

Medicine Line**1924**

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"Jake and Roany was a-chousin' along

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

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

"Now there's homegrown music for you," the announcer's voice crackled out of the radio set with professional enthusiasm. *Not in my book*, Monty grumbled to himself as he made his bed, the only chore he could find left to do.

Call that a yodel? "That was the Medicine Line's own Prairie Troubador, Andy Olswanger, singing a traditional cowboy song," the announcer rattled on, "right here in our studio. Well done, Andy! Say, friends, we here at station CINE, the

voice of Medicine Hat and the province of Alberta"--a gulp of distance, then the sound wavered in strong again--"bringing you the finest listening that radio has to offer, from the Medicine Line to the High Line, all across these splendid wide open spaces where two nations meet in--"

Bunch of open spaces between their ears, Monty fumed as he stepped over and pinched off any more yowling from either the yodeler or the announcer.

Putting that on the air. Yet, it had only been last night, late, when the radio set swept voices in from anywhere, that he had come across ^{Roland Hayes} ~~Paul Robeson~~ singing from Pittsburgh. He had nearly shouted across to Miss Susan to come over and hear, but that was complicated, even here.

As he had been doing all morning, he told himself to set his face for it. Complication was not going to leave either of them alone for awhile now. Glancing around the strange room, he did not feel beckoned by any of the well-intentioned furniture and sank himself back down on the freshly made bed. His mind ticked on their situation as steadily as the unhelpful clock beside him. The Major had better be on the mark about this hidey-hole, or the clucks would come night-riding again, ready to scorch the life out of more than grass this time. *Flock of bastards them anyway.* What he wouldn't give to take on those Klan boobs,

one to one, he didn't care whether with rifle, jackknife, tire iron, name it. On the other hand, what he wouldn't give to be a thousand miles from here about now. Somewhere that he wouldn't stick out like this from rubbing up too close to white people.

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

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

Too restless to stay on his back, he rolled onto his feet and prowled back over to the window. The windowglass was the old wavy kind. The sprawling parade ground, the tired old barracks across the way, the windbreak of skimpy

dried-up cottonwoods that had never quite died and never quite flourished here, all had a waver to them, as if flowing in place; as if the air still held the slightly turbulent rhythm of parading cavalry.

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

"Sit tight," Wes instructed Monty, "while I get our marching orders."

Ignoring how stiff his game leg was from the long car ride, he pegged his way to Susan's car and told her the same. A man none of them knew had come out of the guardhouse on the far side of the expanse between officers' row and the barracks. Pulling on his suitcoat and walking carefully around the patches of cheatgrass that infested the parade ground, he advanced to them. Not looking forward to meeting him, let alone spending the time ahead under the eyes of him and his, Susan scanned around at the gaunt files of empty ^{red-brick} buildings, as sudden up out of the prairie as ruins scoured free by a shift in desert dunes.

What, Wes, no sense owning a fort if you can't put it to use? her

astonishment spoke for her when he singled out this as the refuge for her and

Monty and his voice. ^{-in-training.}

Something new in the history of amortization, he admitted with a trace of amusement inadvertently showing on him. Sober-faced again in an instant, he looked as if there was more he wanted to tell her than what she heard in his eventual words: *It's remote, up there. It wouldn't hurt for the two of you to be out of sight for a while.*

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

Not until-- Susan caught the hesitation there in him again--*we settle some scores. If we don't, neither of you will ever be rid of these pests. Susan, something like this is supposed to be up my alley. Trust me on it, pretty please?*

Which would have been easier if she hadn't recognized the public-speaking pirouette he then performed with his tone of voice: *Besides, you'll all but be out of the country. The Medicine Line--*the old Indian phrase for the boundary with

Canada and the prospect of sanctuary there, she knew as well as he--*is just about in sight from the fort.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Without a word, the man led the three of them back over toward the guardhouse. Along that side of the parade ground, brick barracks were lined up for what seemed half a mile, a number of them gutted by fire, the surviving ones looking rundown and rough to the hand from pockmarks made by decades of

blowing grit. Monty chuffed a rill of dust with one foot; it more than likely was left over from the dust storm, and he wondered how long it would be until the next one. His eyes joined the others in trying to take in the mass of deserted habitations over these arid acres. Ranked across from the ramshackle barracks and seeming to squint toward them in disgusted inspection stood prim old house after house of officers' quarters either shuttered tight or with broken windows like splintered monocles. And down the middle the wind blew, the parade ground its permanent right-of-way.

