

“Ah, that would be Fiddle Strings,” came Angus’s answer, “Dair’s footloose mouser. He lives at all the old places, up and down the creek, except our own. If you can hold his affections you’re more than welcome to him.”

“He’ll be company, I suppose, although his manners can stand some--”

“Susan?” He startled her with the gravity of his voice, as if calling on her in school. “You didn’t come back to Scotch Heaven to gain a cat.”

She looked around at him. “Would you believe, I’m here to teach singing.”

“I did hear something of the sort. And to whom.”

Susan could not help but give an amused snort. This had not changed. Try to do anything on the sly in the Two Medicine country and Angus McCaskill knew it by nightfall.

“You heard right,” she sorted her way through these words,

“Wes...Wesley Williamson is giving him this chance.”

“That’s a modest wonder to me,” Angus said with equal care. “Generosity from a Williamson.”

She tended to the boiling coffee, clattered cups onto the cupboard sideboard between him and her, and set down the box of brown crackers with

some force before answering. "You know and I know that Whit would kick a blind orphan out of his way. But the Major seems to have Monty Rathbun's interests at heart, don't ask me why. Angus, I've given myself a good talking-to about this, any number of times since I heard the man sing. This all may seem dotty"--she swept a gesture around at the dilapidated room, farthest thing from a proper music parlor--"but the thing worse is not to see what can be done when a voice you'd gladly give your own for comes along. There's something there, when this Monty person stands looking like a hopeless cow chouser and then out pours the majority of a choir."

Angus's expression granted all she had said, but there still was a furrow of concern on him. "Say you brush him up and push him out of where he's always been nestled. Leading where, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Don't I wish I knew. I hear everything you're saying, his color can get in his way that quick. But knocking on stage doors will have to be his own concern, or Wes Williamson's. I don't care if he were made of limburger, my part in this is to train that voice of his."

"That mightn't be popular, with some."

"I've been spat on before," she said levelly.

He knew that look on her. The Susan who was the leader of the girls in the garter snake fights with the boys, the Susan who had brains by the bushel and curiosity by the cubit; the Susan he many a time would have traded places with on the checkerboard of life, truth be told.

“You know my inclination,” Angus had ready now. “Teach away. You remember the approach I took with you,” he made the old joke of the timid preacher being urged by the deacon to cut loose in his sermons: “*For the Lord’s sake, man, fire the popcorn at the porcupine--some of it may stick.*”

They laughed together.

“I’ve yammered on,” he chided himself after a little. “There’s not that much conversation to be made around here, any more.”

“No.” This cobwebbed room that had rung with Bible and rhyme. Susan glanced around, then at him. “I noticed on the way up here, the graves are kept.”

“Yes, I see to that.”

“Angus, it haunts me that they came to Helena to me at just the wrong time.”

“People die everywhere, lass, so far as I know.” He stepped to the stove and coffeed up again, his back to her. “They went like flies here, too, during the



flu.” She heard him swallow, on more than a bite of cracker. She knew there was particular loss, Anna Reese by name, his equal at the Noon Creek school and the woman he had waited half his life for, in that slight sound.

Susan had her own tightness of throat to talk past.

“I’ve been across to Samuel’s grave. Twice now.”

“Ah. Have you.”

His turn to silently bolster her. It was six years on, since his own son Varick had come home from the Great War, and the brother whom Susan had raised like a son did not. Somewhere in his schoolhouse even yet was the homemade telegraph rig that incanted from one end of the room to the other the name of its long-boned inquisitive young maker in Morse code: Samuel Duff, ajump with ideas. Susan had taken the bright boy under her wing for high school in Helena, and right after, seen him climb onto the troop train that never brought him back. Then, their hearts out of them, no sooner had Ninian and Flora lodged themselves in Susan’s care than the capricious influenza epidemic doubled back and took them. Angus winced within. The flood of death around Susan, that last year of the Great War, would have knocked anyone off her feet.

“You’ve been through the thick of things, I know,” he resorted to. “But maybe this is your turn at some of the thin. One pupil, mind you--shall I change the name of Scotch Heaven to Easy Street for you, Miss Duff?”

She made a face at that, as he hoped.

Next task prominently waiting, Angus deposited his cup on a scarce flat surface and gathered himself to go. “I’m off to the rescue of your door.” He gave the doorway a pat of promise on his way through as Susan followed him out.

She watched him swing into his saddle and as he departed the yard, she thanked him with the instruction: “Don’t you dare be scarce, you and Adair. Ham supper here, just as soon I can get the ingredients.”

“You’re on. “

Why this, Wesley bastardly Williamson?

Angus turned that over and over as he went home and hitched the team of workhorses to the wagon he had been using for fixing fence on Breed Butte. By now the wagon ought to know the way up to the Barclay place by itself, he paused just long enough to muse; then climbed on and gave the reins a flip to start the horses.

As the rescue vessel for Susan's door splashed across the North Fork and began lurching its way over the old ruts up the slope of the timber-topped butte, Angus swayed on the wagon seat and in the course of his thoughts as well. Great treat that it was to have Susan back in the vicinity, where in the book of reckoning did this open-handedness by the lordly Major come from? A singing school for one, fluffed into Scotch Heaven by Williamson money generous as feathers? A change that was. Angus's mouth soured at the ancient history of contention with old Warren Williamson and his hooped locusts branded with the Double W. And now Wesley Williamson, next thing to a governor, kindly turns the valley into a music parlor, piano and all? Nothing against the man Rathbun--the break of day probably was the only break life had granted him up until now--but since when was a choreboy a logical candidate for the Susan Duff Conservatory of Music?

Arrival at the Barclay homestead silenced all this in Angus for a little, as entering the past always did for him. He climbed down into the yard where he and Adair had exchanged their marriage vows, Scotch Heaven's legion of people three deep around them then. Clapped a hand to his hat to firm it down against the chronic mischief of the wind up here so near the brow of the butte. Walked past the caved-in root cellar where Varick, forest ranger in charge of half the mountains

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in the Two Medicine country now, had played billy-of-the-hill endless afternoons with his Barclay cousins. Gingerly approached the house of logs built by himself and Rob, his one-time partner, eventual brother-in-law, and ultimate nemesis.

Thirty-five years, gone again in the space of his steps; how was it possible?

McAngus, you're not immune to the calendar. he chided himself.

Looking the door over and finding it still fit for service, he went back to the wagon for prybar and clawhammer. Again now the hair on the back of his neck was up a little about the Williamsons. The original wampus-cat, Warren, four or so years ago had gone to his reward--it would take a Dante to know, but Angus figured his was a reasonable guess--on some coast of Hell. But the dirt had barely begun to settle on that deserved grave when the next in command of what promised to be chronic Williamsons, the Major, materialized right here in this yard. Angus thought back through that with care, looking for snares. He had happened to be here on some errand in his ordained role, landlord of the empty. It was soon after Rob's widow Judith had loyally sold him the Breed Butte homestead, and with that and the lease Susan had given him on the Duff grazing land, he had been going around feeling fortified about keeping the Double W from buying in on Scotch Heaven. Therefore the appearance of that gorgeous matched

gray team and the buckboard with a figure of significance in it coming over the ridgeline therefore had only tweaked his curiosity.

