must 've been another one of those wanted ones, lieutenant. Took care of himself, same way as that one pulled the trigger in front of you, sir."* And that would be that.

DROP CAP

By the second month after Mose mustered out, there were times when Angeline sang as if wondering to high heaven where he had vanished off to now.

*"Sometimes I feel like a feather in the air,
A long ways from home."*

Standing there ironing her way through the summer--taffeta floated to the top of the officers' wives' laundry this hot time of year--she wondered how long she dared let this go on, a husband jangling loose in the world. At first Mose had crowed about being quit of the cavalry and its stand-to reviews on perfectly fine mornings for going grouse hunting. It did not take long, however, before he was

under the steady inspection of her eyes. Without saying much, she added him to the rest of her chores, let him roughhouse with Montgomery probably more than was good for either of them, tried to make allowances for the fact that he still seemed more at home with his horse than his family. She could tell he had not liked the move to servants' quarters here in back of the hospital, not that she could see it was any step down from married men's quarters over by the barracks; quieter here. She was much relieved when he latched on with the fort's horse contractor as a wrangler. But being bossed in the breaking corral by men he had once been over did not sit well. Angeline had real cause to fret when he tossed over that job and began to spend a good deal of time at the roadhouse, a mile from the fort and handy to the thirsts and other wants of the cavalrymen. Doing odd jobs there, he described it as. She did not want to hear how odd.

*"Sometimes I think I'm neither here nor there,
A long ways from home."*

Switching a cooled iron for a heated one, by habit she used the brief trip to the stove to peek in on Montgomery in the next room where he was absorbed with his little zoo of tin toys. *When Papa coming home?* the boy kept pestering her with and she didn't have the heart to scold the question out of him. Lord knew, she asked herself it a hundred times a day. Ever since he took his discharge, Mose did not let her in on his thinking, just as he wouldn't say scat about that whole long last march to pitch those Crees back into Canada.

Something about that bothered ^{ca} at her. All his other times in the field, he came home with stories that wouldn't ^{not} quit. Now it would take an advanced mind-reader to get anything out of him. Off in hunt of work, was as much as he told her this time when he saddled up, tickled Montgomery into a frenzy, kissed her that way, then rode around the back of the stables before heading out the west gate of the fort. That had been a week ago. She'd had an uneasy feeling, watching

bothered at

him avoid the road along the parade ground and past the barracks where any of Troop D might have been encountered.

“Papa!”

Angeline nearly dropped her flat-iron in startlement as Montgomery flung past her knees and sent the screendoor whamming open. “Papa, what that?!”

How Mose could ride a horse up to a house that quietly she never would understand, but here he was, practically on the front stoop, down out of the stirrups and unkinking himself by the time she could rush to the doorway. Montgomery had bounced to a halt and was turning into a solid fidget of excitement as he gazed up at his father.

“There’s my Monty-tana!” came Mose’s parade-ground boom. “C’mere, son. Brought you a persuader.” He knelt and outfitted Montgomery with the miniature horse-hair quirt. “Put the loop over your wrist, then hold it, so. Now you can give your stick pony what for, make him go as fast as you want. Off you go.”

As the boy cantered away, quirt whizzing, Mose rose to his feet and swatted dust off himself as if in Angeline’s honor, standing there akimbo the fresh way he did when he first came courting her. He all but had canary feathers on his lips, she saw.

“Found us work, Angel. Over in the Two Medicine country. Working for somebody rich. Goodbye, Fort Ass-in-a-bone.”

“Hush with that!” She looked past him for little ears, but Montgomery was busy rampaging in and out among the clotheslines in search of further air to be whipped. Besides, this was no time to let herself be scandalized, an improved mood around here was worth taking any amount of her husband’s teasing. She smiled her best and said gently: “Mose, that’s good, about the work. But you look done in. You need food?”

"I could handle some."

"It'll be ready by the time you put your horse up."

Hotcakes and sidepork, his favorite any time of day, sizzled on the griddle when he came slamming back into the house. He slapped Angeline on the hip and sat down to address himself to the food. Angeline served it up, then watchfully moved over to her mountain of ironing. She had to figure he would tell her the rest of it in his own good time, whatever calendar that was.

~~He~~^{Mose} ate and ate, still saying nothing, sitting there in something like a state of daze, as if the success of his journey was just now catching up with him. By damn, it had worked. You could never tell whether a white man would even look at you sideways, second time around. ~~Mose~~^{He} had stood on the porch of the big ranch house waiting with his still respectable campaign hat swatting nervously against the leg of his best civilian pants. Then all at once Warren Williamson practically came flying out the door, over to him in a second and appearing monumentally annoyed at having been summoned to deal with this kind of caller.

"If you're looking for a meal, you ought to know enough to come around back and the cook will--" Something about Mose registered then, maybe the hat. "You're that sergeant." Just that fast, Williamson's expression went from clouded to amused and suggestive. "Not still looking for that runaway Cree, are you? I believe I saw you and your private come back without him, just his horse."

"That one?" Mose had come three days' ride to take this chance. "Just between us, sir, he got cured of that with a lead pill."

"I figured he did." Now the ranch owner looked at Mose man-to-man, and any hesitation in him didn't last much longer than a couple of heartbeats. "I'll tell you what. If you're on the grub line now, I could maybe use a man who knows what he's doing on horseback."

Westernism for
being out of a job,
hobo-ing, maddening
meals while looking
for work.