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

"That's Ned," said Bailey, and left it at that.

more
landscape

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

Wes fell into logistical conversation with Bailey while the four of them trooped off toward further batches of buildings. Monty thus far had no sense of recaptured past such as the visit during the dust storm had whirled up for him here, his mood too heavy for memory to make any headway. Was he losing his marbles, or did Fort Assiniboine constitute the last place on earth he'd ever expected to be plunked down in and told to set up housekeeping? While the Klan clucks got to roam around free as bees? "*I don't want to be running from them, I tell you,*" he had implored the Major in his own session of argument against being made to hole up here. "*This way you won't be,*" the reply came gliding, "*you're just going to the other ranch.*" Some ranch; you could lose track of cows for a week just in the jumble of these buildings. Although right now, he saw, a couple of the hands were down at the road putting up the set of gateposts where the new Deuce W sign would hang. The Williamsons never wasted any time in putting their brand on anything.

A wrangling corral, holding a new saddle string of mares and geldings like
an unexpected pool of fresh-washed pebbles, loomed into their path now, and

beyond it, a tumbledown blacksmith shop for horseshoeing and enough stables for a major racetrack. Susan was impatient to scoot on past these, but the men weren't.

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

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

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

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

"But what were they thinking of, building all this that late?" Susan persisted as if the prairie deserved an explanation for all this intrusion on it. She ran a hand through her hair, which the wind was fashioning into knots. "I was

only little at the time, but even as early as we lit in this country, my father said the Indians long since had no more fight left in them than a dog's breakfast."

"Your father would," Wes said, lightly enough to take any sting out of it.

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

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

“Wes, Monty,” Susan called over from where she was peering into a higher-standing boxy building a little apart in this next cluster of structures.

“Look at this, will you.”

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

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

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

“What it is is a *stage*,” she overrode that, “with an actual *proscenium*, and there can’t not be acoustics.” She sailed on into the audience section as though dilapidated auditoriums were her first love. “We need a few of these seats in

working order, is all. Here...over here...and back there. The rest can be, well, imaginary audience.”

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

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

“I shouldn’t wonder,” he managed to give that.

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

“Mine won’t like it, but I’ll have the ones who aren’t on watch pitch in.”

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

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

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

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

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

“What’s this then?”

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

The clock finally having to confess to the appointed hour, Monty hustled out of his quarters dressed in concert gear, drawing deep practice breaths as he went. The mid-morning light here where there was nothing any higher than those stunted cottonwoods to break it was already hard on the eyes as he gingerly navigated his way to the auditorium. He felt more than medium ridiculous at having to try to keep the cheatgrass out of these silk socks, but he had decided that if any of Bailey’s bruisers snickered, they were welcome to do so until they choked on it. He wasn’t the one sitting on his duff day and night up in the drafty second-storeys of Fort Skin-and-Bone guarding them.

When he stepped into the big horseshoe-shaped room, which was cleaner than it was yesterday but still not clean, naturally she was already up there in

possession of the stage. Ensnared at the piano, she was writing furiously onto a sheaf of paper held in her lap. Looking things over, he did have to grant that the piano, by whatever method it had been manhandled into here, added surprising serenity to the scene of harum-scarum seats and lath walls with bare ribs showing. But everything else within the confines of the gaping performance space seemed in what barely passed for working order, and he had a growing feeling this included him.

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

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

"Miss Susan, I feel like I have doilies plastered all over me, all right?"

Now do you suppose we could get going?"

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

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

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

He could not help but grin this off a little. “So you could have the pleasure of hearing me breathe like a tea kettle?”

“There’s that,” she laughed the way she only rarely did during lessons, low and earthy, the kind of laugh that he happened to like ^{to} hear from a woman. “When we started at this, I had no intention whatsoever of taking things this far,” he heard out of her now. “Tune you up, so to speak, and that would be that.” She cocked him a look as if he was solely at fault for this next. “Then you had to go and get worthwhile. Don’t bother to puff up, there are still any number of kinks to be worked out of your hide. But the way your voice has come along would knock over any teacher, and I’d be a traitor to the profession if I didn’t give you whatever seasoning I can for actual performing. That’s why I wanted us to

practice, even here, in full getup from now on." No wonder she seemed so primed and pressed, he realized; she had on an aqua-green gown long enough to pass muster at a fancy ball. Now that he looked, she was even in womanly war paint; face powder, touch of rouge, something done to the lips. If the imaginary audience grew tired of his performing rig, it could feast attention on the accompanist.

Those cobwebs of thought she swept right through. "What we're going to do are called runthroughs. Done right"--she gave every appearance of being in charge of that nationwide--"these will help to put you at ease no matter what happens when you're actually performing."