The grays came like winged things, then had halted smartly, as if on target, in the center of the yard. *"I just came over to clarify something, I hope you don't mind,"* the squire at the reins delivered with a winning expression. Major Williamson was a famous smiler, and Angus didn't doubt he meant most of it. *"I understand you put the run on my agent the other day."*

"Tsk, Major. I nicely asked him to keep his feet off my soil."

"Does that still go?"

Angus's gaze took in the unnaturally propped leg there on a padded bolster, as if it were an item of cargo that didn't fit with the rest of the imposing person in the buckboard. *"Come on down for a stretch if you'd like."*

Wrapping the reins in a way that the grays would not get any ideas, the Major descended smoothly enough, considering. Angus watched him alight in fine western boots but with walker heels; specially made, those, he had no doubt, since the man could no longer put that leg to the stirrup of a saddle. From his end of things, the Major was all manners:

"Angus, if I may?"

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That would be an improvement, Angus had come close to saying. In his time old Warren Williamson had one boxcar name for all of them over here,

"Damnscootchprotestant."

"We've never been able to deal with--reach a deal with those of you on the North Fork," the Major was saying in a voice with none of his father's rasp.

"Wouldn't you agree it's about time for a fresh start?"

"I'd agree it's time the Double W had a fresh dealer, if that's what you are, Major," Angus had set the man straight. *"To us over here, your father was such a sonofabitch it was running out his ears, and Whit I'd say takes after him."*

"You're still here in spite of them, or I wouldn't be standing in this yard with the wind blowing through my every aperture, trying to talk sense to you."

Angus had chuckled. *"I'm with you on the wind, at least."* They moved into the lee of the house.

"Regrets about Barclay, by the way," the Major had said as though the house reminded him. *"I know you and he went back a long way."*

Angus's glance followed the other man's to the reservoir, off along the slope to the West, where Rob and his horse had slid on the embankment slick with spring and drowned. A life he had known as well as his own, Rob's, and he

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still could not make its pluses and minuses come out to a proven sum. The fit recitation cropped out almost without his knowing: "*That blind night waiting, all men darkward go/Unto Inferno, or Paradiso.*"

"*Cheyne, is that? 'A tourist, I, on the ring roads of Hell'?*"

Angus had to grant that an eyebrow of approval. "*Teach him even at Harvard, do they?*"

The Major had not seen fit to remark that in Copeland's course on literature of the ages, Copey had delighted in citing Cheyne as the poor man's Dante. With a covering cough, the Major brought matters back down to earth.

"*Can we talk business?*"

"*One of us no doubt will.*"

"*Angus, I know you've worked like anything, trying to build an operating ranch over here. But in country like this, it takes a real swath of land to run livestock. Your quarter-sections*"--the Major inclined his head around to the quilt-pattern acreages of the Duff place and this one and Angus's own--"*are always going to be too small. Homesteads were an Act of Congress, and you know what happens when somebody has congress with you.*" No chuckle from Angus at

that. The Major backed up to the straight and narrow: "*Homesteads everywhere are going under. You've seen that yourself.*"

"*I have. That's why I thought to shore mine up.*"

The Major looked him over as if he were a checkerboard. "*Let's try this. Double, what my fool of an agent offered. It's a lot for empty country, Angus.*"

"*Imagine. Money raining, and there wasn't even any thunder.*"

"*That still doesn't sound exactly like 'yes.'*"

Angus had not been able to resist. Puckish as a Shakespearean, he confided: "*Potter in at the bank has kindly offered to take all this off my hands.*"

That had sharpened the expression on his visitor right up. Angus had no way of knowing how much under it took on an immediate edge, too. If the Major had wanted to spell it out, whenever his father and Potter at the Valley Stockmen's Bank were not trying to outfox each other for some piece of land the two of them had done ordinary business together in cordial dislike that went back approximately to their cribs. *That galvanized Yankee in at the bank* was Warren Williamson's offhand scorn for Potter's ineradicable hardscrabble-Missouri family origins. *That slab of cold roast Yankee*, Potter doubtless dripped back in his genial drawl whenever the Boston-read patriarch of the Double W, or for that

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matter the similar Major, got on his business nerves. It made wicked sense for Angus to do his dealing with Potter and let the Williamsons choke on the bone, and the Major too well knew it. He still was trying to muster the barrage of argument to counter that when Angus's face twitched toward grin.

"Potter has pockets all over him," Angus said dismissively. *"I'm not selling this to any of you creatures."*

"I hadn't thought I would go home counting that a gain," the Major manfully granted, and made the climb back into his buckboard. To his surprise, Angus held him from going by grasping the near horse's rein. *"Potter did have ^{an} something interesting to say. You're buying up homesteads all the way east to the Highwood Mountains, are you?"*

"Where they fit into our pasture picture, I am." His tone as much as added: *With both hands.*

What do you get, Angus had wondered then, when you double the Double W? *"Tell me this, Major. How much ground would you say a man can swallow before he turns into an island?"*

No answer given, that day or this. Standing there akimbo, looking out over the gentle spill of valley and the meandering creek he and Rob had followed

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to here like giddy pilgrims all those years ago, Angus put aside the past for the moment, which was far as he was ever able to put it. He still was bothered over the open hand of the Major, back down the slope where Susan was strenuously setting up shop. But from girl on, Susan had always known her own mind, had she ever. Telling himself to confine his prying to the stubborn hinges of the door, Angus set to work on opening the house on Breed Butte to the elements.

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That night Susan put into her diary:

So much for wishing for ghosts, when they line up in the mind to volunteer.

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Early sun was sorting the green plaids of spring--blue-green of the timberline on Breed Butte, mossy green of her doddering barn roof, meadow green of the volunteer hay fostered by the creek--when Susan stepped out into the morning and around the corner of the house to gaze north. From growing up here, she could catch sight of a coyote the instant its lope broke the pattern of the grass on the farthest butte. So, she now spotted without effort the horseback figure on its way across the benchland from Noon Creek, then could not blink away the duplicate figure next to it.

Eventually the two riders clopped into the yard and swung down, facing her with their reins drooping in their hands.

“Morning, Miss Susan,” Monty said in short fashion. She could tell at a glance that he was full of second thoughts over this, about to go back for thirds.

Dolph appeared no more happy to be along than Monty was to have him. The pint-size cowboy reported unwillingly, “Ma’am, the boss says I got to tag along with Monty here, do any chores while you’re schooling him up on this singing.”

Susan paused over the knot of logic by which, if a woman was at risk from a man, two men were sent.

“You can chink.” She indicated gaps between the logs of the house where hard weather had done its work. “The whole place can stand chinking, I’m sure. Mister Rathbun, come on in.”