Just like that. It still confounded Mose: you just never knew how things would work out. There on that porch he'd had his good piece of paper ready in his shirt pocket, but Warren Williamson never even asked whether he was discharged or had deserted.

Angeline realized she was swiping back and forth across the piece of clothing in front of her with a cold iron. She drew a breath and took the plunge:

"Mose? Two Medicine, you say? Isn't that over by where you threw those Crees across the line?"

"General vicinity, is all. I'll be riding for a big ranch, Angel. Be herding cattle instead of Crees."

#

Nose against the screen door, Monty peered in at the grownups, impatient with their talking and eating. He could not wait any longer for the best thing about his father coming home, the moment when he would be grabbed up in those big arms like he didn't weigh anything at all and tossed in the air, way up by the ceiling, and caught and tossed over and over again--he knew it scared Momma, and for that matter it sort of scared him, but it was a treat from his father, catching him up like that. He slipped past the screen door into the kitchen where they were, and when the two of them looked around at him, he raced headlong before Momma could stop him. "Papa! Papa! Make me fall up!"

Uptown and Down

1925

As usual by this hour of morning, Monty was out onto the street for the third time.

Habit stirred him awake early to do the chores even here, two-thirds of the continent away from the Double W, and even though the nature of the doing had changed beyond recognition. His first excursion, embarked on while it was still too soon to tell what the pinch of sky between the rooflines held for the day, always was around the corner and a few blocks over to the public school and its playground space out back, where he cinched up the roadwork shoes and ran to keep his breath built. At that hour only a few of the more fly types--Harlem never seemed to have any shortage whatsoever of types--out early or in late on activities that did not bear inquiring about were around to levy looks at the heavy-shouldered man, long way from a kid, bounding across the skip-rope scuffs. Back to the apartment for a wash-up after that, then gratefully to his big feed of the day, breakfast. He took his meals by the month at the E & B--Earl and Bea's

in a nightlife district nearby
 24-hour Buffet--~~beneath the elevated railway stop~~; the Eat 'Em and Beat 'Em, if you could put away enough grub in the course of thirty days, and he had brought his appetite with him from the ranch. Ham and eggs and unlimited cornbread to set him up for the day, quite the life if he did say so himself. *Steak* and eggs, for two bits more, on concert days like yesterday.

He was getting his teeth into New York life in other ways, too. Each day he felt less like some sort of permanent tourist as he strode through the well-heeled neighborhood called Strivers Row ~~about now~~. The tree-lined street brimmed with morning-faced people by this hour. Harlem, he was finding, operated as if every little while some signal was given to open a floodgate and it became the turn of this ten thousand or that to pile out to go to work, to school, to church, to nightlife, to wherever there was maybe another rung on the climb from dun beginnings. Every one of those street-set faces, the astonishment still struck him as soon as he hit the sidewalk, somewhere on the same prism of color as his. Oh, there were white countenances even here--harness-bull cops on the beat and bowtied owners of stores and theaters, mostly--but hardly any in comparison; white raisins in the dark plum cake, all they amounted to ~~here~~. *in Harlem*

He thought about this at some level even when he was thinking about ~~anything~~ *every* else. Sometimes after breakfast he would linger on his counter stool just to watch through the big cafe-front window the start of the morning rush, the domestics and elevator men and streetcleaners and dishwashers and myriad other doers of chores ~~pouring into the station~~ *heading for the elevated railway* in order to be on the job downtown when the white world there cranked open for business, and he could not help but marvel at the way things had swung his way. Last year at this time he had been in their shoes, even if his came with cowboy bootheels and milk-cow manure on them; and the ~~goddamn~~ *goddamn* Klan trying to cut his tracks, besides. Now he put on a suit every day of his life, and the fanciest of black cloth to perform in at night, and

was it any wonder he felt far enough up in the world to tingle when he took his morning constitutional along Strivers Row and beyond?

Still, there was something more that kept trying to register in him on this particular outing. *Feels like the day it'll hit*, the rhythm of the notion came to him as steadily as his stride. *Feels like the odds are saying to hell with themselves today*. He realized he of course did not have a whit of fact to back that up--luck doesn't let you know beforehand that it is about to change, like the more generous weather--but the impression tingled too much to ignore. It was somewhat like the jangle that went through him back there on the boat at the Gates of the Mountains, that incredible first day. He clenched one hand, just from nerves, as he navigated from one block of toney addresses to the next. His mind played with the idea that maybe there was such a thing as odds mounting up to the point where they vibrated like bees in a hive, sending something off into the air. In any case, he could not shake off the feeling of good fortune about to alight and start tickling him silly, did not want to even try to shrug that away; he had too many years of his life invested in finally reaching the vicinity of luck.

But maybe it was just the atmosphere. Strivers Row, after all, knew its stuff about prosperity. This later crowd stepped smartly into the day according to Harlem's own clock rather than downtown New York's, and while Monty had clued in that this given neighborhood carried a justifiable reputation for being snooty--it was swankily confident enough to joke of itself as being the home of America's leading second-class citizens--the evidence of the eyes was that this particular canyon of brownstones was indeed Harlem's hit-it-rich gulch, where the shared color was of a different luster than gold but at this time and place panning out just as nicely. ~~He sipped at the spectacle every step of his route.~~
Well-dressed men so dark of face that they made him look like a moonlight shadow nodded a respectful good morning to him and forged off to put fillings in

people's mouths or plead their cases for them or align their voting habits. Kids dressed as spotless as little royalty flashed down tall sets of steps from the rowhouses and bounced one another in the general direction of their schoolday. Now and again a boy spilling over with mischief would skip in behind him and walk the cowboy way Monty did, toed in and just enough bowlegged to suggest horseback heroics, until the mother on sentry at a window called down in a well-modulated voice not to be pestering Mister Rathbun like that, hear? Monty knew better than to grow spoiled by such circumstances, but it gratified him every time to walk along here as recognized as a man chalked down the back.