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

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

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

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

Eventually she swung around to him, the edge of her gown flipping just short of his ankles, and informed him, “Then when you’ve instilled all that in

yourself, you can relax and let your performance take its course.” She stood out there at center stage--on the exact plank she had chalked for him, he noticed, without ever so much as having glanced down--looking lit from within. With all the reassurance in the world in her voice, she confided: “There are only two rules of being onstage, doubtless since Shakespeare: remember your lines, and don’t bump into the furniture.” He managed a laugh, which echoed back at him from the wing of the stage as if from a big empty rainbarrel.

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

Toeing the mark there at center stage, Monty fought the flutters that had accompanied him all morning. Try as he had, the thoughts dogged him at every step toward this mournful relic of an auditorium, then in every square foot she checker-moved him through ~~here within the thing~~ ^g. In the feel of this fort, its blind grip into the prairie, he sensed how it was that the Rathbun family began to flake apart, back there in his first years. The spectral rubble of this place somehow held them yet, maybe invisible to see but outlined as if by firelight in his imagination:

Sergeant Mose Rathbun, rough-hided veteran of the Tenth Cavalry, sent trotting here to fight Indians who no longer needed fighting; Angel Momma, imported to do the linens. And in here would have been the one gathering place outside of duty, back when this fort was manned. The regimental band--Miss Susan had said as much--would have held forth in here, every-so-often concerts of rowdy-dow marches. But that was the kind of tumpy-tump his mother had hated--*They might as well beat it out with a spoon on a washtub, parade themselves to that.*

This must have been where what Sunday services there were got held, too. His father the absconder, sitting here listening to hymns of faith? Somehow he could not picture that either--*Your daddy wasn't ever what might be called churched.*

Even here, desperate temple of music it was supposed to be, he saw how those lives sundered. Other imaginings rose to him like fever vapors from a swamp.

The lordly white officers, probably not a one of them a patch on the Major or they wouldn't have been shelved out here, they'd have filled the front rows like a streak of calcimine, wouldn't they. And in back of them, the uncomfortably unhorsed cavalry troopers in Chinese-checker rows where every marble was black. All of them, swept west like so much dust, to this fort which constituted a

military wild goose chase, it and everything it came in touch with an epidemic of failing, failing--

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

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

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

"No, I am not ready this time either," he ~~chokingly~~^{ad out an} answered her question ~~to~~^{to} before it came. "Just give me a minute and I'll try to get that way." He retreated to the side of the stage, feeling her eyes on him. He sat down in the chair there,

his arms onto his knees and his head out past his toes. If he was going to throw up, he didn't want it to be on these clothes. The prompter's chair, she had said this was, when she was showing him it all. Then how about some promptitude with these songs, any damn one of them, that he had supposedly known ever since ears were fastened on his head?

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

Monty sat back, passed a hand over his face, and made an effort to look like someone who belonged in the vicinity of an auditorium. Then, just like that, music ^{filled} ~~was in~~ the place, solid to the roof. The fancy kind of melody, for sure--her fingers racing all over the piano keys--but everything new that kept coming into it tiptoed back to meet the main tune. Then off a wonderful trickle of music would go again, eventually to shy back to the melody. It had its melancholy side, but the piece stayed full of exalted tricks like that, and as many of them as his ear

could catch, Monty followed with stone-still attentiveness. He couldn't not. This was music that savvied the way into the darkness of mood he had come down with, but lulled it into thinking better of itself. Showed the mood how to console itself, so to speak. ^{Creative music, all the way.} Mesmerized, he watched her fingers in their minute acrobatics along the keyboard, *forth and back*, as the Major would have said. How did she know to pull off a stunt like this?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monty lost the meaning of the saying in the fierce roll of rrr's. Susan indicated out to the farthest reaches of the auditorium as though it was full of something besides howling emptiness. “They'll snatch the breath right out of you, they'll wreck your concentration, and even if they're sitting out there sucking cough drops with the best will in the world, they can stop you cold if you let them.” Her tone softened substantially. “It's odd. A singer needs people to come hear, and they seem to need the music. But they're a--I don't want to say a threat, but they're a force to be reckoned with.”

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

Susan fixed him with a stare that ignored that and told him he had better declare war along with her. “If you don't dominate the audience, the audience will dominate you. You've got to overcome them.”

rodeo
crowd
remarks

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

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

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

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

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

The bottle of blend stood right there handy on the desk, but if the Klan chieftain was not going to reach for it another time, his second-in-command certainly wasn't. He already was nervous about this nighthawk session, just the

pair of them here, not the entire Klavern. Funny kind of way to operate, it still seemed to him. He had to accept his superior's reasoning that it was up to the high ones like them to single out nighthawks, recruits who if they proved themselves could be inducted as Knights, but somehow it was a lot easier to go through with things when you had the hood and robe on. This wasn't the secret meeting place, either; sure, it was after hours, but even so, he flinched at sitting around smack in the middle of Gros Ventre like this. No telling who might--

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

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

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

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

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

"This Williamson bunch is no cinch," the other man complained. "They cut loose the couple of boys out there we were counting on."

