"The evening brings all home," the last ringleted girl had finished off the ballad on a hopeful note—she would have given her ears for a praising word from Miss Duff—and night and quiet came again to the house on Highland Street. Regular as the curtain of nightfall was Susan Duff's routine in closing away her teaching day. Shoulders back, her tall frame straightened, even though there was no one in the house to meet for the evening but herself, she shuffled sheet music into its rightful order, tallied the hours of lessons in the secondhand mercantile ledger she kept handy atop the piano and cast an eye over the schedule of impending pupils, then the balky old doors of the music parlor were slid shut. Next a quick stop in the hallway bath to freshen her face with a
rinse of cold water; one adjusting glance into the mirror, never two; hairpins taken out, and her chestnut hair shaken down. Onward to her stovetop supper, which she raced through as though still making up for her father’s interminable graces over expiring food. Now, with a pat to the kitchen and a cursory locking of doors and windows, she was ready to ascend.

As fixed as a star, the telltale glow of her gable window appeared over Helena at the last of dusk and burned on past respectable bedtime. You might think a woman of her early climb in life, singled out by her father’s God for a soaring voice to lift His hymns and then casting away choirsong for the anthems of a harsh young century, would find it a hard comedown to be faced with a nightly audience of only herself. You’d be as wrong as you could be, Susan would have you know in a fingersnap. The hours beyond dark she counted as her own, free and clear of beginner lessons and quavery approximations of high C.

This night, however, no sooner was she upstairs than she whipped to a halt in front of the alcove of window, her gaze drawn down the hillside to the state capitol dome, resting as it did on the center of the government of Montana like a giant’s copper helmet. The dome still was alight with the festoon of bulbs that had greeted 1924 four months ago, which seemed to her uncalled for.
“Blaze,” Susan addressed the civic constellation in the coarse-ground Fifeshire burr she was born to, "see if I care."

She gave a throaty chuckle at herself and wended her way toward her desk. The attic-like room extended the full length of the house--loft quarters for a married pair of servants, this must have originally been--and Susan used the expanse like a rambler cottage perched above the formal quarters of downstairs.

The rolltop desk, a divan, a gramophone, what had been her father's Morris chair and footstool, onyx-topped sidetables, a blue-and-black knitted comforter on the sill seat of the strategically aimed gable window, sets of bookshelves, a spinet piano, the whopping Duff family Bible on a reading stand of its own, all populated what was in actual fact her bedroom.

This mob of comforts drew her up out of public day as if lifting her into a lifeboat, and Susan tallied the necessity of this each time, too. Liberal with the night, resourceful as she probably ever was going to be in her fortieth year under heaven, she held to the belief that she was most herself in these private hours, this room where the minute hand did not count. The time of footlights and the song-led marches for the right of women to vote were tucked into the past as firmly as could be, and as to the tongues of the town down there beyond the base of the
stairs, she could do nothing about those. But up here, she at once got busy at
life's amended version of Susan Duff. There were encouraging letters to be
written to favorite former pupils. (Tonight's, which took lip-biting concentration,
to the breathy young soprano whose recent lieder recital in Milwaukee had not
found favor there.) The afternoon's newspapers to be devoured, the Herald for
spite and the Independent for sustenance. Books in plenitude; at this point she
was determinedly attempting the novels of D.H. Lawrence. Music, of course; her
half-finished operetta Prairie Tides always awaited, always unnavigable, but the
gramophone sang the songs of others perfectly on command, restorative in itself
to a teacher of voice. And she still was secretary of the Montana chapter of the
Flanders Field Remembrance Alliance, which took her to a drafty meeting hall
once a month and obliged her to see to official correspondence, clerical enough to
cross the eyes, in between. Tonight, as always, she shifted scene every so often,
her tall solo figure suddenly on the move as if she were a living chess piece. Time
did not lag here in her industrious garret; it was not permitted to.

When it was nearing midnight and she had just begun to salt away another
day between diary covers, she faintly heard the turn of a key in the front door and
then the rhythm of him coming up the stairs to her for the first time in four years.
“Susan? You might have changed the lock.”

He arrived on the wings of that commanding smile. The very model of a modern genteel Major, a line of hers teased somewhere back in that diary.

Behind Wes, men would have charged Hell; in fact, men had.

Surprised no end to be confronting him again after all this time, Susan still could not help but marvel at the presence with which Wes did most anything, as though the shadow under him were the thrust of a stage. Poised there at the top of her stairs, wearing a fortune on his back—or more aptly, on the swath of chest where General Pershing himself had pinned a medal—he looked ready to do a white-glove inspection; civilian life, now that he was tailored to it again, was a continuation of duty by other means. Even his way of standing, the weight taken on his left leg to spare the right knee peppered by shrapnel at St. Mihiel, proclaimed the reliance that the world had wanted to place on him. Brave and wounded at the same time: the story of Wesley Williamson’s life, as she was plentifully aware, on more than one kind of battlefield.
Voice training had unforeseen benefits. She thought she managed to

sound in possession of herself--or at least within her own custody--as she spoke

back to the immaculate invader:

"Evidently I saved you some shinnying, by not."

"Oh oh," Wes said, his smile dented but still there, "I guess I've been
told."

He picked his way through the long room, interested as a museum-goer,

to the perch nearest her, which happened to be the edge of her bed. "May I?"

*You and your Williamson manners.* Walk uninvited into a woman’s

bedroom, then be solicitous about seating yourself too near. This time Susan’s

words would have cut through bone:

"Sit yourself down, Wes, please do. I haven’t had a good look at a

family man in a while."

Wes ducked his head slightly in acknowledgment. At least she had not put

the run on him, quite yet. He settled to the bed and wordlessly looked over at her

before trying to make his case. The woman there just beyond reach had an

enlarged sense of justice, which had been one of the first passions that drew them

together. The snip and snap of talk with Susan, their political mustard plasters for
the world if they could have had their way; he missed that, and her laugh which
started somewhere down in the Scotch gravel of her family footing, and the
abandon with which she performed the comical burning of her corset in the
fireplace of that Edinburgh hotel room to prove to him she could be modern in that
way too, and the violet concentration in her eyes—during their love-making
Susan’s eyes stayed open, learning and teaching even then—and the always
intriguing extent of Susan, down to her remarkable fingers which, it amazed him
to find during some early clasp of love, were appreciably longer than his. The
right length, by rare luck of nature, to caress music from piano keys or to coax it
from the air when she sang. The heaven-given lilt of her voice he missed most of
all, even when she was furious with him, as now. Everything was there to be
missed, as he contemplated Susan across the frozen distance between bed and
desk.

“Wes?” She put down her pen as if pinning something beneath it. “Do I
get to know why you’re here?”

“I’m working on that.” Reluctantly giving up his inspection of her, he let
his eyes slide over the motley keepsakes in attendance around her, the brass
paperweight shaped like a treble clef, the tiny mock strongbox which held pen
nibs, the soldier photograph with its tint going drab, the silver letter-opener with
the French maiden of liberty, one breast bare and glinting, in bas relief on its
handle. His gaze lit on the open pages in front of Susan. "A woman armed with
a diary. Not the best company for me to be keeping, I suppose."

Susan just looked at him across the small white field of paper. When you
have cost a man a governorship, what further scandal does he think you are apt to
inflict on him?

The silence stretched. At last Wes brought out:

"You know I couldn't."

"I know you wouldn't," she said as if correcting his spelling. They had
been through this and through this. A proven hero who could not or would not
undergo a tug-of-war with his church. "Wes, the Pope has no need of the divorce
law. But you do." Who had broken his vows six ways from Sunday in half the
countries of Europe and in this very room and then would not break his
misbegotten marriage. "She's not a well woman, Susan. I can't face leaving her
when she's like this, it's against everything in me."
Susan, from a family that had the stamina of wolfhounds, held no patience for the delicate constitution and strategic indispositions of Wes’s wife. She couldn’t resist asking:

“How is the tender Merrinell?”

For a start, his wife was under the impression he was in Minneapolis at this moment, buying grain consignments. Wes shifted a bit on the bed. “She is...holding her own. At Lake George, with the gold-dust twins. Easter break. Although they aren’t especially twins any more. Sisters by luck of the draw, more like.” Once again he regarded Susan as though taking the opportunity to stock up on her. “How is the Lord’s gift to the musically inclined?”

“Enough how’s, the two of us are starting to sound like a powwow, for heaven’s sake. This isn’t like you, Wes. At least your word was always good. When we stopped consorting with each other--”

“--When you dropped me like a bushel of hot peppers--”

“--When we were this close to being the flavor on every gossip’s tongue and I said I’d have no more of it if I couldn’t have you, we agreed that was that.”
Actually, he recalled, she had handed him his walking papers with words more stinging than those. "If I'm going to be alone in life, Wes, it might as well be with myself."

"You're not doing either of us any good by barging in here in the middle of the night, are you," Susan was at now. "If I know anything about it, you were always quite concerned with 'appearances.'"

Wes waved that off. "No one much is up at this hour. I had Monty leave me off at the capitol grounds and came up around the back blocks. Here, come see the new Doozy." With the aimed quickness which had always reminded her of a catapult going off, he launched up on his good leg and was over to the gable.

In spite of herself, curiosity drew her over to the window by him. In the diffused glow of the strings of bulbs on the capitol dome, the butter-yellow Dusenburg could be seen parked down the hill from dozing Highland Street.

Wes's Negro chauffeur, Monty, was caressing the hood of the automobile with a polishing rag. The lanky form leaned into the already burnished surface as if magnetized to the machine. "Monty would sleep in it if I'd let him," Wes was saying.
Susan stood there transfixed. The Williamsons. Their wealth and their fortunes, which were two different things. She closed her eyes for an instant, overcome by the fresh weight of memory. But when she opened them again it was all still there: the penny-colored dome that should have been Wes’s by civic right, her reflected outline on the pane of night beside his, the chauffeur stroking the flanks of the costly plaything.

Wes turned from the window, a smile of a different sort lingering on him. Susan created more distance between them. She did wonder why she hadn’t changed that door lock.

He surveyed the room’s furnishings again. “I’m glad I wasn’t the one to heft all this up those stairs. Susan, do you know what I think?”