Looking doubly doleful, Dolph moved off in search of buckets and the nearest clay bank as Monty traipsed into the house after her. He was surprised to see it wasn’t much of a layout. The kitchen was the center of everything, as was to be expected, but this one appeared to have had a boxcar of peddler’s goods emptied into it. All of it made his own room at the back of the Double W

washhouse seem snug as a ship captain's. But through a doorway to the room beyond the kitchen he glimpsed a spinet piano, its white keys like bared teeth.

He kept on looking at every possible thing in the house except the woman standing there like Lady La-De-Dah. All of a sudden he remembered to take off his hat and then had no idea what to do with it.

Susan snagged the unmoored hat, hanging it on her father's peg nearest the door in a way that told Monty there was where it belonged from now on. She wasn't displeased that he didn't sail in here and make himself at home. He had been awkward as a schoolboy there at the Gates of the Mountains dock, too, but for her purposes better than slick and stuck on himself.

"Let's go on in here." She led the way as if he were the hundredth pupil in this log cubbyhole instead of her first and only.

The piano sitting waiting, Monty edged into the room.

"Ready, I hope?"

"Miss Susan--"

Whatever he had intended to say, he took it back to makings as she watched. Finally he nodded, a sharp inch of inclination and then as quickly gone, and issued only: "I guess I can't count on getting any younger."

I just wish flashed in Susan, right past the ramparts of determination and teacherly creed she had been trying to maintain. In singer's years the man in front of her was a near-eternity older than the pupils who had to prove themselves in her Helena music parlor, and now that he stood here fresh off a horse and in work-worn togs instead of that handsome greatcoat, she was fully faced with the task Wes was letting her in for. And. And of course those considerations paled, so to speak, alongside the fact that among all her pupils ever, there had never been a colored person of whatever age, dress, or capability. Well, she instructed herself, that's why the two of them were here, wasn't it, to drown out *never* with song.

"Don't look so nervous," she passed the mood of instruction toward him. "No one dies of music except in opera. Now then, let's first of all hear how you sound on dry land. That same song, please, and take your time with it."

The flutters in him saw their chance again. Kill this off before it got started. Croak out the spiritual, off-key; cough in the middle; tell her his voicebox had come to the belated realization that it was too old to go to school. *Quit before you even start?* some banshee in his conscience howled back at that. *Why not scoot on home under your mama's bed and play with the cat, while you're at it?*

Feeling like a first-class fool but choosing that over running and hiding, he nodded again and resolutely gathered himself to put what he could into the air.

“One moment, Mister Rathbun. May I?” She came over to him and pushed his slouched shoulders back and into straighter alignment, Monty flinching with surprise. “A singer mustn’t stand all caved in.” Her dress swishing, she stepped back to demonstrate. “High chest. Level head, no, not as if you’re gandering around for rain, merely level does the trick. Here, watch again.” She looked ready to give the Gettysburg Address, while he felt like he was being turned into one of those hat-store mannequins.

“*Go Down, Moses*” came out about as it did with the accompaniment of the Missouri, Monty’s phrases like one bell after another but no arc of sound in between, his voice punctuating the melody rather than following it. Again Susan was bothered by the labored way he squeezed air in and out of himself, as if his chest was a polka accordion, and she despaired for a moment over the lengthening mental list of items to be worked on.

Yet there was the genuine article somewhere in there, she was back to thinking by the time he was done with the song. When he stood planted (pigeon-toed as only someone who had spent a lifetime in cowboy boots could be, she

added to the mental list) and let loose, somehow you ended up hearing more than he seemed to have sung, as if his voice had a shadow made of sound. At the Gates of the Mountains, she had wondered if it was a trick of the canyon echo; here as there she had to try to keep a rein on her sense of excitement at the way his knells of song stayed on for that unaccountable moment, lingering in the ear, the auditorium of the head. That vocal quality was rare and it was the one thing this problem pupil had going for him.

“Spirituals suit your voice nicely,” she said to be saying something uncritical. “Your mother always sang those at her work, the Major told me.”

“She did. She came from church people.” He hesitated. “Although it was hard, out here.”

“No doubt.”

The slap of wet clay against a furrow of logs startled them both. Dolph had chosen to start chinking outside the exact room where they were. Susan and Monty tried to keep straight faces at being chaperoned with mud and trowel.

“Let’s get ourselves underway,” she did away with that distraction and set right to work on what was nagging at her the most, the drag of Monty’s breathing as he sang. “The first of many first things”--the quick little toss of her head was

meant to take the edge off that, and didn't quite--"is that you must learn to properly draw air into yourself."

Disappointment clouded him over. He hadn't come here to take his nose for a walk.

"This all counts more than you may think," Susan came close to a coax a lot sooner than she wanted to. "You can't expect to sing your way to the top of the world without your wind under you, now can you." *Suppose not*, his manner came around to, and he presented himself for whatever she had in store. She drilled into him that he was going to have to breathe from deep down, bulge his middle so his diaphragm would let air all the way into the lower region of his lungs. "It's like cleaning out the bottom of a closet so the rest of your things will hang right." He gave it try after try, and his intake still was the worst part of his vocal wardrobe.

"Don't worry, there are exercises. Mister Rathbun, you're not to let yourself be perturbed about whatever you think I'm inflicting on you, honestly. Are we agreed? Now then, pretend you are smelling a rose."

He gave a minimum sniff.

"A nine-year-old girl can do a better job of it than that." She looked stern until he inhaled lustily. "That's not bad," she commended. "Now put your fist in front of your mouth as if holding a bugle."

How does she know these things?

"Mister Rathbun? What is it?"

"I have me a bugle. I do. Played it all the time when I was a bit of a thing."

"Angeline, the boy is driving us mad with that bugle."

"I'll have him put it up, Mister Warren. It was his father's."

"Then you know very well what I'm asking of you, don't you," Susan swept on. "Put your clenched hand up, no, against your lips. As-if-with-a-bugle, for heaven's sake. Now smell the rose, but put the air back out through your fist. *Deep* breath, now blow out, make it sound like a tea kettle. Again--in, out. Until I tell you to stop. Again. Once more. Take your hand down, keep that same rhythm of breathing. There. Feel the muscles work? Down there in your flanks?"

His flanks felt as if they were an unwilling topic of conversation. "Some, I guess."

He wondered how much of this Dolph was hearing, outside.

“That’s what you must practice,” she decreed. “At home, in the mirror.

Do it a dozen times first thing each morning and again over the noonhour and again at night, and I guarantee, I can tell whether or not you have been doing them.” Monty considered himself notified. “Next let’s acquaint you with the notes.”

He listened apprehensively while she demonstrated how to sing the scale.

Her voice was smooth, each note up the ladder a tease of song; how was he ever going to get there? She would hold pitch, he would frown in concentration and then sic his voice onto hers. After considerable of this she called a break, with tea and honey for his throat and enough advice from her to make his head swim.