His mind on all this and as always somewhat on tonight's music as well, he nonetheless grew leery as he approached the corner where the fancy stoops gave out and opportune storefronts suddenly lined up like they were clothespegged to the second-floor windows. Strivers Row could be as grand as it wanted, but the enterprises beyond were as forthright as a trapline. Even the fruit stands posted prices that seemed to want argument--the elocution-schooled wives from the rowhouses would be along to do their shopping any minute now, primed for debate--and somewhere on any block an apartment-room church with Eureka or Oasis in its name waited to reel in your soul and take it to heaven or Africa, and within a bottle's throw of those were cabaret speakeasies aswim with bootleggers, con men, cardsharps, touts of this or that, women with their hooks out, and other manner of lowlife ready, he well knew, to drain off what his singing was bringing in.

Making sure to sharpen up his eyes, the way he used to start watching out for the Loomises as soon as he lit onto Clore Street, he arrowed ahead past all the diversions. Tut-tutted sympathetically to the well-rehearsed hard-luck stories that cadenced from the strategic scatter of beggars and kept on the move. Even the accents of the blandishments were tricky here, the gumbo lingo of the cottonbacks

up from the South and the lullaby intonations of the Caribs and the rounded declamations from the diction wallopers who might be genuine street preachers and might be something else entirely. This flange of Harlem struck him as remarkable in its way as Strivers Row, with its absolute necessity to keep your wits about you along here or there were just all kinds of pockets they could fly off into. Fortunately, within a couple of blocks his daily destination poked up like a smudged thumb out of all this concerted grasping, the newsstand where the ink of headlines practically obliterated the gray-napped proprietor within.

Exchanging greetings, Monty shopped the array of front pages the newsstand was wreathed in until he spotted the particular one he wanted today. The *World*; that ought to be ample enough. He handed the vendor the pennies for the newspaper, then a paper dollar for the number he wanted to play. "Three-oh-six again, how about."

"Straight or combination?"

"Straight again."

"A man can strop a razor on what you pick, Mister Rathbun." The old vendor jotted the number and Monty's bet on the cheatsheet, then handed him his slip of paper. "How'd it go last night?"

"I'm about to find out."

Back in his apartment, though, he took his time about that. Over and over he had told himself he shouldn't still be, but he was smarting from Boston last week, where he'd had a cold and his performance suffered accordingly. Some of the reviews there worked him over practically down to his shoeshine. *The crickets*, J.J., his manager, pooh-poohed the critics; *You leave the crickets to me, Montgomery*. Good sound logical advice, as far as Monty was concerned, just

impossible to follow. Wasn't a person always going to be curious about what was written about him? Half the people he'd met in New York lived on that precise curiosity.

But he didn't have to let it smack him in the face this very moment. He did his voice exercises first. (*Make that such a habit you'll feel absolutely undressed without it*, one of those precepts cross-stitched into him back at the North Fork and the Fort Assiniboine auditorium by you-know-who.) Straightened up his bed. Did some mindful dusting, wary in the vicinity of radiators and doorknobs where spark shocks lurked when a person lived on carpets all the time. Recalled that it was rent day, and the tab at the E&B had to be covered too, and his walking-around money needed an infusion as well. Humming, he dug out his bankbook, sneaked a look as if checking a hole card, and gave the kind of whistle he had been waiting a lifetime to give when holding his financial worth in his hand. How it did add up, each whopper of a deposit after one of the big performances, and even the smaller steady take from the Saturday morning jumps, held at the Plaza Hotel and the Barbizon and those places. Cecil tickling the piano, him putting forth maybe half a dozen songs, eight tops. All due respect to the Double W and life as the Rathbuns previous to him had known it, but this beat looking at wet sheets on a clothesline or the back ends of cows.

Contentedly stashing the bankbook away, he came across yesterday's number slip in the dresser drawer, under his socks. He wadded it into a tiny ball and put today's in its place. To tell the truth, he would not be surprised if the number never did hit. But it was the luxury he allowed himself, a dollar a day to play the numbers; as much as his month's wages had been on the ranch, and here he didn't even miss it. Other than that buck-a-day bet, he had himself staying so

life "accin
the hole"

~~?~~

See
p. 281
re done

~~?~~

Harlem slang.
hey, we
gotta have a
little.

tight to the straight and narrow he could have taught rope-walking. *If I don't know by now not to blow it all ^gin, how many hard knocks does it take?*

Still holding off on the newspaper, he could not help glancing toward it, its masthead *New York World* expectant on the table. Quite the world, all right. Last night he had walked onto the stage in front of a packed audience of twelve hundred, and tonight's would be no more than three dozen at best. Another musicale. The take wasn't great, but J.J. scheduled these with as much care as he did the big-hall recitals. People on the in; *sassiety*, J.J. called such gatherings.