“Only on rare occasions. Is this one?”

“You’re treed, up here. No, let me finish. You’ve treed yourself. Chased the Susan Duff that was, right up into this upholstered perch.” He walked back the length of the room to seat himself on the edge of the bed again, letting drop a phrase at a time as he came. “I see makework. I see pastimes. I believe I see the unfinished musical masterpiece. I see the man-eating diary. I don’t see you taking the world on as you always did.” When she made no answer, he tried the
affectionate mock burr he had never been able to master: “Tis a waste of a bonny woman.”

“It’s late, is what it is,” she left it at, checking the clock. “Wes, please. Have your say and take yourself home.”

“I have the pupil of a lifetime for you.”

“I don’t lack for pupils, they’re coming out my ears.” Which was not as true as it once would have been.

“This one, I want you to devote all your time to, for however long it takes. I’ll pay double for everything—your hours, whatever you need to arrange in the way of accompaniment, all the sheet music you can stand, name it.” Watching to see how she was taking this, he quickly upped the ante: “All right then, triple.”

“I have never wanted your—”

“There’s no charity to this, Susan. You’ll earn your keep with this pupil, don’t ever worry about that. It’s a voice I’d say is...different. Unformed, of course, but intriguing in its way. You’d take it on, if it fell on you from a clear blue sky, I’m sure you would.”

His cadences of persuasion tested the walls of the room, as if this familiar floor were a speaking platform over the night-held capital city. Susan knew by
heart every gruff note and passionate coax Wes was capable of, and how effectively the mixture worked. "The copper kings of this state think they are immune to fair taxation," she had heard him send crowds into a rising roar as he uncoiled his campaign tagline, "I promise them an epidemic of it!" No other politician in the state had stung back as fiercely at the KKK as its flaming crosses flared on the bald hills above Catholic towns and railheads bringing immigrants to Montana land: "This cuckoo Klan, they seem to be scared the Pope will descend on them in their beds, else why do they go around wearing their nighties over their heads?" In his other great campaign, in the bloody mud of France, Wes's words were known to have made the difference between life and death. Susan carefully chose her way around his entreaty now:

"For a singing teacher, hearing is believing. All I ever ask is to be amazed."

"So I remember," Wes said drily, then went right on. "Opera, vaudeville, I don't know what we're talking, with this. I honestly don't, Susan. That will be for you to decide. I'm like the fellow who only knew two tunes: 'One is It's a Long Way to Tipperary, and the other isn't, I think.' But you, New York and Europe and all, you've heard the best and you'll know where this voice can be
made to fit. Oh, and we’ll need to do this at the ranch, not here. It’s a shame, but
we can’t--well, you’ll see...” He frowned. “I’ll work the idea into Wendell’s
skull, but we may need to make arrangements around him.”

Susan shook her head no and then some.

“Your old place, then,” he regrouped. Not for nothing, he reminded
himself, was this prideful woman the daughter of Ninian Duff. Ninian the
Calvinian. “You could stay there, why not? I’ll see that it’s outfitted for you,
groceries, bedding, cat and canary if you want.” He paused as if to make sure
each of his words was registering. “I’m asking you to do everything you know
how for this pupil. The works.”

“Wes?” Honest bewilderment broke through in her voice. “Wes, who in
this world means that much to you?”

He appeared stunned at hearing it put that way. Sitting there glazed, pale
as porcelain.

When Wes at last rose from the bed edge, was it her imagination or did he
lurch more than a tricky knee would account for? She watched him stiffly
navigate the length of the room, biting her tongue against calling out to him. Let
him march down her stairs and out of her carefully compartmented existence

(Treed!), let him leave that key in the door, let that be the natural end of it.

But he paused at the gable window and stood there facing out into the

night. Over his shoulder he told her: "Monty."
The sound always gave him a bad time, the slobbery breathing at the lip of the barrel. Then the bawl of fury six inches from his ear. *Who said this is easy money?* Panting, he stayed jackknifed in the barrel, chest against his knees and chin tucked down, clutching the handgrips next to his ankles. “Hyah, bull!” he could hear Dolph Kuhn, the pickup man, shouting from somewhere in the arena, but Dolph couldn’t ride anywhere close while the animal still was on the prod. A horn tip scraped the metal of the barrel, inches from his other ear; he flinched every time that happened, even though he knew you could go over Niagara in one of these. When the serious butting began and the barrel tipped over and started to roll, the jolt delivered by the bull came as almost a relief; now he could at least
concentrate on holding on. *You don’t want to let yourself shake loose in there,*

the wizened rodeo clown up in Calgary who had given him a couple of lessons in
this had warned, *or you’ll know what a pair of dice feels like.* Nor, he had
found out the hard way, did you want to keep your eyes open during this or you’d
end up dizzy as a cat in a churn. His ears told him enough about it anyway: how
the crowd loved to be scared at this stunt, the human ball in the barrel and the bull
determined to butt the infuriating object until it presented something to gore.

When the barrel at last seemed to have quit rolling and he opened one eye
and cautiously raised his head, he saw the ornery whiteface Hereford paw the
ground one last time, and then its departing rear end, the tail switching slowly
back and forth as the bull lost interest. Even so, he waited to hear the whap of
lariat on rump as Dolph galloped in to haze the bucking bull out the far end of the
arena. "He’s on the run, Snowball," Dolph called, "better get yourself out of
there."

Monty gulped air and unkinked himself. A little groggy, but he
remembered the routine and tossed his hat out first. Reliably the crowd guffawed.
When no harm came to the hat, he stuck his head out the end of the barrel like an
inquisitive turtle, gawking this way and that. The rhythm of the laughter built,
orchestral, mass chortles of anticipation as the audience waited for his next maneuver; he’d been right about this, rodeo-goers could handle the idea of him fooling around. He clambered out, spun around and peeked back into the barrel, as if the bull might be in there. Thunder of laughter at that, any more and they’d shake the grandstand to pieces. He quit while he was ahead and picked up his dusty hat, bowing to the announcer with the megaphone who was whipping up a nice round of applause for “our artiste of the barrel after that dosie-doe he just did with the gentleman cow.” Then back to business, kicking the barrel along until it was in the vicinity of the bucking chutes again and he was standing ready for the next bull rider who needed his neck saved.

‘Artiste’ now, am I. Hope they didn’t hear that across town. He drew another deep breath and concentrated on the gate where the bull would rampage out. Only one more rider in this go-round, and wouldn’t you know, there was a hang-up in the chute. He watched the rider scramble up off the bull’s back as if it was suddenly too hot a place to sit, while the chute men shoved at the recalcitrant bull. Forced to wait out there center-stage in the arena with only the barrel for company, Monty took the opportunity to mop the back of his neck and under his chin with the red handkerchief. That was another of the jokes, using the red
hanky like a matador's cape when he had to draw the bull away from a bucked-off rider. It occurred to him that it was actually pretty funny to be swabbing at himself this way with the hard-used piece of cloth, because at this point of the rodeo he was an irredeemable mess. The bib overalls six sizes too big drooped on him, and the screaming-red long underwear that was the other part of the costume was darkly wet with sweat. He had fresh green manure up one pantleg. *Angel Momma* ought to see me now. *Used to worry about me playing in the mud, she'd have kittens over this.* Keeping watch on the chute situation—the bull had jammed a horn under one of the fence planks and was resisting the profane persuasion of the chute crew—he checked around on himself to make sure his props were at the ready. Out of his hip pocket dangled the head of the rubber chicken that came into use when he and the announcer had to resort to chicken thief jokes, and handy in the bib pocket was the hairwork braid for the other surefire gag where he grabbed onto a bull's tail and it appeared to come off in his hand.

Weary and filthy as he was, while the action was suspended this way Monty felt almost like he was back at one of the Sunday picnics along Noon Creek, standing around at the edge of the chute crowd like this. When he and his mother would go to those church picnics, they would pause as soon as they were
in sight of everybody but just out of hearing. "Well, Montgomery, the two
colored people are here," his mother would say solemnly. He would giggle,
without entirely knowing why, and Angel Momma would laugh way down in her
throat, and then the two of them would take their dark faces amid all the white
ones. Well, that hadn't changed. The backs of Monty's hands as he comically
put up his dukes in challenge to the reluctant bull in the chute were a burnished
dark brown that resembled the oiled saddle leather all around him in this rodeo
arena, but he was as aware as ever that his color was not repeated on any face
within sight.

Including his own. From brow to jaw, and ear to ear, Monty's face was
white with theatrical makeup. This of course was the main joke, that he was
scared white.

By now Wendell Williamson was parting the sea of riders and hangers-on
who were milling around in front of the chutes, on his way to see why three men
could not deal with one bull, and Monty straightened up to his full height. It
never hurt to be on your toes when the boss was around. That was how he had
cozied into this, when word went around the ranch that Wendell Williamson had
bought up a string of bucking stock. The very next morning, quick as he was
done with the milking chores, Monty stuck his head in the Double W boss’s office off the kitchen and mentioned that he’d heard Mister Wendell was turning into a rodeo producer and if he happened to be hard up for someone to do that clown job... Wendell looked him up and down--young and built on springs; a bit of a cut-up, but within limits--and saw no reason why the Double W choreboy couldn’t give it a whirl, on rodeo weekends; somebody had to put on the clown get-up.

That had been a dozen rodeos ago and here they were at the last and biggest of them all, in the fairgrounds of the capitol of Montana. As was their custom, the Williamsons were using the occasion to play both ends against the middle. Somewhere up there in the shaded side of the stands would be Wesley Williamson with Helena society and the money men from as far away as Boston and New York, while Wendell ramrodded the show down here at the level of hooves and horns. Like the other Double W hands who’d been chosen to try their luck at putting on rodeos, such as Dolph and the stock handlers and the unfortunates trying to pry that bull loose, Monty was along for the ride, so to speak.
Right about now he could have used a little of that grandstand shade. He mopped himself some more, taking care not to touch the mask of makeup. It was Mister Wendell, who had traveled and knew about these things, who decreed the whiteface cosmetic. "Those minstrel shows, they put on blackening. Be kind of funny if you did the opposite, wouldn’t it?" Monty saw the point.