Then back to traversing the notes. It took many tries, but finally she granted that he had approximated the scale.

By the time they called it a day, he felt as if he had gone fifteen rounds with a tornado. Heading for his way out, he made his manners and said he would see her tomorrow.

“You will not,” Susan said with a slight smile. “Three lessons a week are as much as a voice can stand--every other day and Sunday off. But practice the

breathing exercise in between, don't forget." He stood there at the door looking as if he had just been swatted with the calendar, but she couldn't help that. "Wait, let me give you my list for some more provisions. And tell Whit Williamson for me that I am going to need a milk cow."

Monty fiddled with his hat while she kept jotting down foodstuffs. The adjusted ciphering of musical career that he was doing in his head was not coming out well at all. "Miss Susan? How long you figure I'm going to need to take lessons?"

"Oh, forever," she said absently, still writing her grocery list.

"How--how's that work?" His dismay was the purest note he had hit all day, causing her head to snap up. "I can't be coming here until they lay me away!"

"No, no. I just meant that every singer needs refresher lessons, all through life. As to how long these sessions need to go on--we'll just have to see." Her face gave away nothing, but the provisions list she handed to him looked long enough to endure a siege.

Monty turned at the door. "Mind if I ask? These lessons forever--who gives you yours?"

“I administer them myself. I take my own medicine, Mister Rathbun, don’t worry.”

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Nights run slow here, rationed out by the wick. Why hadn't I remembered?

She moved the lamp some more until it almost touched the open diary, annoyed at how spoiled the electricity of Helena had made her. There was no great reason why a person couldn't write and read by courtesy of kerosene.

Compose an operetta.

“Fiddle Strings, will you quit.” The cat tickled its muppy fur back and forth across her ankles, purring without shame or letup. “You’re a tyrant, you are,” she addressed downward. Rather than go out in the dark to the springhouse for milk from the pail, she resorted to the can of condensed milk she used on coffee, cutting off the top to get the last teaspoon into the cat pan. The cat looked a trifle critical, but lapped it up.

She fed the fire next, last of the night’s chores except for the load of good intentions she had brought here with her. Piqued by Monty’s question, she nightly put her voice through its paces before she ever sat down to the diary and

the waiting noteless sheets of score. Good thing, too, because if she held off on her vocal exercises until she accomplished what she wanted on the page these nights, she would be in direct competition with Angus McCaskill's rooster as it summoned the dawn up there at the head of the valley.

Having given herself enough of a scolding, she resumed at the table again.

Prairie Tide lay there side by side with the diary; inert, the weight of ten years on it. How could this be, that the mud-road cavalcade for the vote refused to shape itself to music for her, after she had been the one to pour forth its soul in song? She could see, fresh as this moment, the famous trio of flivvers, dubbed the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, and the *Susan B.*, grinding from town to town along the full length of the Yellowstone River and then looping north to the wide plains of the High Line and the even newer counties and sprigs of towns there along the immigrant seedbed of the Great Northern railroad. Blindfold her and spin her dizzy and she could still perform the evening of favorites that drew the homestead families to the scattered one-room schoolhouses and the fledgling motion-picture emporiums, so that on the heels of her rousing songs the speakers could have at those audiences on behalf of the statewide suffrage referendum. "*Our* *ambadress to the shanties*," she was deemed by Jeannette Rankin, high-born

and connected and said by everyone to be Congress-bound as soon as Montana women wielded the vote. Susan, her father's daughter in quickness to take umbrage, had swallowed that from Jeannette because there was a flavor of truth to it; as the carloads of the crusade trundled past isolated gulches where kerosene lamps glowed yellow, puddles of light such as she had come from, she felt singled out by some circular law of the draw.

Of course even then she had known that the performance of a lifetime would not go uncriticized. The costs, back in Helena. *"Miss Duff, I must know-- are you one of those suffs? My child does not need a singing teacher who believes in disrupting the home."*

"Then she will never have the historic privilege, Mrs. Moberley, of a teacher who believes the female of the species has the right to be distinguished from the lower animals by possession of the ballot. Are we not persons?"

In the end, all had been worth it. The overshoe counties, the prairie tide of settlers, carried the day in the so close referendum on suffrage. It was a famous victory, and lacked only its snatches of tune. The moment Wes proposed Scotch Heaven to her in this charitable enterprise of his, to call it that, Susan saw the interlude here as her chance to remedy that lack. Here she had solitude, that

Cheshire countenance of creation: find the face of what you wanted to do and lock onto it without blink or hesitation, wasn't that the prescription? Here she was even paid (*All right then, triple*, the most welcome words Wes had spoken to her in those four years) to sit and stew over music. (Unbidden, the schoolyard song chanted in her: *A diller, a dollar/a high-collar scholar*. Why on earth should that take up room in her head, and not some passage fit for an operetta? Maybe there was her answer, have Angus's tots compose the lyrics that seemed beyond her.) Here she had but one student--although he frequently seemed like more--standing in the way of the time and strength and patience that ought to set that pageant of mud and glory to music. And tonight again she couldn't capture any of it, the flivver journey of 1914 as scattered as the Milky Way.

"Trunk songs," she delivered the verdict on this work of hers to the noncommittal cat. What little she had composed so far was only worth being closed away under a firm lid, in there to ferment with the mothballs. With *Prairie Tide* swept away one more time, she went back to the diary and today's other frustrating musical chapter.

I am so down I can hardly write. Monty works hard at these lessons, but there is no reservoir of breath in him. It's as if he has no diaphragm! He chops

along from note to note. This morning I braced him as to whether he was doing his exercises when he is out of my sight. "Religiously," he had me know. I must hope that did not mean only on Sundays.

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The next day came blowy, perfect bad weather for staying in and facing unwritten music, and she was trying to get underway when a voice outside resounded like the language of kings:

"Susan! I've brought you a person of importance!"

Angus's hail sent her to the window. He rode past to his schoolhouse every morning about now, but the bundled-up figure perched on the saddlehorse next to his--*Adair, at this early hour?*

Susan swooped her diary and the reprieved pages of operetta off the table. Canny Angus, to give her whatever time possible to put on a face to meet Adair.

She was more wrenlike than ever, Susan saw during the doorway effusions, the years carving her down to delicacy. Most unScottish, for a woman born not a pathlength away from her hewn husband, but then Adair had always been the other side of category.

"Come in, hang your hat on the floor," Susan fell back on the habit of the house.

"Not I, thank you just the same," came back from Angus. "I have to go put roundish thoughts into squarish heads."

"And you wouldn't have it any other way," Susan told him, Adair chipping in with "You'd mope like a spent rose without that old school of yours."

"Leave it to Scotch women to shed a ray over the affairs of men," he jested. "If one of you doesn't tell me what I'm about, the other one will."

It took two to set the likes of him straight, they assured him, and off he went to his schoolday. Susan turned and groped at the cupboard.