The leader resorted to the whiskey bottle now, pouring them each a strong splash. "One of them named Alf, Rolf, something of the sort?"

"Who? None of our likelies, called that."

"All right then," the leader said in relief. "Spread the word for the Klavern to make itself scarce around town, Saturday night. Let me see if I can nighthawk us a certain somebody when he gets enough of this"--he flicked a finger against the bottle--"in him."

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

Ordinarily, dark amounted to a change of clothes. Dressing up, in New York, because with Merrinell's situation it seemed proper to meet her for the

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evening meal looking as lustrous as possible. Times when she felt well enough a few days on end, he would know to go to the next notch and cram the table with dinner guests, desperately getting the black-tie entertaining done in big doses.

Society nights at the Symphony Hall or Carnegie Hall--she almost always felt well enough for those--meant full evening wear. The *grandmother-of-pearl* cufflinks,

he mused to himself now, as he dropped his business-shirt ones into their

sandalwood box in his dresser. Out here, fashion ran the other direction,

downward with the sun; even alone here at the ranch, as now, he did not feel right

until the day's tailored suit was hung away. After supper both he and Whit liked

to be in fresh comfortable britches--particularly if there were ranch accounts were

to be gone over; Whit maintained that riding a desk chair was harder on a person

than horseback--and corduroy shirts old enough to be soft as chamois. It was a

habit caught from their father, and as he dressed into it this evening, Wes

wondered as he sometimes did whether he and Whit would end up like their father

and Teddy Roosevelt, chesty men with years and weight piling up under the

fronts of their shirts as they sat back talking ranching, on into the night.

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

first.

They. Wes took those phantoms downstairs with him now, much as he once shared room in his mind with the German officer who commanded opposite him in the trenches. The adversary always held a certain fascination, particularly with the polish of darkness. Thinking on this, Wes gravitated to the office off the kitchen, taking care to steer clear of Gustafson, chauffeur conscript broodily nursing a cup of coffee at the long crew table, and the touchy Chinese cook closing down his own day with discharges of pots and pans. With the office door safely shut behind him, Wes paused as if taking a reckoning on the room. At some point tonight he had to make himself settle there at the desk for a good long while. Assembling the Deuce W was turning out to be like fitting together jigsaw puzzle pieces made of layers of paper, and the next of those layers had to be currency. *We'll tap a duke or a lord*, their father always airily said in the early years when overseas investors thought cattle on the endless open range of America were a bonanza. Those days were gone, and now it was banks, banks, banks. There were rounds to be made, and before then financial figures to be put in trim like a troupe of acrobats.

Deciding he was not yet ready to nest at the desk, Wes crossed to the outsize old mahogany breakfront which Whit, like their father before him,

familiar old
~~character~~
~~of~~
 edges, ~~dark~~
 as steeped in
 itself as a
 humidifier
 cigar

had faith that

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

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

wanted
with
crossed

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

Susan.

He did justice to the brandy and sent a chiding look around this room that had known nothing but males for all these years. Not that the rest of the house

was any better--something like a hunting lodge with a stockmen's club thrown in.

centles

Horns penetrated from every wall, any furniture that conceivably could be

enveloped in ^{*conside*} leather was. ~~First-rate, Warrie!~~ Roosevelt had yelped to their father

Unfortunately, Wes missed,
the first time he set foot in here. ~~An opinion~~ the female half of the human race did

his father's & White's opinion that deer ought to begin on the hoof.
not seem to share. Whit's young wife from Memphis had lasted here barely a

year. (Whit had merely said *Good thing I tended to business right away with her*

and got the kid started and used Great Falls from then on.) Merrinell had been

here a total of once. Not for the first time, Wes pondered whether the place was a

deliberate no-woman's-land that the Williamson men had strewn in self-defense,

like concertina rolls of barbed wire between the Western Front trenches, or

whether women of a certain social cut simply couldn't be bothered to try and

civilize the Double W.

Well, one had had her say here lately. He thought again of Susan holding forth with that ferocity of hers, that night last week. He would have given

considerable to know what magic she worked on Monty, in here. Enough that they now were all on war footing, surplus fort included, with the damnable Klan.