At last there was hope at the chute; the horn was grating out from between the planks after great contortions by all involved. A minute or so more, and he’d be matching wits with a bull again.

"Hard to wash all that off, ain’t it?"

There is no known cure for what the human voice can carry. Monty sickened at the insinuating tone, at having to deal with that, even out here with the crowd sunny and contented.

He turned his head not too fast and not too slow to find where the remark had come from. The telltale expression was on one of the calf ropers lounging around the end of the chutes, he and a pal putting rosin on their lariats. *Explains it some*. Calf ropers didn’t have enough on their minds, their event wasn’t any harder than tying their shoes. He never heard much from the bull riders; they didn’t care what color the man was who let the bull chase him instead of them.
Monty tried to read the grins on this pair of lasso twirlers. If he was lucky, the show-off one was joshing about the whiteface makeup.

"Oh, I shine up pretty good when I want to," Monty said with a pasted-on smile.

"I'm kind of curious about what you use on yourself," the first roper persisted, the other one looking uneasy. "Stove black?"

"Lie," the sound rolled from the depths of Monty's lungs, surprising him as much as the two of them. Both of the ropers were staring at him now, hard.

"Lye soap," Monty sang out, no boom to his voice this time. "Us boys who've still got the bark on us, we can scrub up good with that and it doesn't hurt a bit."

The one who'd started this gave him a last narrow look, then grunted and sauntered away. The other roper tagged after him and Monty overheard:

"You maybe ought to let up on him. He's the Williamson's pet pup."

"Aw, hell, I was just funnin'."

"You find your check in your plate in the morning and a walk to town with your bedroll, you won't think fun."

"Jesus, what's life comin' to."
The megaphone of the announcer heralded readiness in the chute at last, and Monty went back to a bullfighter frame of mind.

This bull erupted practically sideways from the chute, a side of beef writhing eerily in the air the instant before it struck the ground with all four hooves extended, the rider clinging on but in trouble. *Damn. This one would have to be a twister.* Monty danced from one foot to the other behind the upright barrel, the red handkerchief held ready behind his back. He wasn’t to make his move until the whistle blew at the end of the ride or the rider was bucked off. This bull’s third jump, the man on his back went flying. Instantly Monty scampered in to draw the animal’s attention before it could wheel around and find the figure pancaked into the arena dirt.

The bull turned toward Monty faster than he wanted, and he backed off a step.

Some bulls just stood there in confusion at the sight of the clown, some tamely turned away. This animal lowered its head and looked like it meant business. “If you like the look of my tracks so much, I’ll make you some more,” Monty chanted to the animal for the crowd’s benefit, then backpedaled until he had the barrel between him and the bull. When the bull charged one way, Monty
dodged to the other side of the barrel. Back and forth, beast and man, like drunks trying to navigate past one another in a narrow space. This was another part the crowd ate up.

Monty knew the time had come to hop into the barrel, the bull was getting good and mad. He hesitated a moment. He'd had enough rides in the barrel for one day. He bolted for the fence at the far side of the arena, sprinting as hard as he could.

The bull blinked once at this turn of events and took off after him.

Running for his life, Monty had the presence of mind to hold the red handkerchief out at arm's length and daintily drop it, as if the bull were a suitor. The crowd howled. The arena fence was getting nearer. According to the bawling, so was the bull. *Best advice I can give you is not to fall,* the Calgary oldtimer was cackling in Monty's head.

Monty aimed for a stout corral post—if you made your jump onto the middle of a section of plank fence and the bull plowed it out from under you, then you were in a hell of a fix—and leaped, grabbing for the post with both arms and pulling his legs up under him. The fence shuddered below him as the bull slammed into it, but he was high and dry, and giddy at having pulled off the stunt.
Dolph rode up to encourage the bull to the exit gate, then reined around to check on the puff-cheeked clown as he slid down off the fence. Hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath, Monty admitted: "This is getting to be a long day."

"One more go-round and you can quit teasing the livestock," Dolph said as if it was all the encouragement in the world.

There was a break in the action now while the chutes were being reloaded, this time with broncs. Dolph dismounted and Monty swung up into the saddle and slumped there like the end-of-the-trail Indian while Dolph led the horse across the arena, another part of the act. The dried-up little cowboy walked as if his feet hated to touch the ground, which was not an act at all.

When they got over by the chutes Monty slipped smoothly off the horse and Dolph tied the reins to the arena fence.

"Monty?" The pickup man inclined his head in the direction of the bull pen. "You don't want to run too many of them footraces with these bastards."

"I'll have to remember that."

"It makes for quite a show, though," Dolph granted with a chortle, "you lighting out across there with that bull's horns tickling your hip pocket." He sized
up the riders and ropers and hangers-on clotted around the chutes. “Now’s a
good a time as any to pass the hat for our hardworking rodeo clown, don’t you
think?”

“I been paid,” Monty said swiftly. “Mister Wendell already--”

“What’s that have to do with the price of peas in China?” Dolph looked
as if he hadn’t heard right. “You got something against extra money?”

“Not so I ever noticed,” Monty stalled. He’d known Dolph longer than he
could remember; Dolph himself was a stray who was riding the grub line about
the same time the Double W took in Monty’s mother as washerwoman. Yet he
found he didn’t want to tell Dolph, right out, that there had been that run-in with
the mouthy roper.

“So how about it?” Dolph persisted. “Halvers?”

Monty glanced at the men along the chute. Everybody looked to be in
good cheer, but you never knew. He drew out deciding until Dolph started to
give him a funny look, then nodded. Go for broke, why not. Last show of the
season, any hoodoos in the bunch will have all winter to get over me. “If you’re
gonna be the one that does it, Dolphus, sure.”
Dolph had already had his Stetson in one hand and was fishing into his jeans pocket with his other. "I'm just the man what can." He held up a fifty-cent piece as if to fix the specific coin into Monty's memory. "We split halves after I get my four bits back, got that?"

"You drive a hard bargain," Monty laughed in spite of himself. He watched the little cowboy gimp off on his collecting round.

"DOLPH!"

Frozen in his tracks, Dolph cast a look back over his shoulder. That voice on Monty; when he wanted to, he sounded like a church organ letting loose.

"What?"

"Be sure and trade the chicken feed in at the beer booth for silver dollars, would you?" Monty's tone was shy now.

Dolph snorted. "It all spends, on Clore Street. Don't worry, Snowball, I'll get you dollars."

As Dolph set to work with the hat, Monty stood there loose-jointed and private, the middle of him warming with anticipation of Clore Street. Silver dollars were definitely the ticket. Like in the blues he'd heard the last time he hit town. *Flat to stack and round to roll/ Silver dollar, lift my soul.* Not that he had
any use for the blues, but good sound cartwheel money, he most certainly did.

Tied in the bottom of his side pocket right now was one of those little cloth sacks that Bull Durham tobacco came in, with the ten silver dollars Mister Wendell had paid him. If Dolph did well with the chute crowd, as much as another ten might be added to the sack and that was a full Bull bag. Drop one of those on the wood of a bar and you could start to get somewhere in life. In his head he began parceling out the twenty lovely coins. The Zanzibar Club: the trick was to hit it early, not so many to buy drinks for. The trainmen came off shift at eight, the porters and brakemen from Chicago and Kansas City piling in to hear the music and have the company of other dark faces here in the white, white West. Things started happening in the Zanzibar then. Those KC boys made him nervous, though, calling him "Sticks" and "Montan" as though it was his fault he had been born out here instead of on the corner of Twelfth and Vine. And Montgomery Rathbun had as much name as anybody, if the world would ever use it.

So, hoist a few in the Zanzibar before the KC boys hit town, then try to find that sporting girl from last time, the one who took it slow. Couldn't pray for that to happen again, but it didn't hurt to hope. When a man came to town all stored up, he didn't want a hurrying woman. Then the fantan game, in the
Chinese gambling place. He should have half his money left by the time he
drifted into the game, and with a stake like that there was every chance he could
win back what he spent at the Zanzibar and the cathouse. Head on home to the
ranch with a good stake for next time, even.

He watched Dolph passing the hat and saw with relief that the rodeo
contestants were chipping in their four bits, no complaints. Even the loudmouth
roper tossed in when Dolph jawed at him. Monty felt like a man whose ship had
come in. He hummed a snatch of “Silver Wings and a Golden Harp.”

By nightfall the Bull Durham sack was flat empty.
"You're awfully quiet, Susan."

"Such a place, there is everything in the world to be quiet about." Even her declarative tone was rounded off by the murmur of the Missouri. "I could pinch myself. Half my life I've spent in Helena, and I've never once been out here."

Wes yanked down on the brim of his hat one more notch. "We could do without this wind." A sharper gust through the canyon buffeted the motor launch as he spoke. "I hope it doesn't snatch Monty's breath away."
In the sway of the bow, like a bundled statue being borne into a white-walled port, Susan stood braced as she gazed ahead to the Gates of the Mountains. Half the sky of her younger years had been the arching northern palisades of the Rockies, but here the mountains made fists. Precipice after precipice stood guard over these waters, pale limestone cliffs materializing straight up out of the river and lifting pine forests on their shields of stone and catching on their summits the fresh flags of snow. Every whiff of air held the scent of fresh pitch. Off to starboard—at least she still knew right from left—a stand of snow-flecked jackpines on the nearest clifftop filtered what there was of the early-spring sun through the shade of their branches, and she watched this lattice of the seasons until the river left it behind. As the boat puttered deeper into the corridor of channel, Wes kept himself propped against the deck railing near her, resting his leg and evidently his thoughts as well. Her own mind was a maddening merry-go-round, thanks to him. When she insisted on auditioning Monty in private, but someplace spacious to hear how his voice carried, Wes simply commandeered a mountain range.

Williamsons had always owned.
Susan turned her head just enough to study him as he bent to coil a mooring rope that didn’t pass muster, seeing in the intent lines of his face the Wes Williamson she had first laid eyes on. At the time she was twelve and snippy and inseparable from her father, particularly on trips to town, and they had gone in to the stockyards at Valier to settle up with the railroad agent on the shipping of their lambs. Commotion bawled out over the prairie from the loading pens. “Ninian Duff! And Ninian’s likeness!” the shout came from on high, the ringmaster of cattle himself, old Warren Williamson in the catbird perch above the cutting chute.