Pulling out his song sheets to make sure they were in the right order, he tried to picture the probable musicale scene. (Another of her prescriptions.) A number of Strivers Row's own movers and shakers always adorned the evening's chosen living-room, to be sure, but right in there with them mingled the fairhaired downtowners who came up here on the lure of the music or their own highly honed curiosity or just because it was the thing to do. The Rabiznaz, turnabout of the Zanzibar, he couldn't help but think of those as: cluster of white folks who stuck out oppositely in Harlem like the dark-skinned habitues in off Clore Street did there in Helena. Which was to say, reverse to the overwhelming color around them, the way faces show odd in the negatives of a photograph. Not that it bothered him--he had been mingling, to call it that, since the day he and his parents entered the pearly kingdom of the Williamsons--and it didn't visibly bother the Rabiznaz or the Harlemites, but he did find it close quarters compared to dealing with a stage audience. Close and elevated. Women who were said to have diamond-studded garters (not that he had chanced onto such a phenomenon himself yet). Men with books to their names, or handed-down money they hadn't bothered to count yet. Conversation that circled as mercilessly as the rims of their gin glasses. "*Oh, there's Blanche and Alfred, I'll bet he's scouting.... Oh, look, the Sitwells are over from London. Did you hear Heywood say, 'They don't with*

?

Brant! Think about it: They don't 'sit well' with him! Famous

me.” It helped that the Major sometimes was on hand, providing some force of gravity. At the last one of these even his wife was there, looking as if the presence of other people was a strain.

Couldn't count on seeing him there tonight, though, it occurred to Monty, given what time of year it was. He thought a moment and rearranged the order of the night's songs, putting the Medicine Line one last so that he would have some guff about Montana and the Tenth Cavalry and so on to give out with when he had to be on his own to make conversation afterward. He fondled the stack of songs as appreciatively as he had the bankbook. *Talk about luck, having these.* They couldn't have squired him along on this any better, them and the Major.

#

By the time the whirlwind of success on the radio stations out west had carried him all the way to the big job in Chicago, he'd known it was prudent to consult with higher authority about the step beyond that. The Major gave one of those smiles of his and said, *You need to get together with Phil Sherman.* The heart-hammering trip into New York, the session of the three of them in Phil's fashionably rundown office in the theater district. There barely had been time for Phil at the upright piano to rack the accompaniment sheets into place and attempt to follow him in a few of the songs, when there came the knock at the door. In walked the slenderest man Monty had ever seen, in a duck-foot strut. His complexion was dark honey and his suit was fashionable London brown, both accentuated by a carnation of nearly blinding whiteness in his lapel.

“Philip,” ^{the man} he greeted Sherman, “tell me you have a theater owner who still knows how to spell vaudeville and would give his left one to book Butterbeans and Susie for, oh, six weeks at scale.”

Who? still written on Wes's face and *Which?* similarly all over Monty's, they tried not to look like fish out of water as Phil, chuckling, steered the arrivee

to them for handshakes. At Wes's name, the already taut man all but twanged with attention.

"The Major Williamson, do I gather? Philip here has been holding out on me. First Sergeant Jace Jackson, sir, 369th Infantry."

"The Harlem Hellfighters." Wes looked instantly at ease and shook hands with him a second time. *"I never did understand why we wasted you by attaching you to the French. In the thick of it at the Argonne, your bunch?"*

"Us alongside the Senegalese," that was answered. *"A matched set, I presume the thinking was."* J.J. at last zeroed in on Monty, who had a hunch he had deliberately been left for last. *"And this is the talented gentleman you think I need to hear, Philip?"*

"The very one. Allow for my piano playing, okey-doke?"

"Before we start," J.J. stated. *One thing.* Up stood his index finger, illustrating the imperative. *"Could save us all some time."* He sent a warning gaze to each of them in turn. *"This isn't going to be jazz, is it?"* Or jass, as J.J. pronounced it with a wince. *"Because, no slur on our singing friend here, that is not a field I will have anything to do with. You can tell me as much as you want to that jazz is all the thing. But the ambience, gentlemen, the ambience. Blind men, hopheads, scatty women--how's a person supposed to do bookings around menageries like that?"*

"Relax, will you. Nobody's going to accuse this music of being jazz, it's more--" Phil came up short.

"It's a bit different," Wes tried to pitch in, *"but--"*

"Easiest thing to call it is spirituals," Monty confined things to.

Which made J.J. wince even harder. Delicately as a ballet performer he spun to Phil.

"Philip, if you don't mind my saying so, this is not up your alley. I can throw a fishline into any congregation between here and Mobile, and come up with a spirituals singer."

"Since when are you so overrun with performers you can't even listen, J.J.?"

His bluff called, J.J. parked himself across the room. Wes went over by him to complete the audience. Monty stepped to the piano beside Phil, and approximate as the keyboard work was, *Mouthful of Stars* roared to life.

In the silence after Monty's last wall-shaking line of song, J.J. appeared perplexed. *"I don't know that one, and I have two uncles who are reverends."*

"Then you have one more chance," Phil swiftly set the hook. *"Shall we try him on that 'Jones' number, do you think, Monty?"*

"Unless you want to save it for that other manager you have in mind," Wes made up on the spot. Monty could have kissed him.

Phil getting a bit more hang of it at the piano, *Just Another Praying Jones* went even better than ~~their first rendition~~ ^{the song}. J.J., all three of them could see, was almost sold.