Knowing he had to get at the work waiting on the desk, Wes still stayed a while at the window and the questions out there in the dark it framed. What faces fit onto the Klansmen? Who was the main push behind them? Because he was all too sure it was somebody sharp. Some one man or at most two, spurring the others--the usual haters and misfits--into this. Someone who had been sent in, perhaps. On that possibility, Bailey was giving the railroad another scouring, but both of them would be surprised if that turned up the answer. Beyond that avenue, there was town after town to sift and the Two Medicine country abounded in distances. It all took time. What most bothered Wes was that these Klansmen were not surfacing. Elsewhere they were showing off in the open, a couple of hundred gathering on Gore Hill at Great Falls the other night to burn a cross. Those 'peaceful assemblies' provided a chance for the Baileys of the world to ferret out identities, and when the time was right, those Klan members would get a rude cure. But these. Crucify a cat, kill off some cows--the Two Medicine brand of Klan picked away just bloodily enough to worry a person, So that you

evan so

advancing

work/price

3mo dur/ have
'marks of some
gandydancer

mastily

had to notice the night, even a quiet one such as this. It reminded him of the too innocent stillness before a barrage.

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course I did. Mrs. Gustafson has just played the part of the audience you weren't holding with '*Unless I Be Made To.*' Now then, what do you do?"

We went over this just yesterday. Quick, quick--the audience isn't getting any less restless."

He still was peering huffily at the balcony doorway where Mrs. Gustafson had steamed out of sight, but Susan was pleased to see him get a ~~grip~~ ^{hold} of himself. ^{& begin to grapple.}

"Fit in '*Praying Jones*,' next," he calculated promptly enough. "It's livelier."

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

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

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

Trying not to sound exasperated, the man across the back table repeated what he had been saying the two previous Saturday nights. "We can't take you

She stomped
her feet like
stomped of
exit

into the Order just like that, not until you prove out. Can't you find some way to give us some help on this?"

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

"Speaking of proof."

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

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

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

She whapped the diary shut with good-night finality, but held onto her pen as if she never went unarmed. Her clock had been banished beneath clothing in

the deepest drawer until bedtime--she agreed with Monty that the tick-tock here was crazily more loud than elsewhere--so she leaned sideways far enough toward the window to check the progress of the moon. High in the sky; if this long night had a meridian, the moonlight should be close to shining down on the morning side of it by now. And she still was not ^{one} a bit sleepy. She sighed, and chuckled at herself because she knew she was not much the sighing type. "Get a grip of yourself, lass," she mocked in the burr that had been burnished by her Scotch Heaven stay. Drawing out a sheet of stationery, oddly fresh in this barn of a room where gloom hung in the corners, and an envelope, she put ink right back to work.

Angus and Adair, hello you two--

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

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

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

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

With all the affection there is,

Susan

Susan, rascal you--

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

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

I must break off--Petey Hahn has forgotten the head of the discourse, and is leading his report on the episode of the Trojan Horse off into the personality of

his own pony, Bloater. Do tell Monty for us that we listen with cocked ear for when he will make a gladsome noise in the world.

Fondness from Adair, too.

Angus

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Susan and Monty kept their voices at a murmur.

“You worked that pretty slick.”

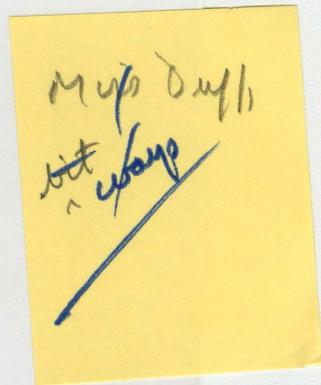
“Loyal to the last dollar, our Mr. Bailey. Well? There was something out here you wanted to go over with me, you said.”

“Promise not to think I’m ready for the bughouse?”

“Monty, please don’t start that. I’m already putting up with riding circles in a weedpatch.”

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

“Would I know a case of it if I saw one?”



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

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

“You take, over there. Put my mind to it a little and I can just about tell you how any of Angel Momma’s days went. From the night before, actually-- she’d butcherknife some pine shavings off, leave them on the oven door so they’d be dry and nice to start the fire in the morning. Did that all her life.” He squinted in concentration, as if to see this next more clearly. “Quick as breakfast was off the stove, on went her irons. Then had to carry her own water, for the washing. She was swimming in laundry and ironing here, and me to handle, besides. And all the time having to prop her clotheslines”--the memory was one of those that

stood out like a tinted picture in an album, of himself darting around beneath the poles she used as though he was loose at a circus--"so the wind didn't take them to Mexico. All that, she must have been one hard-put woman, wouldn't you say?"

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

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

there's ?

at it." He slid his eyes her direction to gauge her attention, and she nodded, a single keen echo of his own usual manner of acknowledgment, for him to keep on. Glancing away toward the gapped wall of long barracks along this side of the parade ground, he began in a low ripple of voice:

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

"So there had to have been hard going for my father, too." Susan watching, the handclasp on the saddlehorn was a fan of fingers lifted one by one now as he named off. "No way up, sergeant was as high as somebody like him could ever go. No war to really fight. No other colored anywhere around, except his troopers." He laughed softly. "Angel Momma always told that she was

~~checked?~~

~~riding one
wyd~~

barely off the steamboat at Fort Benton before here's this Sergeant Mose Rathbun making eyes at her. But that's after he's already been at Fort Skin-and-Bone those years. And that's kind of interesting to me."