"Adair? I have coffee on, but beyond that, I'm afraid it's graham--"

Adair produced a dishtowel bundle. "I brought you a loaf."

The bread was still warm from the oven. Susan sent her a look. A woman who had baked bread before breakfast? And then ridden down here in the dew hours to spend, what, the day? From girl on, when Susan had sung at the wedding of Angus and Adair and even to a knockkneed schoolmaid it had been obvious how Angus's eyes searched past his bride of convenience to Anna Ramsay, Susan had tried to fathom what this person's view of things must be.

But there seemed no knowing, no way in past those deflecting gray eyes with their odd guardpost of freckles directly beneath each. In the time after Adair's second still-birth when the women of the other homesteads would visit in and always find a deck of cards laid out in columns in front of this woman, Susan's mother would come home shaking her head and say, "*Adair and solitaire*," not a commending rhyme. Now Adair was saying, "It's so fresh, it may be hard to cut."

"No, no. It'll be a treat."

Susan mauled off two large floppy underdone slices and the two women silently buttered and ate. They brushed their hands of that, and took up one of those dutiful conversations about the how of things, how was the Rathbun man doing, how were the further generations of McCaskills coming along. Susan was delving desperately--she was relieved out of all proportion when a gust rattled the kitchen windowpane as if wanting to come in out of its own weather and join them, and the two women were able to say almost in chorus that today's was a thieving wind, it had stolen through snow somewhere--when Adair came out with:

"Susan, I'll not keep you from yourself."

still-birth
?

With a start--*written all over me, is it*--Susan began to say something patently insincere about company other than herself probably being good for her once in a while. The other woman interjected:

"I only came to ask a bit of a favor. I would like lessons."

Serves me right, Susan let herself have, suddenly longing for the procession of sugarplums with ringlets through her Helena music parlor. "Adair, really, I'm just here to tutor this one pupil."

"Every other day, according to when I see him and his wetnurse riding across the bench."

"That's so. But--"

"That leaves the other days."

Susan gave up any pretense of politeness. "What brings this on?"

"I'm not asking you to make me into a fine singer or famous or anything of the sort." *I'm spared that, at least*, Susan thought to herself. "It would be something to do with myself, is all." Adair gazed at her. "A person can sing to herself and not be thought soft in the head, can't she?"

Susan knew she wasn't feigning. All the pretense in Adair McCaskill, you could collect on an eyelash.

“Adair, I always need to know--what manner of music do you have in mind for yourself?”

“Songs with the old country in them,” Adair stated. “Your mother’s songs would do me.”

Susan that night thought long and hard about the populace of solitude.

About the dots of humankind, connected and not, strung through the weathered valleys and across the girth of prairie like constellations reflected on the ground.

The Adairs, the Anguses--and those between them even when no longer there--of the flivver trip: the women hungry for any other women to talk to, even dressed-up ones from Helena; the men half-bemused and half-alarmed that they would be hearing these suffrage arguments from their wives and daughters forever after.

Then episodes began to come back to her, the elongated memory shadows from the dots. The syrup sandwiches that were all the supper that could be mustered by the host family fresh from their emigrant railcar near Ingomar. The proud pledge of allegiance in Danish by the Frisian colony near Dagmar. The way smoke would fall to the ground before a storm, the smell of the weather riding out to the road to meet them as the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, and the *Susan B.* chugged into view of yet another isolated homestead chimney.

"Out of my way, star boarder," she directed the drowsy cat. She fetched the sheets of composition paper to the table and spread them there in the wash of light.

By midnight she had unraveled two lines for every one she had written, and endured her way through another one of those spasms of hopelessness when not even the prepositions seemed to fit into her sentences, but she had a few lyrics and something hummable to show for the night.

#

"How's come the Major is so generous on this singing of yours, and not on my trick riding?"

"Dolph, the only riding trick you know is to climb on the side of your horse a person is supposed to, and you've got a fifty-fifty chance on that."

"What the hell you talking about?" Dolph sputtered. "I can do the saddle stand, and the Comanche tuck, and, and--" Monty's effort to hold in laughter registering on him, he grinned sheepishly. "Tune up your tonsils, then. But you end up back at rodeoing instead of concertizing, I'll ride circles around you any day."

"Fair enough," Monty said soberly.

C11

“Here, I’ll barn the horses, you get in there and take your medicine from her,” Dolph rattled on as they dismounted in the now familiar yard. “Ask her for me what she’s doing with all the milk from that damn cow, feeding an orphanage?”

As he approached the house Monty could hear her in there plinking the piano in a testing way, *da dum, da dum da da*. Knowing she was just waiting her turn at him, he knocked and already had the door handle in his grip and his hat ready to flip onto the peg by the time she called the customary “Come on in, Mister Rathbun.”

She didn’t migrate into the kitchen to swoop him in as usual, though, only poked the part top of her around the inner doorway like the front end of a clipper ship. “Here’s an idea. Come see.”

Monty sensed something arduous ahead. But when he stepped in to where she had taken up her station, the only thing new was that her wind-up Victrola had been moved to front and center, its morning-glory horn expectantly aimed their way.

git

tag part

“Today I have something I want you to hear, Mister Rathbun--do you suppose it would it be all right if I call you ‘Monty’? It would save a little on the world’s supply of breath that I’m eternally after you about.”

His short-measure nod. He still was trying to come up with an educated guess as to what this was about. Stand around and listen today, after standing around chasing through the scale those other days? *Am I ever going to get to just sing?*

Vigorously she cranked the phonograph and set the needle onto the record. Out poured a profound bass sound as if the foundations of heaven were shifting; Chaliapin in *Boris Godunov*. Monty appeared ready to take to the hills.

“Whoops, not that one,” Susan said with a chuckle. She grabbed the intended record from the imposing stack on the sideboard. More whirls of the phonograph handle, and a voice soared high and clear:

“Let us break bread together on our knees,

Let us break bread together on our knees,

When I fall down on my knees

With my face to the rising sun,

Oh Lord, have mercy on me.”

some
11

Susan cut the song off there with a practiced pass of her hand over the Victrola and looked at Monty to judge his reaction. He felt a little dry-mouthed as he managed to say, "It's nice." He hoped to God it was Roland Hayes. If there was more than one spiritual singer like that in the world, he had might as well go back to polishing car fenders right now.

She made him know the voice was Hayes's as if it was obvious even to the snoozing cat over there, and talked on a bit about the fullness of that voice, the technical polish on a natural purple tone. "Now we're going to pick up the trick from him."

Another spirited winding of the Victrola, but this time Susan hovered over it, putting her finger lightly against the edge of the turntable as it spun. Slowed down that way, the voice on the record became a stately warble. Monty listened as though he were deciphering pig Latin.

"There," Susan said cagily, Monty looking at her as though whatever she was up to was as clear as mud. "Hear what he's doing, inside the words? I'll play it again. Here, this part."