"Maybe this is the real deal here," he weighed what he had heard as if the rest of them were not in the room. *"An authentic."* As if reluctantly rousing from that vision, he looked around at them and came to business. *"He does have a voice on him, and something about those songs--Montgomery, I can undertake to represent you. I would put you together with Cecil--no offense, Philip, but he's the best around at churchy piano."* He paused, turned back to Monty, and the index finger was there like an exclamation point again. *"But coming from amateur, you need to know what you're letting yourself in for, back here. You have to nail it in every performance."*

Nail it? Amateur, at what? Monty resisted asking the man if he had ever been in front of a rodeo bull that wanted his hide. Instead he said, with all the heft he could put into his voice: "*Can't back up and start over on the radio either. You can ask a million or so people all the way from Spokane to the Twin Cities to Chicago* --nobody has heard me mess up yet."

#

Six full months since then, and that yet still hadn't even come close to occurring, and Monty was determined it never would. He put aside the song sheets, ready for the musicale. *That's that.* All right: it was time. He went over to the table where the newspaper waited.

He folded the paper back, scanning until he spotted the review. Read it, chewing his lip. Read it again, a lot more slowly. Shaking his head to try to clarify the imprint of the words, even though he knew what they meant, he ripped the piece out of the paper as though it would get loose in the room and do something more to him. Then he caught his breath and sat down to write to Susan.

#

Downtown, at about where the measuring stick that was Manhattan Island struck fortunes made before the Civil War, Wes was picking out railroads. He'd had a wall rack installed behind his office door with slots for all his passes, now that he was of the gandydancer fraternity, and as perquisites went, this one bemused him more than most. *A lifetime ticket or one to bankruptcy, depending.* Each elegantly printed pass entitled him to highest privileges--which was to say, a private car--when he traveled on the rails of his fellow moguls. And should any of his ampersand-endowed confreres from the Chesapeake & Ohio or the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul or the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe wish to ride

What about Boston with the cold?

Mm, we're gonna say a cold doesn't count - it's not jitters or fouling up or other possible performance mishaps

the twenty-two miles of the Teton & Two Medicine, naturally he would be only too happy to reciprocate.

A rap on the door broke his cross-country train of thought, but still in a prime mood he moved aside and called out, "Open, Sesame, or Hilly, as the case may be." Hilfiger, his secretary, came in looking as if his Teutonic dignity had something spilled on it. "Major, I cannot at all account for this. But Mister Gardiner is downstairs with some new things."

"Now? I don't understand. You know I'm getting ready to go away."

"I somehow overlooked him when I cleared your schedule. Shall I tell him it will have to wait until after Montana?"

"Use your head, man. Whatever he's come up with will be gone by then. Send him in, but--" he looked pointedly at the wall clock. "And go ahead and make my arrangements, will you. I'll be taking the Pennsy to Chicago, and let's make it the Milwaukee on the next leg." It went without saying that Wes's own railcar and red-carpet treatment from the Great Northern Railway, which profited handsomely at the Montana end of things each time a trainload of Williamson cattle was shipped to market, were to be ready for him at the St. Paul depot as usual.

"Absolutely, Major."

"Oh, and Hilly, see if you can ring up--No, never mind," he canceled that with a wave of the hand that happened to go in the direction of Harlem. Lord knew, he was no expert on the owl-like life of a singer, but Monty very well might be sacked out, resting up for another night of performance. What was there to be said, anyway, welcome to the *World*? Wes wondered how he was taking that review. He should have picked up the phone to him first thing, but with all the commotion of putting house and family to rights for the summer.... Too late now.

The only sound for a moment was the repentant slapslap of Hilfiger's soles as he hurriedly pattered down the stairs. The quiet was like a housewide trance, the machinery of mansion life stilled to only the occasional rustle of a distant maid. Making the most of the almost sinful spot of time, Wes virtually tiptoed over to his desk and sank into the lush silence. *Funny. The house has the best of it this time of year. We clear out, and the walls get to rest their ears.* Since having to bow out of Montana politics, he had spent more of each year here--the vast old pile of a place had been imposed as part of Merrinell's dowry--and hoped he was not growing too used to its granitic grandeur. Guidebooks to this venerable neighborhood called it "captivating," and he supposed that was right if a person took it back to Latin: *captivus*, captive--clarity in the root, as usual. Evidently conceived on the architectural conviction that a man's home was his Bastille, this ancestral bastion of his in-laws permitted only peeps through high narrow windows to similar slit-eyed neighboring mansions.

While he waited for Gardiner, Wes busily packed things into his ^{attache}~~briefcase~~. By this time tomorrow the place would be like a ship frozen into an ice floe, sheets over all the furniture, inhabitants scattered to different latitudes. Not more than an hour ago Merrinell had left with the girls for her mother's summer place at Saratoga; time to break them in to that circle of society. Inasmuch as Merrinell's mother was a living refutation that a female could not be a pope, Wes had sympathy for his daughters in the immersion into parasol sodality ahead of them but nothing of real help. It was all he could do to keep his own head above water in the fathoms of family.

Gardiner padded in with his portfolio case, its leather as softly sumptuous as his manner. "Major, thank you for working me in."

"What's on offer today, Timothy?"

"A find, I can safely say. I think you'll be pleased with it."