“Come to see what real livestock looks like?” Susan’s father had begun with cattle and advanced to sheep, and along the way contended for every spear of grass with Warren Williamson and his bony-hipped Double W specimens. From day one Ninian Duff knew when to stand his ground, and now he barked a laugh and shouted back: “Livestock are those, Williamson? Here I thought the flea circus had come to town.” Taking their time about it, the two Duffs approached the corral, bearded scarecrow of a man and gangly girl in overalls, and climbed up to inspect the mooing mess. The cattle were being chuted into railroad cars: dogs worked at their heels, dismounted riders stamped around trying to look useful, the stockbuyer slapped the corral boards with a tasselled whip thin as a wand. The
herd of brown-red backs was wound tight against the end of the corral, a rivulet of steers banging up the high-walled ramp into the rail car. Down there in the muck hazing his crew as they hazed the cattle was the next of the Williamson breed, Wendell, installed by his father to run the Double W ranch in the next valley over from the Duff homestead. "It is like perpetually neighboring with Jonah's whale," Ninian Duff had been known to say.

At her father's side above the milling cattle Susan fiercely took it all in, allotting grudge where she knew it was due--to the grabby Williamsons, high and low--and something like hunger toward every other face around her. The poor riders, unfit on foot. The stockbuyer, like a big gray jay in his suit of gabardine. The familiar thicket of dark whiskers that marked her father's presence, at the corner of her vision. A story wants to be told a certain way, or it is merely the alphabet badly recited, the king's remembrancer told the king who had no patience, in the book of stories that they closed each week with at the one-room school on the South Fork. Faces, Susan had decided, were the first letters of those stories all around a person. So, she was at the stage of ravenous wondering about anyone she laid eyes on, and lately that included the father whom everybody said she was a copy of.
“Ay, Williamson,” her father hooted across the corral to Warren as a steer broke back past his swearing son, “any cows ever I had could knit socks with their horns. These seem to be wanting in mentality, not to mention poundage.”

It was then that she caught sight of Wes, his expression minted into her memory the way a likeness is stamped onto a fresh coin. He had been half-hidden next to the stockbuyer, flipping through the shipping papers, but her father’s gibe brought him immediately hand over hand to the top of the corral, still clutching the paperwork like a crumpled bouquet. She knew him without ever having laid eyes on him before: Wendell’s younger brother, the citified brother, the one everyone said was the prize of the litter. She kept her gaze glued to him as he posed atop the corral across from her father and her. It had been drilled into Susan, as only recitative Scotch parents could drill, that it was rude to stare. But to really see you had to keep looking. To this day she could bring back that sight of Wes studying her father as he would a wild creature: with fascination and apprehension and something more—pity? For her age Susan knew a substantial amount about life. She had grasped almost as soon as he did that her teacher at the South Fork was dreadfully in love with the new schoolma’am over on Noon Creek. She had deduced for herself that Banker Cooper’s “vacations” to Minneapolis were to dry
out from whiskey. She had the Scotch Heaven neighbors down cold—the
Speddersons would exert themselves only to avoid work, the Frews were tight as
ticks where money was involved, the Erskines would lend you the elbows out of
their sleeves, the Barclays kept everything up their sleeves—and accepted the
principle that each family had some exception that proved the rule. But whatever
this look on Wesley Williamson’s face represented was beyond her; she had never
known anyone to be sorry for her father.

They were near enough to Warren Williamson on his cutting-chute throne
that he didn’t need to shout, but he shouted anyway:

“I’ll tell you again, Ninian, I want you Scotch Heaven lamb lickers off that
Roman Reef range. We’ve always grazed up in through there.”

Her father leveled a stare across the backs of the cattle to the elder
Williamson. Then said in his Biblical timbre:

“You can want.”

In that exchange of thunders Susan had seen something, and if she had,
the young man so intent across the corral surely must have: in the contest of the
fathers there at the stockyard, Warren Williamson looked away first.
Aboard the motor launch, the ancient impatience of water moving them steadily into the mountains, she scrutinized Wes as he placed the coil of rope where it belonged. A quarter of a century and then some, on the visage across that corral; the same Wes but more so, if that was possible. The boxer’s jawline. The philosophical eyes. Jack Dempsey met the jack of trumps in that face. After all her trying, in love and its opposite, this was still a puzzle to her, the different ways of adding up Wes.

He met her gaze for a moment, smiled but kept the silence, then they both turned again to the Gates of the Mountains.

“Have I got it right, that we’re out here freezing our tails just so’s you can sing to us?” the boatman, Harris, was asking Monty.

“This is a new one on me,” Monty replied, light-headed with it all. “But that’s about the size of it.” He warmed his hands over the boat engine. “Probably the Major didn’t order this wind. Throw it in free, did you?”

Harris hunched farther into his mackinaw and steered toward the middle of the river, giving plenty of leeway to the blunt set of cliffs rearing at the next bend. Monty followed the boatman’s glance around the vessel. The Major and the
woman at the bow, taking in the sights. The Major’s Helena hired couple huddled under the canvas canopy, bewildered as chickens. Himself and Harris, chauffeurs by land and water. Six folks total on an excursion boat that would hold, what, thirty? “Normal people, I don’t take out here this soon in the year,” Harris muttered.

*Like to meet any of those in this lifetime, normal,* Monty’s mind raced.

*But the man has a point. ‘Normal’ wouldn’t cut it, a shindig like this, would it.*

Notions jittered in him today like fancywear on a clothesline. To be doing something besides picturing himself in full song beneath chandeliers that scintillated like the diamonds in the necklaces and stickpins of the rapt audience one moment and envisioning himself pucker-mouthed and mute as a trout in front of this music woman the next instant, Monty scanned the range of mountains stacked around the canyon. As scenery went, the Big Belts struck him as dead-end views: gulches to nowhere, slabs of cliff around every corner, round-shouldered summits that didn’t amount to that much. Not like his boundless Two Medicine country, with its dune shapes of the Sweetgrass Hills way over east there as if they were pretty mirages that just never faded and the great reefs of the Rockies up everywhere into the sky to the west. This river was something,
though, rolling its way mile after mile through this rock-solid canyon. The hum
came without his even trying. *Oh, Shenandoah, I long to see you/Away, you
rolling river'--Can you sing that one by yourself, Monty? Mama's mama taught
me it, when I was little like you. Here, I'll help you with it--'Oh, Shenandoah,
*I'll not deceive you/Away, we're bound away, 'cross the wide Missouri.'

Bound away; maybe that was as good a way as any to look at this dizzying
excursion on what was indubitably the Missouri, and wide. Helena had spurned
the Missouri River in favor of gold-flecked gulches, so by now the city, the
capitol dome or any of that, lay far out of sight behind the boat. Around another
bend now, and Monty craned out enough to catch a glimpse of the higher reaches
of the Big Belt Range. Nice clean fresh snow on those slopes; good tracking
snow. He half wished he were up there hunting, cutting the tracks of a bull elk in
one of those open parks near timberline, instead of down here at this. But
wishing was what had landed him into this, wasn’t it.

"Say, how many horses you got going on this pirate ship?" he threw out,
to get the boatman to talking. Best way to be was to listen more than you spoke.

"Couple dozen. Who wants to know?" Harris eyed him as if he resented
the challenge to the boat’s horsepower.
The Dusenberg had a couple of hundred. "Just wondering. I been around engines quite a little bit myself." Monty gratefully rubbed his hands in the radiated heat from the cylinder block. Fingers long and tapered but strong from years of milking cows; pinkish palms that had known their share of calluses--these hands had been his ticket to chauffeuring, that time during his recuperation when he took it upon himself to tinker Mister Wendell's junked Model A back to life, handling each part of the stripped-down engine until he could have assembled them in bed under the covers. 'Handy' is one thing that means what it says, don't it. With all due satisfaction he recalled washing these hands over and over at the end of each day spent in the grease, carefully cleaning under the fingernails with the point of his jackknife blade, to look slick as a whistle when he sat up to the Double W supper table with the hard-used riders and hayhands. The hands had done their job, flagged the Major's attention when he looked around for someone new to be his car man after Frenchy went on one drinking spree too many. Monty kept on rubbing them here for circulation and luck. Now to see what his voicebox could manage.

Of its own accord his turned-up overcoat collar all at once drooped and let the wind in on him, surprising him the way just about everything was surprising
him today. No reason to be jumpy, he told himself as he turned the unruly collar back up. Yes, there was. White lady variety. He sneaked another peek toward the bow of the boat and wondered again about the singing teacher.

"How do you do, again, Miss Susan," he heard come out of his mouth when she stepped aboard the boat and walked up to him as if examining a bad painting. He had no earthly idea why again hopped in there that way. It wasn’t as if he was on speaking acquaintance with her--although he had heard enough rumors about the Major and her, back a while ago--but somehow the fact that he and she both were from the Two Medicine country seemed like a kind of knowing each other.

She came right back at him with: "You seem to have caught the Major’s ear. Such a debut."

"He’s giving me a good help, with this." He had not really known what more to say about the Major providing all of outdoors as a music hall. Being a Williamson, the Major could do these things. With that, the two of them ran out of things to say, although chitchat went on until the boat chugged to life and pulled out onto the river.
All of Clore Street had played hell with him, his last time in there.

except

The dust-up over his fantan debt, nothing really hurt but his dignity; but that on top of but worse than that, the brush-off from Leticia
What if he got buck fever, in front of her, and couldn’t remember the words? Couldn’t possibly forget words to something you’d known all your life.

“Sing with Mama while she washes, Montgomery. Ah ah AH! That’s it, sing with Mama.” Just to make sure, he ran the song through his head.

Then what if he sang it word-perfect and she still said she had heard a better voice on a bullfrog?

Nervously he rubbed an eyebrow with the knuckle of his thumb. Nobody around but the clam running the boat and the dumb-cluck hired couple to watch him make a fool of himself, at least. That wasn’t always the case when he hit the Helena country. He grimaced, the reminder still with him. That dust-up he’d had on Clore Street, a couple of weeks ago.

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

“Things got a little out of hand, is all.”

“A little? I have to bail you out of jail and haul Doc Walker away from his breakfast to wrap you like a mummy?”