"You had better spell that out for me."

"All kinds of reasons to fly the coop, and he never did," came the reply.

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

He was badly aware how far beyond common sense he was venturing. But he had no one to go to with this but her. If they were bound together in this godforsaken place like a pair of people in a three-legged race, what better time to take this on? *You're good and smart. You had a soldier in your family, too.*

Music aside this once, can't you give me some help on me and mine?

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

Monty nodded as if that made up his mind to something. Spurring his horse lightly on the near side, he made the mount shy around in half a well-reined

← physical
right 75?

more
aren't I
to listening

help

pirouette. Startled, Susan watched man and horse turn into a tableau that needed only the sound of bugles behind it.

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

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

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

She did not say *While a white officer stood right over the top of him on everything he did?* Nor its corollary *Until he had to go out on his own and leaked away into the landscape at the first opportunity?* Monty's family pangs peeled her heart. But they also worried her sick. It didn't matter one spark to her what

was behind his father's evaporation unless it ran in the family, and she had natural resistance to that prospect. Or unless--worse yet--Monty let himself be eaten away at by example: that whenever a man of the color passed down to him by Mose Rathbun stepped across a certain line, the world was always going to be too much for him.

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

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

Monty paused to consider. "Angel Momma didn't give him the benefit of any doubt," he at last said in an outbreath. "Got himself in some kind of scrape, she'd always tell me, and that was enough for her. Nobody else at the Double W



would ever say scat about him, because of her, I suppose. But when you think about it, here's a man fought Indians all his life--what's it take to spook him out of the Two Medicine country, if that's what happened? I can't see the Williamsons catching him at something either, then kicking him out and hiding it from Angel Momma. No," he shook his head decisively, "old Mister Warren would have given him one hell of a talking-to, excuse me, and fobbed him into some little job in Helena, packed us off along with him so breaking up the family wouldn't be on the Double W's conscience, that's more their way." Monty looked off to the perimeter of prairie beyond the far end of the parade ground. "Lately I had to wonder if something like this Klan bunch got him. But Mister Angus would have picked up on anything like that, if it'd happened. If anybody would ever level with me, he would."

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

"Which puts him back to being a quitter, pure and simple."

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

started?
 eyes
 parade?

plain
 pure &
 simple

“Striper. He was an old-hand sergeant, that’s what the Major says they were called.”

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

“Knew I’d get it, too. How about we race Bailey to the stables?”

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

“They hit us again last night, more dead cows,” Whit came in saying, breathing heavily. “Somebody got into them up in the Marias pasture and cut the

Samuel
 wife?
 7mo did!
 have
 come out
 1 hr early
 5

throats of fifteen." He looked at his brother as if pointing out arithmetic on a blackboard to him. "That took a pretty fair number of men, to work over that many cows. Wes, this isn't patty cake with these bastards. And don't tell me the war wasn't either."

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

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

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

"I see the picture," Monty said with resignation. He turned and faced the music, Susan sitting at the piano with that surely-you-can-spell-Passchendaele expression. "Sorry I let it throw me off."

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

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

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

*I wearing
see
I know, don't
let anything
short of kingdom
come take my
attention off
music.*

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

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

Still grappling, Susan husked out as if it were a stage direction:

"Pretend you're not hearing me say this, 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 your 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." She drew a breath. "It has been a wonder to me to see. Bear that

~~me~~
managed

your

change "draw
a breath"

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 Assiniboine 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 there, ears cocked. 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. 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 steps at a time, his stiff leg catching up with each such lunge.

Throughout
this

“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 defenses 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 see me.”

improvised
defenses
+ military
term
chances

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 get the goods. On him 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--"

"Seems to me you pretty much run things."

"If you really can find out where they are, I can stretch matters and make you a provisional. Wait until Saturday night and I'll bring your--"

"Wait is what broke the wagon down."

"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."

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."

Who's all
emo 'we'
7/11
amp hour

A
A

"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? My knee has been places."

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

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 Assiniboine seemed to be drafty. "This'll do fine."

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?"

current

type 2

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 some kind of sounding on morale here, how long he and Bailey had.
“Those bastards in their bedsheets--are they making you nervous?”

“I was born nervous, in that respect.”

Wes started to say more, then cocked an ear around in mystification. “I
keep hearing something.”

“Mice eating the wallpaper paste.” 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. The smorgasbord of gnawing stopped. “You were telling me about
the bedsheets.”