This time he could catch it all:

"Leht uss brayke brehd toogethur..."

a little

“Our Mister Hayes e-nun-ci-ates,” he could hear every pore of every letter the way she said it, “doesn’t he. He’s shaping the words, there in the vowels for instance--each word carries into the next and brings the melody right along with it. Now then. I’d like you to copy him at it until you catch the knack.” Wind wind wind, went her hand on the Victrola handle.

This was off-angle enough he wanted to make sure he had a grasp of it. “Sing along with that machine while you make it logey, that’s what you want done?”

“Only if you’re not shy to be around a voice that knows what it’s doing.”

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

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

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

He was slow to answer. "It fits with something I been thinking about, is all."

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

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

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

the sort of
7

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

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

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

Monty hung back to the other side of the room.

Susan took her hands off the keys. “What is it now?”

“I haven’t ever sang with a piana.”

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

“Surely you’re not afraid of a musical instrument.”

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

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

#

"A letter for you, Mister Williamson."

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

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

Dear Wes--

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

You will be pleased to hear we have made some strides, or rather, I have pushed and Monty has progressed in some steps. Some, I emphasize; less so in others. His vocal range is improving, although of course not yet as much as it

ultimately must. His tone remains his strongest point. In presentation, he no longer stands as if he were made of warped barrel staves. All in all, after these first weeks, I can say Monty is in better possession of his voice. But his voice is not yet in possession of him, which is the breakthrough for a true singer.

You are missing quite the contest. He is a striver. Amenable, to a point, and stubborn as a stump beyond that. Unfortunately he seems invincibly convinced that the lungs installed in him at birth are adequate, but I am determined to build him up, there in the solar plexus and below. The flag of this expedition you have set us upon, Wes, reads not "Excelsior!" but "Exercises!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sincerely, Susan

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

He checked the clock ticking discreetly in the corner of the library. He was late for his lunch with Phil Sherman, but Phil was always late himself, entangled one way or another. He winced, catching himself being envious of his oldest friend. A bachelor who was also a theatrical producer evidently had innumerable affairs to tend to, some more fair-haired than others. "Surely you

remember your Mendeleev from chem, Wes," Phil had said after Wes spotted him at the latest war orphans' benefit with a chorus girl as leggy as a racehorse.

"Chorine is the element I've added to the Periodic Table."

That would do for some people, Wes supposed. Unfolding Susan's letter again, he ran his eyes down it as if it were a balance sheet. The lowdown on Monty's vocal status could be more heartening and could be less. It was her remark about buying his way through the alphabet that piqued him. *Susan, Susan, you don't have to pour it on.* She was supposing that he had set his sights on the TM&T-- "The Empty," he knew people called it, not that he cared-- only because it ran from Valier, the Double W's handiest shipping point these days, to the mainline at Conrad; another cattle baron grab, another annex to the House of Williamson. True as far as it went, but motives seldom know pure boundaries. *What if I were to tell you, Susan, that this is more like an old military maneuver--shaking the blanket to get rid of the cooties.*

He rubbed his temples with a shielding hand, trying to rid his head of the tensions of last night. In the ever-flowering wilderness of progress, a person now did not even have to leave his favorite chair to visit the battleground of politics. He had sat up until the bitter end listening to radio voices describe the

Mendeleev?

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Democratic nominating convention tying itself in knots over the Klan. The Smith and McAdoo factions would go back to endless balloting again today, deadlocked over a simple resolution against the bigotry which everyone knew went under the initials KKK. The Republicans hadn't really been any better, standing by that mute fool Coolidge, successor to that incoherent fool Harding. Very much, Wes wished he had Susan in front of him instead of her all too representative letter. She could joke all she wanted, but in times like these he was the one who had to face what the Two Medicine & Teton was likely to carry other than cattle. Word had it that railway workers were the web on which the Klan was spreading itself through Montana, the skunkholes called Klaverns by all reports in forty counties by now. *The sneaking bastards*. He wasn't having that in the Two Medicine country. He would need to clean and gut the little railroad, fire every one of them and have the sheriff kick them to the county line if that's what it took.

Like the mills of the gods, the drivewheels of faith sometimes could grind exceeding fine, and Wes took what satisfaction there was in that. He tucked the letter away. Wouldn't Phil Sherman relish this railway venture, a homely little set of tracks as an excursion for exquisite banter. "But this is perfect for a Galahad like you, Wes," he could all but recite the conversation to come at lunch, "a

chance to operate a railroad as something other than organized robbery of the public." "Yes, Phil, and I'll maintain it by passing the hat here in the Club." (But he thought he would not make the case, even to Phil, about the railroad as necessary angle-iron against the Ku Kluxers; as a Catholic cautiously let in to Phil's natural Gold Coast set at Harvard, Wes had learned considerably more than was in the curriculum.) The two of them would spar from there--the East tended to be a sparring match; the West always was a wrestle--and he knew it was time, past time, to go on up now for asparagus and epigrams.

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

the opposite. When I'm governor I'll make this state so hot for you, you and the copper boys will need to go around in furnace pants."

"Wes, Wes," the politico chided. He put down beside Wes's brandy glass a newspaper clipping. "*Miss Susan Duff, Helena's renowned alto, will give a recital this evening at the Missoula Atheneum for the benefit of the Over There memorial where so many of Montana's men at arms lay...*" That was followed with the receipt for the Missoula hotel room. Under Wes's staring eyes, the man crumpled the two pieces of paper and flipped them into the fireplace. "Naturally, there's more where that came from."

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

Over There

1919

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

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

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

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

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

The enemy's attentiveness to newcomers in the stale flat-footed killing match that was the Western Front was understandable: Montanans were the mould for reinvented soldiers, American Expeditionary Force-style--hunters from the time they were boys on ranches and homesteads, well acquainted with shovel calluses and dirty chores and rough quarters. Most of all, not worn down as the Europeans and British were by the routine of trench life, which was mud and boredom interspersed by the warning whizzes of every calibre of weapon known to man. Wes remembered thinking that Company C handled better that day, their first in the frontlines, than they ever did on the grumblesome troopship or in the poker-wild disembarkation camp, and that sort of thought had told him he was thoroughly an officer again. At the time, of course, only newly commissioned as an old captain, not yet a young major; but back in command comfortably enough.

"Sergeant, instruct Private Imhoff to limit his conversations with the other side,"

he had issued the order just to keep matters rolling his way, before jauntily setting off to inspect the remainder of the position. Not twenty minutes later, a salvo

screamed in on the Montana battalion. He and Lieutenant Olsen had to make themselves thin together behind a shared snag of a tree, shrapnel whining sharp as a singing saw.

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

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

Perhaps because it was the one piece of contested earth anywhere around that vaguely held its original shape, Wes made it known he would like to go up

a little
paged

onto the hill. The French military attache was solicitous about whether Monsieur Williamson would wish to walk that far, which meant whether he could. Wes glanced at the officer's own mark of the war, a monocle worn derisively over an unseeing left eye--glass the fitting companion for glass, *non?*--and said he would be all right. Then he set off up Dead Man's Hill with the Frenchman.