“Major, I got more than I bargained for. Knocked up, locked up, and doctored up, like they say--I didn’t go looking for any of those.”
"How are your ribs?"

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

"What was it this time? Fantan again?"

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

Helena had played hell with him, all right, Monty reflected with overdue wisdom as the boat slowed to a kind of aquatic waddle in the presence of the most imposing cliffs yet. That beating, and the brush-off from Leticia the time before; a
man could hardly come to town any more without getting treated like Job's dog.

"Leticia?" those joyboys in the Zanzibar had razzed him unmercifully, "call out the militia!" This time his wince cut deeper than any ribs. He had been stuck on Leticia. She wasn't street baggage, she was a good decent copper-brown woman with a part-interest in a millinery establishment and a sideline in cosmetics. He had sounded her out on marriage, even. *You're a lovely man, Monty, but you are no provider.* And off she went with that slickback head waiter from the Broadwater Hotel.

Maybe it had taken him too long to get himself in gear, maybe he shouldn't have needed the double-barreled dose of Clore Street to teach him. But in any case he had gimped back to the ranch admitting to himself that life there was never going to provide beyond what it already did--the room on the back end of the wash-house, the choreboy's place at the long table three times a day, wages that were gone before you could clink the dollars together. Which is why he had mustered himself and asked the proper source:

"Major? You know anything about those singers, on stage and that? I was wondering if I could make some money with it."
“Pity.” Wes was peering critically at the Missouri’s volume of water, lapping against the sheer base of the cliffs.

“What is?”

“Oh, nothing. It would’ve made a wonderful place to put a railroad through.”

“You and your railroad,” Susan made fun of him. “You would levitate it, would you?” Actually, it occurred to her, magic carpets were his stock in trade.

Wes had but to say *abracadabra* and this steam launch awaited where the Missouri swept into the mountains. Monty and the Doozy presenting themselves at the dock, both looking newly spiffed up. She herself had been royally fetched from Highland Street by the Swedish couple who took care of Wes’s Helena house, the Gustafsons. Susan had stiffened when she learned the Gustafsons were to be her escorts. A number of times they had served as camouflage for Wes, in the audience with him when she sang.

“An outing for the servants, is this to be?”

“Your old friendship with Mrs. Gustafson must be kept green.” Then in his married tone: “It’s that usual matter, how things have to look. Please, Susan.”
Appearances. Keeping those up was one of the prices of Wes's wealth, and she knew there had been other costs as well. She was one of them.

Clasping her scarf to her throat against another incursion of the raw wind, she glanced back along the length of the boat. Mr. and Mrs. Gustafson sat shivering, dressed too lightly. Susan had little sympathy. Sweden was not exactly a Mediterranean clime, why did the Gustafsons think April in Montana's latitude would be balmy?

She centered her attention back on the matter of Monty. The taproot of talent is ambition. This man was quite far along in life to be wanting a career; what had he been saving himself for until now? Not to mention far along the palette of pigmentation, compared to the flesh tones of the audiences he seemed to crave. Yet she knew he had already come some way up in life. The dawn-and-dusk chores of the Duff homestead would never leave her, and when she multiplied those by what must be the drudgeries asked of a choreboy on a ranch as huge as the Double W, yes, this Monty person had come considerably up. The emphatic crease of his trousers, the good hat. And he smartly wore a greatcoat, nearly as capacious as that on Wes. She wondered how on earth he and his
mother had alit with the Williamsons: two shakes of pepper in that salt-white confederacy of riders and masters.

She kept watch on him now as Wes beckoned him from the stern. He had a roomy chest, which gave her hope. Ropy in build, young enough yet that he had no belly to speak of. Full-lipped, but no more so than the bee-sting look that was popular on motion picture women. Glowering brows, but his eyes held no belligerence; quite to the contrary, they seemed to be all negotiation. Small ears, tight to his head. Hair that hadn't been fiddled with, no misplaced faith in straightener. Spotless hands and fingernails. In outward appearance, she was forced to admit, so far so good with Montgomery Rathbun, songbird on the edge of the Williamson nest.

There was a fluster at the center of the boat as Mrs. Gustafson scurried out from under the canopy and announced noon by pointing to the sun. She brought forth the dinner basket: fresh baked bread, headcheese, boiled eggs. A lard can of doughnuts.

“It's a hard and fast rule of the profession,” Susan headed this off, “that Monty must sing with an empty stomach.”
“Then we’ll listen, in hungry concert,” Wes said. He looked around at the cliffs, like opera-house walls grown to five hundred feet: La Scala fashioned out of a fjord. “Will this do?” He seemed to be serious.

Susan smiled a little. “As good a place as any.”

“Harris, can you let us drift?” Wes called to the launch operator.

When the engine was shut off, the silence was overpowering. The wind stirred the swags of branches far above them, but evidently was blocked by the oxbow turn of the river.

Monty took a position in the center of the boat. Susan was dismayed to see he stood like a cowboy, hip-sprung, spraddled. But then that’s what he was, among a confusing number of other things, she reminded herself.

As if feeling the need for correction in her look, he grasped the lapels of his coat, thought better of that stance, and let his hands drop to his side. There they opened and closed. He drew in an audible, open-mouthed breath, but no voice issued forth. Standing as if rooted to the deck, he seemed dry-lipped, apprehensive. It suddenly dawned on Susan that Wes was making it hard for him, depositing him out here in this magnificence, giving him his moment in grand style, testing him. Deliberately?
“Ready when you are, Monty,” issued from Wes now, not exactly an order but close enough.

Stiff as a cactus, Monty aimed himself at the crowding cliffs and suddenly let out in a tone as deep as a bronze bell:

“When Israel was in Egypt land,

Let my people go.

Oppressed so hard, she could not stand,

Let my people go.”

Wes listened with everything in him, the song taking him back through time. Back nearly as long as he could remember, Angeline Rathbun’s spirituals had hovered over the white clotheslines in the back yard at the ranch, indeed like angelic sea chanties wafting above a ship under sail. The carry of Monty’s voice, though, had mostly been prominent at branding time and roundup, when the other riders would encourage him to yell the cattle down out of distant coulees. That, and shouting tag-ends of jokes back to his interlocutor, the announcer, in his rodeo period. Listening to Monty now, Wes put his head down and focused on the upside-down steeple of his fingertips meeting, very much as he did when he was in the confessional.
Susan keenly watched Monty’s every breath, as the echoes chorused off the cliffwalls.

"You’ll not get lost in the wilderness,

Let my people go,

With a lighted candle in your breast,

Let my people go.

"Go down, Moses,

Way down in Egypt land,

Tell old Pharoah

To let my people go."

When he finished, the Gustafsons hesitantly beat their mittened hands in applause. The boatman leaned forward in fascination. Wes nodded firm encouragement to Monty. Five faces now turned toward Susan.

"Again, please, Monty."

Monty sagged.

"Don’t be down in the mouth," Wes consoled at once. "She’s known to be hard to please."
"If you could possibly hold off on the man-to-man sympathy," Susan shushed him. "Monty? Again?"

"Miss Susan, honest, that's as good as I can do."

She seemed surprised. "Then just do it the same. Monty, I'm sorry, but one time through a song is not being a singer. That's merely"--she searched for an uncritical set of words--"whistling with your voicebox. I need to hear certain things again in how you managed that song. I thought that's why we're here."

She locked eyes with him, the stare that had conquered a thousand pupils. "Now then."

Wes broke their deadlock. "Harris?" He twirled a finger at the boatman, and the launch coughed to life and turned back upriver to where Monty had aimed his voice at the canyon amphitheater. As soon as the engine was cut, Monty squared away, this time closed his eyes against the challenge of Susan's, and in slow measure summoned up from wherever he could reach in himself: "Go down, Moses..."

When the last echo expended itself, Wes clapped once, hard, and swung around to Susan. "Well?"

"Well."
“Susan, blast you,” Wes was nearly laughing in exasperation, Monty scarcely daring to breathe, “what’s the verdict?”
Scotch Heaven may not have amounted to much as a site,

but you cannot beat it as a sight.

--from the diary of Susan Duff

Susan scrubbed the floor a second time. The homestead house had stood empty since 1918. Almost the same could be said of the valley.

The world was definitely a different habitat on hands and knees. Her kneeling parts ached and her knuckles were red from the harsh washwater as she attacked the uneven pine floorboards with the scrub brush, round two. Cows had been in here; Wendell Williamson’s drizzling cows, Wes’s drizzling cows, depending on whichever end of the beasts he held title to in the Double W scheme of things.
Troughs of the past pooled with sudsy water as she slaved away at the old floor. The oblong worn spot in front of the cookstove where her mother had fended, morning, noon, and night, for thirty years. "Susan, see to Samuel, pretty please. The tatoes are refusing to boil, the devils." Over there where the table had sat, the most seriously rubbed groove was the spot where her father's sizable workshoes shuffled. "A man needs a firm understanding," topmost in the tiny horde of jokes he allowed himself. Her father could quarrel with the wind, then turn around and recite from heart the most lilting Bible passage. It picked at her that contradictions were still the fare of this house. Ninian Duff had swept into this pocketed-away valley in 1887 with a bemused wife and a daughter inquisitive beyond her three years of life and a ramrod determination to make his chosen acres of American earth a homesteaded Eden, whether or not the land had those ingredients. And here I am, back at his old haunt. I can just hear him. "Ay, Susan, we couldn't have kept you in Scotch Heaven with heavy fetters, and here you are back because of a notion worth its weight in moonbeams?" She knew the chapters of her life did not sit well together, she didn't need telling by the echoes here.
In mid-swope at the next offending floorboard she froze. Motion and
furriness where none should be, in the open doorway.

She jerked her head up as the ragged ball of gray settled into cat pose, at
ease on its haunches, ready to be waited on.

"You're prompt," Susan addressed it, "wherever you've been mooching
previous to now."

The cat licked its chops remindfully.

"Shoo. Scoot now. There's not a drop of milk, canned or by the squirt,
on the premises yet. Later." She dipped her fingers in the bucket and flicked
washwater at the cat, which flinched, thought matters over, and stalked out.