“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. *How fast, though? A bullet wins any kind of a race.* This next had

Working on
them

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 came 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."

Monty did not feel any lessening of what had been on his mind, however, hearing this.

soaking
kneaded
sheets (→)
shot out
of him

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 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 Assiniboine 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 now to wash up, Monty still was in a storm of thought as he stepped over to the doing of that. The water he dippeded from the galvanized bucket into the washbasin 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 contempt was. He had been like a man suddenly off his rocker when he got going on the Klan that way.

Damp

↑

washbasin
dipping of that

contempt
was that enough
to do. + rich

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 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

improve ?

soaring

Φ

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.

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 cluck 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.*"

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

With the office door safely shut behind him, Wes paused as if taking a reckoning on the familiar old room of maroon ledgers and manly furniture, as steeped in itself as a cigar humidior. At some point tonight he had to make himself settle there at the desk for a good long while. His lips twitched at the thought that while he may have avoided his father's exact footsteps in life, the indentations of the seat of his pants were right there waiting in the cushion of the desk chair.

Warren Williamson after each day of roaring around the ranch at a pace where you could have played cards on his shirttail--Whit had taken naturally enough to that headlong role, thank God--would then settle in here nightly at the constant arithmetical puzzle of adding acres to cattle and vice versa. *Too bad the old boy didn't have these nights to occupy him.* Wes well knew that the legerdemain that

familiar
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 not 7. his
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 157 by an even
 aged either

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 had
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now needed to be performed at that desk was beyond anything his father had ever tried to conjure up. The WW Cattle and Land Company had more than its fair share of money, and Wes himself had married another substantial helping, but doubling the ranch holdings the way he and Whit and the eventual Wendell were doing would have put a dent in Midas. Coming in here tonight, Wes felt oddly like an officer reporting for duty after a furlough--particularly odd to think of the Klan that way--once again. Assembling the Deuce W was turning out to be like fitting together jigsaw puzzle pieces made of layers of paper, and the next of those layers had to be currency. *We'll tap a duke or a lord*, his father airily said in the early years when overseas investors had faith that cattle on the endless open range of America were a bonanza. Those days were gone, and now it was banks, banks, banks. There were rounds of nameplated loansmen to be made, and before then financial figures to be put in trim like a troupe of acrobats.

Not yet ready to nest at the desk, Wes crossed to the outsize mahogany breakfront which Whit, like their father before him, regarded as the height of furniture manufacture. There he poured himself a decent but not overwhelming amount of brandy and, still following the motion of his mind, circled on over by the big west window with the drink. It had never bothered him to nip at people's

heels, so he had no glimmer of doubt that the thoroughly notified ranch foreman had men on watch out there now every minute since the nightriders slung up that cross and brazenly set it and half a pasture ablaze. In any event, damned if Major Wesley Williamson, possessor of enough combat medals to clank when he walked, was ever going to hesitate to stand at his own window, whatever white-sheeted pack of maniacs might be out there.

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

He did justice to the brandy and sent a chiding look around this room that had known nothing but males for all these years. Not that the rest of the ranch

house was any better--something like a hunting lodge with a stockmen's club thrown in. Antlers penetrated from every wall, any furniture that conceivably could be enveloped in cowhide was. Whit's one concession to decoration in here was a Charley Russell painting of riders with a square butte in the background while the foreground was, of course, all cattle. Unfortunately, Wes mused, the female half of the human race did not seem to share his father and Whit's opinion that decor ought to begin on the hoof. Whit's young wife from Memphis had lasted here barely a year. (Whit had merely said *Good thing I tended to business right away with her and got the kid started* and used Great Falls from then on.) Merrinell had been here a total of once. Not for the first time, Wes pondered whether the place was a deliberate no-woman's-land that the Williamson men had strewn in self-defense, like concertina rolls of barbed wire between the Western Front trenches, or whether women of a certain social cut simply couldn't be bothered to try and civilize the Double W.

Well, one had had her say here lately. He thought again of Susan holding forth with that ferocity of hers, that night last week. "*Wes, you're going to be the ruin of us all,*" she let out in exasperation when he suggested she break off Monty's lessons. (It had not helped that Whit for an instant looked as if he sided

with her in that general sentiment.) He glanced around obliquely as though her presence might have somehow lingered in a corner of the room. He would have given considerable to know what magic she worked on Monty, in here. Enough that they now were all on war footing, surplus fort included, with the damnable Klan.