Wes stayed expressionless, his guard and his hopes both up. This was not like Gardiner. As a rule, the rotund old dealer managed an elegantly diffident approach, as though strays from the orphanages of literature and history somehow simply showed up on his doorstep. Their longstanding arrangement was for Wes to have first look within the range of his interests, and if he didn't buy, Gardiner had merely to pop over to the Morgan Library. But the item the dealer took out of his portfolio case now and lifted from its wrappings, he was handling as if it had come home to stay. The not very sizable journal he deposited on the desktop looked weathered from time rather than passage from hand to hand. Wes recognized that it was bound in elkskin, not buckram-backed nor standardly done up in cow leather nor even deerskin, and he felt an anticipatory tightness in his throat.

He studied the cataloguing slip. "Joseph Fields, Joseph Fields. Why do I know that name?"

Looking wise but saying nothing, Gardiner let it sink in.

Wes's head snapped up. He threw away the first rule of haggling, he couldn't help himself. As if wishing, he asked: "The one with Lewis? In the Two Medicine country?"

"You anticipate me."

Wes wiped his fingertips on the serge insides of his thighs, then drew the journal to himself and opened it ever so carefully. Officerly skepticism still was uppermost in him. With astounding copiousness Lewis and Clark each had kept day-by-day account of the expedition they captained, as did their sergeant, Gass. The enlisted men had been told to do the same, but naturally few did. And those random contributions from the ranks supposedly were all archivally accounted for, long since. Prepared for all manner of disappointment from desultoriness to illegibility, Wes dipped into the age-crisped pages of the journal, and there the

words stood startlingly clear. *"Drewyer and self sent hunting for sage hens....Capt Lewis & Reuben let our horses graze....The visinity was a plesent level plain but for one butte poking high and a lake stinking of alkali...."*

Alkali Lake: on the Double W's Flag Butte pastureland. Wes stared into the crude slants of the ink as though seeing a treasure map suddenly come clear. Joseph Fields and his brother Reuben and the hunter-scout Drouillard, he knew as if by rote, were with Meriwether Lewis on the exploration of the Two Medicine country. Just before nightfall at some hitherto unknown site along the river, they encountered a small band of Blackfeet, gave presents, and made wary camp with the Indians. *"We must wrisk the night with these persons Capt Lewis told us & so we decended to the river in company with them & formed a camp in the bottom where stood 3 solitery trees in a simicircle..."* Holding his breath, Wes turned the page to July 27th, 1806. *"I was on post & laid my gun beside me to reach & wake Reuben when one of the indians--the scoundrel Capt Lewis bestoed a friendship medal on during the night's parley--slipped behind me and took the gun."*

To Wes the rest unfolded with the familiarity of the Iliad: in the tussle that followed, Reuben Fields stabbed one Blackfeet^{ee} to death and Lewis shot one in the belly. The exploring party famously had to make its escape in a marathon one-day ride to the Missouri River, but the tilt of history was against the Blackfeet and other tribes from then on. Wes now had no doubt that he held in his hands the eyewitness account to the first blood spilled by American soldiers in the long contest for the West's upper prairie. This had gone missing for nearly one hundred and twenty years. "Gardiner, how did you come by this?"

"Oh, things sometimes surface, Major."

Wes realized he was breaching protocol front, back, and sideways. Collectors at his level necessarily embraced the pretense that provenance was a

region of France. "Forget I asked. How much are you going to hold me up for, on this?"

"I must tell you, Harvard has expressed an interest in it."

Wes steepled his hands together, then ever so slowly lowered them until they pointed directly at the dealer. "Speaking of telling, drop a word to Pearson from me"--making it plain that he was letting it bounce here on Gardiner first before it reached the Harvard keeper of collections--"that as a donor I don't appreciate his bidding up materials he's eventually going to get anyway, damn it."

"I'll see that your concern is made known," Gardiner all but trilled. In contrition, he quoted a figure twenty percent too high instead of the usual forty, Wes batted that down to a semi-reasonable asking price, and they reached the deal.

Gardiner still hovered over the journal with avuncular tenderness after Wes handed him the check. "Timothy? Is there something else?"

"I understand that you're pressed for time, but if you could spare a few minutes more--"

"Given the going rate so far today, I ought to call an immediate curfew."

"It's been on my conscience that I can't come up with that Cheyne item you asked for, some time back. But if you're interested in that period, I just happen to have a few interesting items with me."

"You just happen to." Wes smiled. He didn't believe in runs of luck, but fifteen minutes ago he wouldn't have had any faith in the existence of a vagabond Lewis and Clark Two Medicine journal either. "All right, lay them out."

A brief letter to a weekend hostess from Lord Byron, standardly flirtatious. A set of poems in the florid hand of Wasson, the Flemish Romantic. Wes shook his head each time.

"This is rather nice," the dealer said. "An original of a verse by Pushkin. He must have copied it out fresh to look it over."

Wes knew the military legend--Pushkin's ^{forebear}~~grandfather~~ an Abyssinian prince who became a general for the Czar--better than he knew the poet's attainments, other than the customary one. "Ladies' man, wasn't he?"

"Sufficient to get himself done in in a duel over one, I believe, Major."

"Russian isn't quite Greek enough to me," Wes scanned the boldly penned couplet in Cyrillic lettering. "How does it read?"

The dealer checked the accompanying translation.