The vagrant cat dispatched, she made herself simmer down and take stock
of what all else needed doing to make the place livable. Except for the want of a
door, the house was still in one piece, at least. Windows were filthy, half a dozen
years of grime and fly life on them, but they would feel washwater before the day
was out. The roof seemed sound, although she knew the test of that would arrive
with the first cloudburst. Other necessities for her stay here--the pump at the well
outside that gaping doorway, the cookstove and stovepipe, the outhouse--she had
found to be extremely elderly but in working order. By nightfall, assuming that
Wendell Williamson's roustabouts didn't tip over in a coulee with her truckload of promised furniture on the rutted road into here, she would be installed in a reasonably presentable household or keel over in the attempt.

But an academy of music here for one pupil, and the pupil it is? Launch Montgomery Rathbun, poor, dark, and not exactly handsome, into a career in song from anywhere, let alone here? Every kind of doubt applied, despite her best efforts to send them on their way. Has Wes gone out of his head?

Absconded to New York meanwhile, Wes had, to spend time in the shallow bosom of his marriage. Susan allowed herself a vixen smile over that, but her mood returned as she had to stoke up the reluctant old stove to heat a bucket of rinse water.

Before the next bout of scrubbing, she stepped outside and took her leisure at the perimeter of the yard, idly whacking cockleburrs and nettles out of her way with a stick. Nearby, the creek ducked past behind its stand of diamond willows, plump at their ends with budbreak. A well-behaved school of white clouds coasted over the highest peaks to the west. Door or no door, Susan conceded, she at least had lucked into the green time of the North Fork valley, with wild hay surging in the bottomland along the creek and fresh grass on the
buttes and foothills that tilted the valley to the spring sun. On a day like this when the clear air was a delicate shellac on every detail of each gray-blue pillaring cliff, the mountains castled up even closer over the Duff homestead and the dozen other deserted ones of Scotch Heaven than she had remembered.

Green-stained stick in her hand, Susan stood stock still for a minute and listened with all her might.

The silence. Eloquent of the space, of the reach of country here along the footings of the Rockies, the cathedral-rise of the continent into the blue stillness of sky, the prairie unrolling in from the other horizon like Bedouin tarpaulin.

Her ears took in the solitude, her mind staying busy with the comings and goings of the dead and the momentarily absent. "Ghosts, Remembrancer? I don't believe in them at all. But they're there." She chuckled, catching herself at this, falling back on the old loved book of stories that the eight grades of the South Fork schoolhouse had read to tatters. The truth of the matter was she didn't at all believe in the spirit world, but right now she rather wished she was capable of it. Ghosts ought be interesting company, she reasoned, particularly here. Not gauzy visitors who popped out of walls and gabbed when least expected, she could do without those. But why shouldn't ghosts, to call them that, constitute a leftover
kind of tune of the soul, lingering in the air after life was gone? A nocturne, she
wouldn’t be surprised: ruminative, tending toward melancholy—after all, the poor
things are no longer the freshest notes in the musical arrangement, are they—yet
with a serenade melody that would not leave the mind. Chopin, she decided,
pensive a moment herself, Chopin surely would be the court musician of
eternity’s nightsingers.

It took no real prompting to remind herself that she currently had enough
concerns dealing with the living. To name the closest to mind—she lopped the
head off a thistle with opinionated vigor—Wendell Williamson, mastermind of
trespassing cows. But bright and early tomorrow the matter would become Monty
Rathbun, showing up here expecting to trade a chauffeur’s polishing rag for the
velvet stage curtains of Carnegie Hall. Never mind the impenetrable head of Wes,
have I gone out of mine? Or at least bid goodbye to any speck of judgment I had
in me?

She listened again, as if her life depended on it.

Again, nothing met her ear but the cockleshell ring of silence. Instead,
memory hinted behind her eyes everywhere her glance lit. Her mother, plump as
a hen, forever there in the front room used for gatherings, grandly matching
installments of poetry with Angus McCaskill. Her father, whiskers down his chest, striding off up the slope to the scattered band of woolies with the fatalistic tread of that first keeper of sheep who ever came to grief, Abel. And Samuel, oh God of my father, where in the tune of things is there any explanation of Samuel?

As alone as she had ever been, which was saying a lot, she squared her shoulders and went back in to where the scrub brush waited.

The sparkplugs lay in two rows on a clean gunnysack rag spread along the runningboard of the Dusenberg, like soldiers formed up on a tan field for the changing of the guard.

Monty fingered the new ones with respect, intrigued as he always was by the notion of bits of fire igniting gasoline in the cylinder heads. He twirled each fresh sparkplug into its place in the rank atop the engine, tightening down just so with a socket wrench. Try as he would, though, to confine himself to what his hands were doing, his mind insisted on going like sixty. You are stark crazy, a man your age, ran one line of self-argument about this bright idea of trying to turn himself into a singer at this stage of life. The other camp just as vigorously
pointed out that a man gets in a rut, and the next thing you know, that rut is six feet deep and there's an epitaph over it.

So, try high or lay low. Things were going his way so far, if he knew anything about it. Hadn't the music teacher taken him on? Wasn't the Major peeling off the money to cover it? But in each case, he had to wonder just why they were providing for him like this. As he'd heard said one time in the Zanzibar, you could never be sure whether what white folks were passing you was pepper or fly grunt.

That was the sort of thinking his mother would have called overly picky, Monty. His engine work finished, he washed up and then applied bag balm to his hands to keep them nice, wishing he had something similar for his voice and for that matter the rest of the inside of his head. Tomorrow already he had to sing for her. Rubbing the balm in and in, he stood there beside the long yellow car for a minute, looking off to the prairie he had been born to, and around at the Double W ranch buildings that were such home as he had ever had. The jitters kept bumping into his other feelings. What it came down to was that he was a little afraid, at all that lay ahead. But then he'd always had to be a little afraid. This schooling of
his voice that the woman was going to do might be a way out of that. And wouldn’t that be something.

He petted the Dusenburg for luck.

“There’s a holy sight I never thought I’d see again,” the voice lilted in from the doorway, “a Duff down on knees.”

Susan shot to her feet and raced to him, wet hands grasping him just above his elbows.

“Angus! Hello, you!”

More than a bit surprised to be in her grip, the angular man leaned his head back in order to thoroughly review her. Delight danced in his every feature as he did so. Angus McCaskill had always been as easy to read as a weathervane, even when she had been only elbow-high to him.

“Look at you, your eyes out like organ stops,” she said fondly.

“It’s been ages, Susan Duff.”

“‘Ocean’s ebb, and ocean’s flow/Round and round the seasons go.’

There. In Mother’s name, I’ve beat you to the rhyming stuff.”
"No fair," he protested, his craggy face full of indignant amusement. "I was standing here struck dumb, and you took advantage. Besides, that wasn't Burns, so it only counts when said on Sundays."

Laughing, she released him and drew him into the house with a gesture at the same time. "I was going to come up later. I knew you were still holding school."

"You ought to have stepped in and done a twirl. Let my not so model scholars lay eyes on my best pupil ever."

"On a spinster teacher starting to go long in the tooth, you mean."

"Don't. What does that make me?" It was comically said, but she caught a glint of rue. His mustache, which came and went according to private seasons in this otherwise open man when she was one of his schoolgirls, had turned drastically gray and looked permanent now, and in the lines around his eyes she could read with clarity every one of his thirty-five years of fending here. The world and its whirls had shaken this valley empty of all the others, but he was still on the land at the top of the creek as sheepman, as teacher over at the South Fork school, the last burr clinging to the swatch of homesteads called Scotch Heaven.
“You couldn’t quench Angus with the Atlantic Ocean,” her father often said of the nimble spirit of this man, not entirely admiration from a Calvinist.

“And your better half?” Susan inquired, a little late with it. “How is Adair?”

“Dair is gallivanting,” Angus responded cheerfully enough. “Varick fetched her down to Indian Head this week to spoil Alec and keep Beth on her toes. Nothing like a grandson to draw her. And another McCaskill is on the way there, toward the end of summer,” he gave out this news the surprised way men do. “We’re becoming downright prolific.”

He stopped. “I’m not much of a caretaker for you here, am I,” he cast a glance around, away from her. “By now I’ve worn the legs off three canine generations, dogging Double W cows out of the North Fork, and still they sneak in.” Then, giving the rectangle of sunlight where the house stood open to such creatures his consideration: “Mind you, I haven’t been asked the whereabouts of your door. But there’s one remarkably like it at Rob Barclay’s old place.”

“Do you suppose it could find its way back here by nightfall?”

Angus gave a grin. “I’ll see that it does. You have your work cut out for you, it looks like. I shouldn’t be keeping you from it.”
“You’ll have coffee and a bite if I have to poke it into you,” she had him know. “My pantry is the Lizzie, at the moment. I’ll be back in two shakes.”

He watched her go out to the automobile, striding in the scissor gait of Ninian Duff but bearing herself as if marching to drums strictly her own. The Model A which had caused pandemonium among his pupils that morning when it puttered past the schoolhouse, immersed itself up to its runningboard in the creek crossing, and at last crawled up the little-used North Fork road sat now, black and pert, amid the sun-browned dilapidation of the homestead buildings. Angus shook his head, frowning, then searched for someplace to sit and settled for leaning against a tilted cupboard.

In no time Susan swooped back into the house bearing an apple box of kitchen basics. “The bite is going to be graham crackers, it appears.” She further fished out a blue enamel coffee pot and a pair of tin sheepherder cups. Fussing with the coffee, she asked over her shoulder: “By the way, are you absent a cat?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She tended to the boiling coffee, clattered cups onto the cupboard sideboard between him and her, and set down the box of brown crackers with some force before answering. “You know and I know that Wendell would kick a blind orphan out of his way. But the Major seems to have Monty Rathbun’s interests at heart, don’t ask me why. Angus, I’ve given myself a good talking-to
about this, any number of times since I heard the man sing. This seems daft’—she swept a gesture around at the dilapidated room, farthest thing from a proper music parlor—"but the only thing worse is not to see what can be done with that voice of his. I’ve heard singers half the world over. There’s something there, when this Monty person stands looking like a hopeless cow chouser and then out pours the majority of a choir.”

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

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

“That mightn’t be popular, with some.”

“I’ve been spat on before,” she said levelly.