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

He and the escort climbed with odd austere care, the dark maroon topcoat and the blue dress uniform the only advancing spots of color in the dun landscape. The rise of ground was so pitted with shell hole upon shell hole there was barely room to walk in single file between, and to Wes's irritation the escort periodically steadied him with a hand to his elbow. Fresh earth was turned

wherever the French graves registration teams had been about their business of exhuming and removing bodies to the memorial cemetery. Across about a hundred and sixty acres, Wes estimated--a quarter section, back home--lay the litter of old rifles, helmets, ruptured canteens, even scraps of uniforms and bone bits.

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

The French officer kept to himself whatever thoughts he had about the formidable American insistent upon the view from the top; merely more of the battlefield. Nevertheless, Wes needed to see back through time in more ways than one. *But Lord, to spell it out in bones:* he swallowed on that as if trying to get rid of an overpowering taste. From the first day he and his company of men marched in here, he had recognized the Western Front for what it was: history's most gargantuan stockyard. Trenches and bivouac quarters and sentry posts rather than

chutes and corrals and cutting gates, but the herd-handling system, the organizing principle, was shockingly the same as the Middle Ages abbatoir he and Phil Sherman had traced out of its famed ruins near Aylesbury, as a lark, in their wander summer after Harvard. First and foremost, the cattle pens--except that here, the constructed containments had been insanely built in unending quantity, across half a thousand miles from the ocean to the Alps. Then the commodity on the hoof to fill the expectant channels, in this instance a million soldiers on each side, and when those were consumed, another million and another. Feed them, water them, care for them as best you could, these penned droves: then hope against hope that their weight, the avoirdupois of armaments and guts, would tip the scales. Whether it did or didn't, adjacent to the slaughter yards waited the next sites in the process: the trade yards (replacement depots and hospitals), the tanyards and the bone yards (cemeteries and ossuaries such as this hill). Modern continental war this may have been, here, but in grotesque recourse to the invention of organized slaying it was also fundamentally medieval--a four-year market in the alive, the dead, and the in-between.

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

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

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

She stayed close by the stammering Missoula haberdasher who was state chairman of their committee for the memorial project; his red-eyed wife, with two sons in the cemetery which all but surrounded this town, was worse than no help in this situation. Gently pummeled with hospitality as they were, Susan let her

sight that
meets you
grandly

stage sense steer her through. Back when her voice was still regarded as finding its promise rather than having reached its limits, she had performed in Europe-- cities a cut below Paris and Vienna and Berlin--but never at an occasion so bedecked as this. Franco-American tricolors aside, everyone there knew this gathering was intrinsically auspicious, coinciding as it did with the imminent date on the calendar which would put the worst of wars one full year into the gentling distance of the past, into calculable history. Here at St. Mihiel where *poilus* and doughboys had fought together and broken the German salient, their countries would erect for all the world to see a monument of that hardest alloy to attain, peace. If her given part in that was to hold herself high enough tonight for the French to sight along, she could stiffen herself to it.

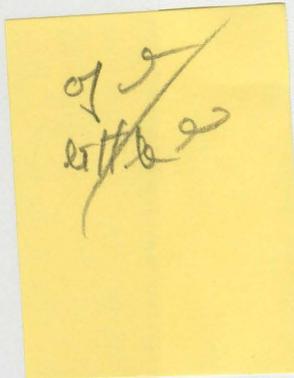
Yet under it all Susan, for all her common allegiance with the other Americans who had been sent, was there decidedly to represent the postage-stamp trust territory populated entirely by herself and Samuel. The colossal memorial statue, to rise out of the field of white crosses marching in place, she had not bothered to have an opinion about, and could not believe Samuel would have. But the archive proposed by the French, to hold forever the letters and diaries of the killed soldiers--their stories in whatever scrawled moments, adding up to the

but a
swath
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last chapter of a sacrificed generation--she would have skated the Atlantic to see done. Tucked in her luggage back at the clammy *pension* was the packet of Samuel's letters, the most costly of donations.

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

Sister dearest--They do have wind here. Reminds me of a little bit of a constant chinook, but more of a washelli. Samuel with his love of code and collector's passion for language. She went to his notebooks, found the one with his lexicon of wind names, across the airy face of the earth: *chinook, williwaw, datoo, mistral... washelli*, a coastal Indian word for *west wind*. She took another



pushpin from her supply and, eyes all but closed, thrust it into the map on the Western Front.

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

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

The rest of it, this initial evening, was a matter of maintaining a measured smile and accepting apologies for the inclemency of climate within the confines of

France. She played the role of weatherproof visitor to the hilt until inevitably her little group was brought face to face with the famous Major Williamson, whom they surely knew? Oh, they did not?

“Sad circumstances to meet in, Mr. Averill, Mrs. Averill,” the distinctive voice undiluted in the several years since she had heard him speak at the suffrage convention--he was the state senator from Pondera County, as a Williamson or one of their bootlickers customarily was--and the commanding mien that even then had his listeners whispering *higher office* was similarly undiminished, quite the contrary. Wesley Williamson looked like he always had a cushion under him about six-inches higher than anybody else’s.

As amused as the occasion would allow, Susan watched him turn in her direction and read her family resemblance with surprise and probably worse; you could not be the daughter of Ninian Duff and pass for anyone else. Uneasy though he plainly was, he spared her any pat remark about resemblance or coincidence and seemed to step back in himself in unexpected apology. He must be here, she realized, as the representative of the veterans, which was to say the survivors, the lucky ones. But how does one qualify for such luck? *The Lord called Samuel*, her father had put a trembling finger to the Bible passage so many



times the page bore a smudge, *and he answered, Here am I*; she herself would no longer go near a God who let that happen in the epidemic of madness called war.

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

Curious, Susan checked to either side of him in the crowd, but the high and mighty Wesley Williamson seemed to be unaccompanied. Somewhere he had a wife to tend to, rumored to be high society, doubtless taking in Mont St. Michel or Lourdes while he dirtied his hands with this obligation. Momentarily Susan was distracted by a freshly bubbling glass someone placed in her hand. By now the mingled Montanans had become the object of ceaseless toasts. Tonight and tomorrow belonged to them. Missing no chance to underscore the cost in lives caused by the foe across the Rhine, the French had expressed the wish to

~~photo...~~
summoned
by way of

honor before the great gathering of memorial delegations from all of the United States those from the state that, *per capita*, had bled most grievously in the war.

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

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

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

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

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

“The Adamses, you must mean, Major? In memory of the sad case of Henry’s wife Clover, isn’t it?”

“You have seen it then, Miss Duff?”

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

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

“And you aren’t one for weeping?”

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

“You’re a hard critic.”

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

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

On the day that was to culminate in the closing ceremony, Susan would have been nervous if she had let herself. But, dressed in her aqua green best and with enough on under it to compensate for the cobblestone chill of the town square, she sat like a picture of poise through the speeches that began at mid-morning in both languages, or in instances when the French tried to incorporate English or the Americans made forays into French, pulverized fractions of the

two. Then through the rainbow swirls of folk-dances. Then through a rather carousel-like version of Sousa marches by the French military band.