*"Not all of me is dust. Within my song,
safe from the worm, my spirit will survive."*

Wes sat unmoving. Monty's singing at that last musicale flooded back to him. That's what Monty had seemed: *within* the Medicine Line song. The people there at that musical evening had turned to statues, not even the click of a glass, at his almost holy rendition of his father's prairie soldiery. Even Merrinell, who kept all her matters of the spirit confined east of the Palisades, remarked afterward how struck she was by it.

"Damn the poets," Wes said softly. "They tattoo all the way through. I'll take this, too."

The dealer left, a discreetly happy man, and Wes sat in the quiet company of this day's collected prizes, his thoughts once again on their way toward the West and Susan.

#

These pages went a bit lame during my regency in Angus's schoolroom, and now they threaten to gallop the hand off me to catch up. I find I can barely move the pen fast enough to keep up with the race of thoughts. I wonder what ninny it was who so blithely said a diary must be a servant--

Thunder sent another casual tremor through the loft room, the arriving storm dimming what should have been the peak of the day, and Susan got up from her desk and with guilty pleasure put on all the lights. After Scotch Heaven life the Helena house still felt unfamiliar and for that matter wastefully voluminous, the size of a factory, but to have electric light again was a treat she practically sprinkled behind her ears. She would not have traded all the gold of Last Chance Gulch for the teaching year she had just put in at the South Fork, nor would the same sum persuade her to do it over again. Her smock crackly with the weather's contribution to the atmosphere of energy, she sat back down to the pages brightly awaiting her continuance:

--not a master. Ho ho. As if the habit of summing one's days into ink could be as lax as whether to dust the top of the cupboard or not. I can no more ignore the need to keep track of life--as much of it as can be made to fit in these pages--than Wes could his confessional booth. And I find that there is the odd benefit that with the passage of time the words hold more than I knew I was putting there. I look back not even a year--she flipped pages; an eyebrow went up and stayed that way--and I find Monty in despair, Monty persevering, Monty exasperating, Monty in magical voice.

As she composed her thoughts at pen-length, the rain din built second by second. Merciless rods of it determined to puncture the roof, from the sounds of it. "Lord, if ye happen to be of a mind/Send us rain," Angus's inevitable appropriate weather couplet rattled in the back of her mind, "And if so be it ye spill some/Send it again." When the roar on the roof hit such a pitch she could not hear herself think, she gave in and quit the desk again, this time for the gable window and the rare sight of excessive moisture in Montana. Hollyhocks in the yard were rocking madly in the wind, rainwater puddling into small swamps around them. There was a smell of great freshness in the air, and the temperature

was vigorously dropping ~~about a degree a minute~~^g. The only thing feeble about thundershowers this time of year was duration; hoping against hope she checked the sky, and while the stormy section looked like black sheep's wool, already on both sides of it were patches of bland blue-gray. She watched at the window until the sharp-edged squall rumbled off across town. Then returned to the diary and noted in brackets that not a drop of this worm-drowner would have reached far enough to do the Two Medicine country any good.

She paged back some more, under the spell of the inked words and their curlicues of memory. Maybe it was the ozone, but everything today seemed sprung out of the usual sense of passage of time. It felt curiously like adapting some foreign custom, this diarying in the middle of the day. Siesta in reverse. The role of woman of leisure did not come naturally to her, but she was working at it. Her hair was down--no pupils today, of course, and none in prospect until she could get the music school resurrected and a number of miffed mothers soothed--and the shawling effect on her shoulders was another sumptuous diversion from usual. As she read back over entry after entry, moments leaping out at her, she twiddled strands of the tresses she had let grow all her time at Scotch Heaven, idly judging their distance from gray. Reaching the point of doing that, was she. *Vanity, thy name is human*. Automatically she reached down a music sheet and jotted that in the margin in case it could be made to fit into the operetta somewhere.

Suddenly the pen had a mind of its own again: *What odd bits we remember*, she found herself resuming on today's marathon diary catching-up. *Monty's letter mentions Mrs. Gustafson's fearsome hotcakes--the plop of them hitting the griddle was in itself almost tough enough to chew--and I have thought back time and again to that X on the stage, to flatter it by calling it that, there that first day at Fort Assinniboine. What a nerve I had, chalking that mark and letting*

on to him that standing right there would solve all stage woes. I recall him looking long and hard at it (and doubtless at the proposition of myself as teacher). When he stood his ground to that barn of an auditorium and my asking of him, I knew we would get somewhere.

Susan fidgeted the pen, rolling it contemplatively between the fingers of her writing hand, while she worked back to the page of that first day of scouring traces of cows out of the homestead house, the one about Scotch Heaven not amounting to much as a site but unbeatable as a sight. She tried to think back with exactness. Had she meant for those words to carry a whiff of epitaph for Scotch Heaven even then? They would have had to be astral as comets to predict the final human sum of the old valley: Adair Barclay McCaskill and Susan Duff its last residents. And Adair only until she had Christmased with Varick's family. At the new year she had gone to Scotland on a visit that showed no sign of ending. Susan had spent the full winter--fortunately an open one; only for a few nights had she put up at the Hahns', nearest family to the schoolhouse--and the swift spring in a Scotch Heaven that was as much apparition of its homestead decades as it was creek and valley. Varick had not decided yet on the disposition of the McCaskill homestead, ghostly indeed now without Angus and the sheep. For that matter, she still was making up her own mind what to do with the lower end of the valley. Ninian's land. With more than grass and hay attached to it.