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

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

They laughed together.

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

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

"Yes, I see to that."

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

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

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

Susan had her own tightness of throat to talk past.

"I've been across to Samuel's grave. Once."

"Ah. Have you."

His turn to silently bolster her. It was six years on, since his own son
Varick had come home from the war, and the brother whom Susan had raised like
a son did not. Somewhere in his schoolhouse even yet was the homemade
telegraph rig that incanted from one end of the room to the other the name of its
long-boned inquisitive young maker in Morse code: Samuel Duff, ajump with
ideas. Susan had taken him under her wing for high school in Helena, and right
after, seen him climb onto the troop train that never brought him back. Then, their
hearts out of them, no sooner had Ninian and Flora lodged themselves in Susan's
care than the capricious influenza epidemic doubled back and took them. Angus
winced within. The flood of death around Susan, that last year of the Great War,
would have knocked anyone off her feet.
“You’ve been through the thick of things, I know,” he resorted to. “But maybe this is your turn at some of the thin. One pupil, mind you--shall I change the name of Scotch Heaven to Easy Street for you, Miss Duff?”

She made a face at that, as he hoped. Gathering himself to go, he was thanked with the instruction: “Don’t you dare be scarce, you and Adair. Ham supper here, just as soon I can get the ingredients.”

“You’re on, “ Angus lit up at the prospect of better food than his wife’s. He gave the doorway a pat of promise on his way through as Susan followed him out. “I’m off to the rescue of your door, then to the sheep. Davey has them on the other side of Breed Butte.” He saw it didn’t register. “Davey Erskine.”

“Of course,” she said with a start. “Give him my best.”

It lightninged out of nowhere to her. The time Davey Erskine had asked her to a dance at the Noon Creek school, the next valley over. As he led the way through the dark from the hitchrack to the tuned-up schoolhouse he kept remarking, “commoner.” Commoner than what? she wondered. She came to realize when they reached the lighted doorway that Davey had been trying to pilot her with the warnings, “cow manure.”
Now Susan giggled, which was not like her. Then worse: the thought of
the prophet Davey and this fertilized floor she was in combat with set her off into
a helpless fit of laughing. Finally she placed her hand over her mouth.

"Angus, I apologize, really I do. It’s just a silly old memory about
Davey."

"I’ll tell him," Angus said judiciously, "that you remember him with
gladness."

That night she put into her diary:

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

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

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

"Morning, Miss Susan," Monty said in short fashion. She could tell he was full of second thoughts over this, about to go back for thirds.

Dolph appeared no more happy to be along than Monty was to have him. The pint-size cowboy reported unwillingly, "The boss says I got to tag along with Monty here, do any chores while you're hoosiering him on this singing."

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

"You can chink." She indicated gaps between the logs of the house where hard weather had done its work. "The whole place can stand chinking, I'm sure. Monty, come on in."

Looking doubly doleful, Dolph moved off in search of buckets and the nearest clay bank as Monty traipsed into the house. He was surprised to see it wasn't much of a layout. The kitchen was the center of everything, as was to be expected, but this one appeared to have had a boxcar of peddler's goods emptied
into it. All of it made his own room at the back of the Double W washhouse seem snug as a ship captain's. But through a doorway to the room beyond the kitchen he glimpsed a spinet piano, its white keys like bared teeth. He kept on looking at every possible thing in the house except her. All of a sudden he remembered to take off his hat and then had no idea what to do with it.

By all signs there was no hope of putting him at ease, so Susan put him to work. "Let's go on in here." She led the way as if he were her hundredth pupil in this log cubbyhole instead of her first and only.

The piano sitting waiting, Monty edged into the room.

"Now then. We'll start easy."

"I'm for that."

"Don't look so nervous. Let's first of all hear how you sound on dry land. The same song, please, and take your time with it."

It crossed his mind that here was his chance to kill this off before it got started. Croak out the spiritual, off-key; cough in the middle; tell her your voicebox has had a change of mind, it realizes it's too old to go to school. Quit before you even start? some banshee in his conscience howled back at that. Why not scoot on home under your mama's bed and play with the cat, while you're at
Resigned to doing his best, he gathered himself to put what he could into the air.

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

"Go Down, Moses" came out about as it did with the accompaniment of the Missouri, Monty’s phrases like one bell after another, his voice surrounding the melody rather than following it. Again Susan was bothered by the labored way he squeezed air in and out of himself, as if his chest was a polka accordion, and she despaired for a moment over the lengthening mental list of items to be worked on.

Yet there was something there, she was back to thinking by the time he finished the song. When Monty stood planted (pigeon-toed as only someone who had spent a lifetime in cowboy boots could be, she added to the mental list) and let
loose, somehow you heard more than he seemed to have sung, as if his voice had
a shadow made of sound. At the Gates of the Mountains, she had wondered if it
was a trick of the canyon echo; but here too something resounding stayed on for a
moment, lingering in the ear, the auditorium of the head. Color, that vocal quality
was called, and it was rare and it was the one thing this problem pupil had going
for him.

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

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

“No doubt.”

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

“Let’s get ourselves underway,” she did away with that distraction and set
right to work on what was nagging at her the most, the drag of Monty’s breathing
as he sang. “First, you must learn to properly draw air into yourself.”
He looked disappointed. He had come here to sing his way to the top of
the world, not to take his nose for a walk.

She drilled into him that he had to breathe from deep down, bulge his
middle so his diaphragm would let air all the way into the lower region of his
lungs. "It's like cleaning out the bottom of a closet so the rest of your things will
hang right." He gave it try after try, and his intake still was the worst part of his
vocal wardrobe.

"There are exercises. Monty, you're not to let yourself be perturbed about
whatever you think I'm inflicting on you, honestly. Now then. Pretend you are
smelling a rose."

He gave a minimum sniff.

"A nine-year-old girl can do a better job of it than that." She looked stern
until he inhaled lustily. "Now put your fist in front of your mouth as if holding a
bugle."

_How does she know these things?_

"Monty? What is it?"

"I have me a bugle. I do. Played it all the time when I was a bit of a
thing."
“Angeline, the boy is driving us mad with that bugle.”

“I’ll have him put it up, Mister Warren. It was his father’s.”

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

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

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

“That’s what you must practice. At home, in the mirror. Do it a dozen times first thing each morning and again at night, and I assure you, I can tell whether or not you have been doing them.” Monty considered himself notified.

“Now let’s acquaint you with the notes,” she already was moving onward to.

Susan demonstrated how to sing the scale, Monty listening apprehensively. Her voice was smooth, each note up the ladder a tease of song. She would sing, he would sing. After considerable of this she called a break, with
tea and honey for his voice and enough advice from her to make his head swim.

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

By the time they called it a day, he felt as if he had gone ten rounds with The Real McCoy. Heading for his way out, he made his manners: "See you tomorrow then."

"You will not," Susan said with a slight smile. "Three lessons a week are as much as a voice can stand--every other day and Sunday off. But practice the breathing exercise all the time. Wait, let me give you my list for some more provisions. And tell Warren Williamson for me that I am going to need a milk cow."

While she jotted down foodstuffs, Monty fiddled with his hat. The arithmetic he was doing in his head was not coming out well at all. "Miss Susan? How long you figure I'm going to need to take lessons?"

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

"How--how's that work?" His dismay was the purest note he had hit all day, causing her head to snap up. "I can't be coming here until they lay me away!"
“No, no. I just meant that every singer needs refresher lessons, all through life. As to how long these sessions need to go on--we’ll just have to see.” Her face gave away nothing, but the provisions list she handed to him looked long enough to endure a siege.

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

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

*Small hours of night here, rationed out by the wick. I hadn’t remembered.*

She moved the lamp, annoyed at how spoiled the electricity of Helena had made her. There was no reason why a person couldn’t write, think, compose music by courtesy of kerosene.

Piqued by Monty’s parting question, she had put her voice through its paces before sitting down to the diary and the ever-waiting blank sheets of score.

*No more so than a tune from a violin is a set of strings that once inhabited the inside of a cat.*

“Susan! I’ve brought you a person of importance.”
Angus’s hail sent her to the window. He rode past to his schoolhouse every morning about now, but the woman with him—*Adair, at this early hour*?

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

“Not I, thank you just the same. I have to go put roundish thoughts into squarish heads.”

“And you wouldn’t have it any other way,” Susan told him. Adair caroled in, “You’d mope like

“Blessed am I, among women,” he joked. “If one of you doesn’t tell me what I’m about, the other one will.”

“Adair, I have coffee on, but...”

Adair produced a dishtowel bundle. “I brought you a loaf.”

The bread was still warm from the oven. Susan sent her a look. A woman who had baked bread before breakfast? This was a proffer if there ever was one. Adair was saying, “It’s so fresh, it may be hard to cut...”

“No, no. It’ll be a treat.”

Susan mauled off two large floppy slices and the two women silently buttered and ate.
To look at, Adair was... Those eyepits with their freckle markers. Adair was in there somewhere.

“A thrifty wind. It goes through a person instead of around.” The weather had turned

That unique sheen of her talk, like the nap of very old and odd-colored velvet.

How was the Rathbun man doing, how was

“I would like lessons.”

Susan resorted to some breathing control. “Adair, really, I’m just tutoring this one pupil.”

“Only every other day, according to when I see him riding across the bench.”

“That’s so. But

“I’m not asking you to make me into a fine singer or famous or anything of the sort.” Thank goodness for that. “It would be something to do, is all.”

Susan knew she wasn’t feigning. All the pretense in Adair McCaskill, you could collect on an eyelash.
"There’s not one child from the North Fork at Angus’s school any more. ‘The loins of the country are drying up,’ he says. You know how he is.”

Susan flushed with the knowledge that she did know, perhaps better than this woman Angus McCaskill had been married to for thirty years.

That first week and then the next, she worked at getting air into the man.

“You are doing your exercises?”

“Religiously.”

She had to hope that did not mean only on Sundays. “Then let’s try this. As if you were taking snuff.”

“I don’t know, Miss Susan—I’ve chewed plug in my time, but that snuff always did make me sneeze.”