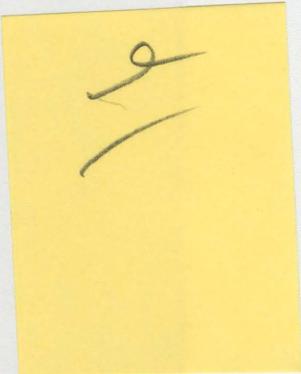
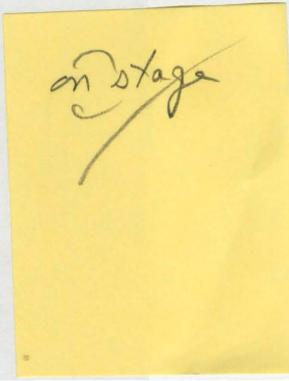
Nerves were one thing, brain cells were another. Yesterday's tour of the cemetery had set matters off. All during it and up to the present moment, she found herself thinking back to the homestead and the dead pile--the heap outside the lambing shed where the dead ones were thrown. Some of the lambs when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

To distract herself further she directed her gaze--very much as if she were taking all this in for the sake of writing it down for Samuel--to this homely old

town's black iron lampposts, so ornamented atop that they seemed to be wearing ponderous crowns, and to the ambling patterns of its spotless policemen, making their rounds at the edge of the crowd like, well, like gendarmes sampling from one patisserie to the next. Almost before she knew it, she was being beckoned up to the platform by the beaming mayor of St. Mihiel.

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

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

As I walked out in the streets of Laredo,

As I walked out in Laredo one day,

I spied a dear cowboy wrapped up in white linen,

Wrapped up in white linen as cold as the clay.

'I see by your outfit that you are a cowboy'--

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

We beat the drum slowly and played the fife lowly,

And bitterly wept as we bore him along;

For we all loved our comrade, so brave, young, and handsome,

We all loved our comrade although he'd done wrong.

The applause thundered off the stone buildings of the town square. She bowed her head the sufficient number of times in acknowledgment and deftly

made her exit. Schoolchildren followed on to the platform, shyly waving handkerchief-sized flags. The band pranced into action again.

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

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

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

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

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

When it was over, the crowd had trouble making itself leave. Handshakes, embraces, kisses upon cheeks. Promises to keep in touch. Wes shouldered his

way along the dignitary row past the awe and clinging congratulations. Now or never. He caught up with her at the archway. "You're staying a few days, Averill tells me."

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

"Actually, I'm staying too. There's a historian who wants to do a walk-through of the battlefield with me. I just thought--should we have dinner together?"

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

"My wife is never--she's not well enough to travel."

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

"Whatever about?"

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

Sand Map

1924

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

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

“The very lads I’m looking for,” Angus sang out. “I have some well-traveled livestock for you.” He whistled low to the dog. “Heel them, Bobby.”

With the border collie industriously coursing behind them as close as the tassels of their tails, the cattle galloped past the paused pair of riders.

“Helping the wayfarers on their way a bit,” Angus informed them, pulling up his horse next to Dolph and Monty. His head cocked judiciously, after a moment he called the dog off. “No charge, though, for setting them into motion for you,” he told the two.

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

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

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

"Suits me."

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

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

Monty was decidedly staying out of this.

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

"That old scissorbill." Dolph saw the expression on Angus and amended: "Excuse my French. But he was always putting the jump on me whensoever I'd ride anywhere close to the North Fork. Acted like he had this whole country in his pocket."

sort

this thought

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

“Have it your way,” Dolph muttered. “C’mon, Monty, those cows are making miles on us.”

Angus inched his horse closer to Monty’s. “A minute of your time?”

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

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

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

“Brave of you, to undergo tonsil exercises when you wouldn’t have to.”

Monty continued to meet Angus’s gaze, although it was not easy. Those agate eyes were too wise for comfort. He knew what they were taking in, a

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scuffed-up colored cowboy who had arrived at the middle of life but nowhere near its center. He felt the old weariness of having to deal with what he was when every face around him was pearl-handled. Why prolong the malady?

“Tell you the truth, I’m about to bunch it. It’s just not working out.”

“Are you not getting along with Susan Duff?”

“It’s not that, so much.”

Angus waited him out.

“I’m maybe not cut out for this,” Monty finally said.

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

Monty absorbed this, staying wary.

Angus looked off up the creek. “She’s been a while gone from here.” He turned to Monty again. “I wouldn’t want to see her come back just to be

disappointed.” Preparatory to going, he snapped his fingers above the dog, which crouched and sprang high against the leather of his chaps, and was scooped to its nestling place between lap and saddle horn for the ride home.

“Mister?” Monty did the detaining now. “‘Curious’ is a habit I never been able to break.”

“Say on.”

“You make it pretty plain there’s some things you don’t like about the way the Williamsons operate.”

“Just everything about them.”

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

“But I’ve known Susan Duff since she was watch-pocket high,” Angus replied. “If she’s for you, I’m never against you. Tuck that away in case it’s needed, all right?” He rode back into the cloaking brush of the North Fork, and Monty spurred away up the slope of the benchland.

Atop, he pitched in with Dolph to round up the last of the spooked cows.

When they had the cattle under control and headed for the west pasture, Dolph beelined over and let his horse fall into step with Monty's.

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

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

"Probably stuck on her himself. Scared we'll beat his time with her."

When that didn't bring a rise out of Monty, Dolph cleared his throat. "She's not so bad a looker."

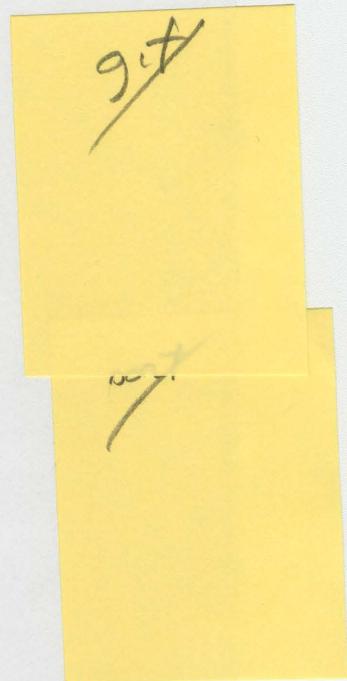
"I wouldn't know."

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

"Do?"

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

In no way did Monty like this territory of talk. Dolph and the other Double W hands could trot into Gros Ventre any Saturday night and have their needs taken care of by a bottle-blonde whore upstairs at Wingo's speakeasy,



while that was out of the question for him. Clore Street or nothing, for him, and that kind of trip to Helena wasn't anywhere in the picture until the Major had enough of New York, and why did Dolph have to start yapping about this anyway?

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

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

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

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

sort