That decision would keep for now. She read back over what she had written so far today. It constituted singing the scales, warming up one's voice. With a considerable intake of air, she commenced to the next:

Wes and I are like flighty children playing with matches. One of us ignites... and the other in scaredy-cat fashion stamps it out. Then the turns are reversed.

She wrote in that vein until her hand began to play out.

Well, at least there was one of them who had life's ground solidly under him at the moment. She plucked up the review Monty had sent, for the sheer savor of reading it over, every blessed word:

Fate lent a hand, or in this case an appreciative ear, to the inspired program of "spirit" songs performed by Montgomery Rathbun at Aeolian Hall last evening. To this hearer, and an audience unanimous in clapping and stamping for encore after encore, the setting was as apt as if by divination: in Mr. Rathbun's wondrous presentation it is as if hitherto hidden songs have always existed just beyond us, tingling in the air, and through him they sing forth like windtunes through some great Aeolian harp.

This he achieves in a voice of dimensions that are hard to measure. His is not the welling bass-baritone of Paul Robeson, deep as the keel of a slave ship, but a built-from-the-bottom-up tone that casts long shadows and etches the ground of life under the travels of his restless songs, qualities that can perhaps be traced to his background as a man of the prairie. That repertory, be it said, is fresh, no mean feat in this heaven-sent-by-way-of-Harlem season of resurging spirituals, when almost weekly new arrangements of timeless field songs can sometimes resemble musical chairs.

The songs he brings are only an added gift, however. Montgomery Rathbun could sing the pages of the telephone directory and lift your soul. His is the latest and perhaps most phenomenal troubador's role in the renaissance of "sorrow songs" heralded in the pre-war recitals of Harry ^{To}Burleigh, enhanced when Roland Hayes added spirituals to his classical presentations, furthered by the innovative scorings of the piano-and-tenor duo of J. Rosamund Johnson and Taylor Gordon, and burnished to a luster now that the profoundly gifted Paul Robeson has turned from dramatic roles to musicianship. At the onset of an earlier generous artistic flourishing, Ralph Waldo Emerson proffered to

Set in
newspaper-like
type?

Harry T. Burleigh

Walt Whitman: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere." Harlem's chorus of spiritual-singing virtuosos must similarly now pay their respects to Montgomery Rathbun, who stands forth as their latest compatriot and rival.

All that and the reviewer did not even have an inkling of how rocky that bottom had been. Reading back, finding the diary days when some bit of coaching or coaxing had worked and both of them felt another breathworth of soar in his song, Susan was starved all over again for that experience of the lessons with Monty. *Don't I wish there was another one where he came from.* Leading the South Fork schoolchildren in "*Flow Gently, Sweet Afton*" in preparation for the program all the parents were invited to, there had been times when she thought she would break off into a maddened howl. Very well then, face up and admit it, she had been spoiled by the particularities of Monty's voice. At least she was not totally bereft of it. One more time she picked up the letter the review had come with, "*I did not pay the man to write this, honest.*" The handwriting, in pencil, was ^{welcomably} familiar from the ~~brief~~ greetings he sent from wherever he sang; they amounted to postcards mailed in envelopes, safe from small-town post office eyes. She could picture the jackknife-sharpened stub, the earnest crouch over the stationery--somehow the words even stood slow and careful on the paper--and found it even more rewardful that he thought she was worth the diligence. This letter was almost warm to the touch. "*Something, isn't it? To think that the spirit songs are having a heyday? And that the foreground, they call it, was the old wagontrack where you about made me run my legs off?*" She smiled a moment at his growing penchant for question marks--he seemed determined to make even his punctuation count as much as it could--and skipped on to the bottommost sentence: "*I hope the old town is ready for me?*" He was coming to Helena on his

concert tour through the West. She circled the day on her calendar. Ahead of it by a week was the Xed-over set of days she was to spend with Wes in the Two Medicine country.

DROP CAP

Under the highstanding sun the cattle were mothering up. Their mode of reacquaintance was repeating itself a couple of thousand times at once, every cow moaning anxiously and making sure with thorough sniffs that the calf trying to raid milk from her udder was entitled to it.

Next to Wes in the shade of the boss tent ~~about a quarter of a mile away,~~⁹ Susan speculatively watched the bawling scene along the lakeshore. Hers was not the only appraisal of what was being done to a calm noon at Lower Two Medicine Lake: around the reflecting rim of water, sphinxlike mountains with manes of timber seemed to draw in closer to frown down over the intrusion.

She glanced at Wes, still busy checking his tallybook before he and whoever was sent out from the Blackfoot²⁴ Indian Agency counted the cattle onto this Reservation allotment, its rugged foothills practically in the lap of Glacier National Park. Simply by eye the massed cattle seemed to Susan an excess of livestock for any summer range. But mob of feeders though this might be, she knew it was only a portion of the Williamsons' growing Deuce W herd. Thousands more were out in the coulees of Fort Assinniboine and the other outposts of the new ranch. Greater thousands than that were spread as usual on the home range of the Double W. The tallybook in Wes's hands had him knitted in study, flipping from one page to the next, back, further pages on into the black-and-white arithmetic of herds and necessary grass; it must be like trying to stay ahead of locusts, she thought. Next to everything the Bible had to say, the one saying she had grown up hearing was that the Williamsons always had more cattle than country. Wes, she was seeing for herself on this cattle drive, dealt not only in