Knowing he had to get at the work waiting on the desk, Wes even so stayed a while more at the window and the questions out there in the dark it framed. The adversary, the unknown, the other side of the spinning coin of fate. What faces fit onto the Klansmen? Who was the main push behind them? Because he was all too sure it was somebody sharp. Some one man or at most two, spurring the others--the usual haters and misfits--into this. Someone who had been sent in, perhaps. On that possibility, Bailey was giving the railroad workforce another scouring, but Wes would be surprised if that turned up the answer. *This doesn't have the marks of some out-of-sorts gandydancer.* Beyond that avenue, there was town after town to sift and the Two Medicine country abounded in distances. It all took time. What most bothered Wes in the meanwhile was that these Klansmen were not surfacing. Elsewhere they were showing off in the open, a couple of hundred gathering on Gore Hill at Great

Falls the other night to burn a cross. Those 'peaceable assemblies' provided a chance for the Baileys of the world to ferret out identities, and when the time was right, those Klan members would get a rude cure. But these. Crucify a cat, kill off some cows--the Two Medicine brand of Klan picked away just nastily enough to worry a person. So that he had to notice the night, even a quiet one such as this. It reminded him of the too innocent stillness before a barrage.

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course I did. Mrs. Gustafson has just played the part of the audience you weren't holding with '*Unless I Be Made To.*' Now then, what do you do?

We went over this just yesterday." She pattered the toes of her shoes against the hard floor of the stage to suggest the sound of a stampede toward the exits.

"Quick, quick. The audience isn't getting any--"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Speaking of proof."

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

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

I lay awake on such things: is he one, I think back over someone I once saw be so terribly mean to a horse; or the slyboots woman in town we always

called "the common carrier" because of her chronic gossip, would she press the sheets for her husband to wear and pat him out the door to hunt us down?

Whoever they are, I live for the moment when Wes can get his foot on the throat of this bunch.

She whapped the diary shut with good-night finality, but held onto her pen as if she never went unarmed. Her clock had been banished beneath clothing in the deepest drawer until bedtime--she agreed with Monty that the tick-tock here was crazily more loud than elsewhere--so she leaned sideways far enough toward the window to check the progress of the moon. High in the sky; if this long night had a meridian, the moonlight should be close to shining down on the morning side of it by now. And she still was not one bit sleepy. She sighed, and chuckled at herself because she knew she was not much the sighing type. "Get a grip of yourself, lass," she mocked in the burr that had been burnished by her Scotch Heaven stay. Drawing out a sheet of stationery, oddly fresh in this barn of a room where gloom hung in the corners, and an envelope, she put ink right back to work.

Angus and Adair, hello you two--

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

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

Refining that voice, confining it to the magic spot on the stage where someone gifted takes sudden root as a true singer--that is another story, which the two of us work on until we are sick of the sight of each other. Not really. Since that dreadful night it has hit me like a slap, what Monty is up against in life. I thought I knew--no, I imagined I knew, if that will pass your classroom

inspection, Angus--what it must be like to be in his situation. Something akin to the unwanted singling-out a woman is sometimes subjected to when men have the full run of things, that was my imagining. But that notion was stupidly pale, in all senses. What Monty is doomed to if Klan thinking (to flatter it with that) has its way is a kind of imprisonment forever painted right on him. His only key out of that, so far as I can see, is his voice.

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

With all the affection there is,

Susan

Susan, rascal you--

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

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

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

Fondness from Adair, too.

Angus

Monty did his running on the worn wagontrack around the parade ground, in the cool of the evenings. Loping there, on the long oval that moved him counterclockwise past the troopers' barracks, then the married men's quarters, then the hospital and its washhouse again, he circled to the slapping of his footsteps like thinnest echoes of the cavalry parading that had coursed across

here. That kind of longing must have given rise to centaur dreams among pedestrians on the Peloponnesus two thousand years before. He waited until after a good enough session in the auditorium and they were on their way across the blowy parade ground for lunch, to try her on this particular yearning to hear hooves going. "I miss being on a horse, any."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Susan and Monty kept their voices at a murmur.

“You worked that pretty slick.”

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

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

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

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

“Would I know a case of it if I saw one?”

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

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

“You take, over there. Put my mind to it a little and I can just about tell you how any of Angel Momma’s days went. From the night before, actually-- she’d butcherknife some pine shavings off, leave them on the oven door so they’d be dry and nice to start the fire in the morning. Did that all her life.” He squinted in concentration, as if to see this next more clearly. “Quick as breakfast was off

the stove, on went her irons. Then had to carry her own water, for the washing. She was swimming in laundry and ironing here, and me to handle, besides. And all the time having to prop her clotheslines"--the memory was one of those that stood out like a tinted picture in an album, of himself darting around beneath the poles she used as though he was loose at a circus--"so the wind didn't take them to Mexico. All that, she must have been one hard-put woman, wouldn't you say?"

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

Monty took a minute in piecing together the next. "Then there's my father, here," his words rushed when they came, almost as if he and she were