“Imagine you are taking snuff, and also imagine you are not going to sneeze, all right?” There were times when she couldn’t tell if Monty was playing cowhand or losing the line of thought. “Here, watch me. Put the tip of your tongue against the back of your teeth. No, lihke kthis. See how mine touched the teeth and my mouth widened? Make yours do that and then sniff the snuff.”
"Helping the wayfarers on their way a bit," Angus informed them, pulling up his horse next to Dolph and Monty. His head cocked judiciously, after a moment he called the dog off. "No charge, though, for setting them into motion for you," he told the two.

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

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

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

"Suits me."

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

“Mister, they don’t want to hear that kind of thing from me,” Dolph
protested.

Monty was decidedly staying out of this.

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

“That old scissorbill.” Dolph saw the expression on Angus and amended:

“Excuse my French. But he was always putting the jump on me whenever I’d
ride anywhere close to the North Fork. Acted like he had this whole country in
his pocket.”

“Man, he did. The one over his heart.”

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

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

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

"I don't mean to detain you," Angus said, doing precisely that so far as Monty could see. Elongated as he was even sitting in the saddle, the graying teacher seemed to study Monty's face from way, way up. "How's the songster life agreeing with you by now?" he prodded, lightly enough. But you never knew.

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

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

Monty continued to meet Angus's gaze, although it wasn't easy. Those agate eyes were too wise for comfort. Why prolong the malady?

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

"Are you not getting along with Susan Duff?"

"It's not that, so much."

Angus waited him out.

"I'm maybe not cut out for this," Monty finally said.
“If she says you have the goods, she’s probably not wrong. Monty, if I can call you that”—people had always called him whatever the hell they pleased—"when it comes to the human voice, Susan knows more in her little finger than you and I and Wesley Williamson combined. If she’s still giving you a chance, man, you’re daft not to hang on to it for dear life.”

Monty absorbed this, staying wary.

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

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

“Say on.”

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

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

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

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

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

"He's known Miss Susan forever. Felt he had to give me a bit of the mother hen treatment about her."

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

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

"I wouldn't know."
"I bet. What would you do, though, if you was to get the chance?"

"Do?"

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

In no way did Monty like this territory of talk. Dolph and the other Double W hands could trot into Gros Ventre any Saturday night and have their needs taken care of by a bottle-blonde whore upstairs at Wingo’s speakeasy, while that was out of the question for him. Not even Browning, the Reservation town to the north where the men went when they proclaimed they wanted dark meat, was safe that way for him; long memories on those Blackfeet. Clore Street or nothing, for him, and that wasn’t anywhere in the picture until the Major had enough of New York, and why did Dolph have to start yapping about this anyway?

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

"Aw, I was just trying to sociable, Snowball. Excuse me all to hell if I tromped on your toes."
That woman was going to drive him to desperation.

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

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

Even this day off from her tasted bad, thanks to her. “Lung capacity,” she had kept after him yesterday. “Yours is lazy. That’s not your fault, it comes with driving for the Major and otherwise never exercising.”

“I’m exercising now, seems like,” he had pointed out.

“It doesn’t come out in your singing, yet. You must keep at it and at it.”

All he wanted was to sing. No, that wasn’t quite all. He wanted to sing as free and easy as Angel Momma had, and have the world sit up and listen, and make enough money at it that one wrong turn of a card wouldn’t leave him flat
busted, and for that matter not have to shine up another man's car and then right away be called on to drive it over these dustbaths called Montana roads. Granted, turning yourself into something took work: he knew that, he had been through it back there in rodeoing. But the dipsy-doodle nose and gut exercises she kept after him about—it was like she was trying to turn him into one of those carnival freaks who could tie parts of themselves in knots. "Take in the snuff," he mimicked.

He shook his head as if arguing with himself. He had never come up against anything like her. It hardly even did a person any use to get a good mad on. Last thing she had said to him in yesterday's go-round was: "If it makes you happy to be cranky, you go right ahead."

He was Johnny-on-the-spot at the Valier depot. Swaying under its pushing finger of smoke, the locomotive of the Two Medicine & Teton Railway teetered across a final coulee on a trestle that had seen better days and came laboring across the last mile or so of prairie into the scant town. Monty readied himself for interrogation as soon as the door of the private coach popped open. "How you doing, Major?"
“I expected you to set that to music.”

“Not just yet.” Monty contrived not to notice that the train porter wanted him to take the Major’s suitcases off his hands, instead holding the trunk of the car open for the man to heft the luggage in. Enough bags that it looked as if the Major was here to stay for a while, so at least there might be some stretches of driving when he wouldn’t have to be huffing and puffing trying to please the unpleasable over there on the North Fork. When he tenderly shut the trunk, he turned around to find the Major studying him.

“You can’t keep me in suspense, you know. How are you and Susan coming with your musical education?”

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

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

“Keep Dolph at the ranch, when I go for my lessons? Dolph is the sort, anything that comes into his head runs out his mouth.”
“Here I thought the two of you were fast friends, all this time.”

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

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

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

Head still turned to implore, his erstwhile chauffeur kept on: “ Couldn’t we work something out, he be the audience or whatever when I’m at my lessons, and I help him with his haying? Or fencing?”

Only at times such as this did Wes long for his military service, when he could snap out an order and watch everybody involved fall all over themselves following it without any yatter. “This is Wendell’s department,” he confined himself to. And he knew Wendell wouldn’t speak to Angus McCaskill if he met him in Hell in charge of the ice concession. Still, if it would smooth Monty’s
feathers any, maybe someone else from the ranch crew could go in Dolph's place.

"Very well, I'll take the matter up with Wendell. But I don't promise anything.

Now, does this car still have a motor?"

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

"The other direction."

Mystified, he slowly turned the Dusenburg onto the road out to the eastward prairie. The man just came from thisaway.

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

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

"There?" Monty blurted. "I thought there's not much there anymore."

It was true that the abandoned fort persisted in burning down, from vandals or prairie fires or who knew what. But there had been so much of it, when it was built as a Presidio of the north to make sure the plains tribes did not
rise from defeat, that the state of Montana picked through the ruins for anything substantial enough to house an agricultural experiment station. Wes himself had been on that appropriations committee and it bemused him a moment now, his part in turning sabers into plowshares. “The Extension boys, that’s about all,” he answered Monty. In turn there was something he very much wanted to know. “Remember it when, do you?”

That question had already taken Monty over. In his farthest memory the 10th Cavalry wheeled on the vast parade ground at Fort Assinniboine. The big, big horses, clatter of everything on the men and animals, the band magically tootling on horseback too. Here and there a white officer, but all the blue riders, faces on them like his mother’s and his. "See him, Montgomery? See your papa? Can you salute him like a little man?"

“Only just barely.” Those first three or four years of life might as well have happened in Bible times, so far removed were they from growing up under the crisscross of clothelines at the Double W. The road unrolled straight ahead of the car, Monty calculating another hour or so to the Marias River and a similar stretch after that to Big Sandy Creek, and then they would begin trending north. “The fort, it’s a ways.”
“This will give you and the Doozy some exercise,” Wes replied, settling his leg as comfortably as he could and reaching his attache case to him.

“That’s something I never did get a good understanding of.” Monty looked quickly over his shoulder, getting this in before the Major drifted too far into thought. “How my folks ended up at the ranch from all the way over there?”

Wes had wondered that himself. Many times. As neutrally as he could, he gazed back at the dark face that was the remaining result of that other. “As far as I know, your father rode in out of the blue. There was a job on the place for someone like him, and of course, your mother when he fetched the two of you.”

“Been different if I could remember much about the man,” Monty chanced a little farther. “It kind of keeps the curiosity going.”

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

“It would have been different, yes.” Wes, older, all too well remembered Mose Rathbun. The same dark brow on Monty, maybe some of the same slant of shoulders from a life on horseback. If Monty was lucky, all resemblance stopped
there. Mose's ilk, in denatured white form, Wes had met up with again and again in the AEF: lifer sergeants who thought they could get away with anything. He'd had to bust some of them so far down in rank they complained they had to go around saluting civilians.

"Major? Something I did?"

"Why, is there something on your conscience?"

"Not any more than usual."

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

Monty clammed up and Wes settled back to brief himself on representing Williamson interests at this session with the state agriculturists. Every so often he lifted his head to take in the prairie prospect. Four times out of five he had occasion to frown at the number of bald-faced cattle on the dun hills, the WW brand seared on their left hips. Wendell was swamping this range with cattle, irrespective of the grass drying away in front of a person's eyes. Wendell should have been the one to go to this session on drought management of land, but Wendell would rather take a beating than be penned into a meeting. Well, maybe the agricultural experimenters at Fort Assiniboine would have advice he could
inflict on Wendell about how to put pounds on the bony specimens across the
swath of earth owned by Williamsons.

Gradually the tawny hills gave way to homestead farms, spotted onto flats
of land rimmed by benchland on every horizon. Wes caught himself drowsing,
snapped awake and checked on Monty; he was peering ahead over the steering
wheel the same as ever. Both men were accustomed to Montana's long-legged
miles. But this journey on a day that had turned sultry, hot air blasting in through
the car windows, seemed to go on and on, methodically, doggedly, hypnotically.

On the section-line roads across the prairie they met no other travelers, black-
locomotived Great Northern trains passing them by on the distant northern
horizon the only other moving things in the blaze of afternoon.

"Hateful weather," Monty eventually offered above the motor-noise of the
Dusenburg. Wes entirely agreed.

Time upon time now, the big car topped a rise and the two men were
gazing down at lustreless expanses. There had been a distressed air to farms all
along the way, the houses and outbuildings brown howls of dry wood, the fields
themselves looked even more stricken. Through his sweat, Wes blinked and
studied. To every horizon, the earth had been plowed and anemic grain was trying to grow, but its stalks would barely tickle a person’s ankles.

And the weather, good God, how many summers of this weather were there going to be? Wes felt himself turning into hot salt soup in the stifling car.

“What do you think, Monty--might this bring rain?”

“Could,” Monty responded, as though anything was theoretically possible. “The air’s a funny kind of dry, though.”

Even though the road ran straight as a rail for a dozen miles ahead, Monty never shifted his eyes from it now. Wes, gandering, was the one who puzzled at the smudged sky to the west. The horizon there had gradually roughened with hills, breaks, coulees, and now that banked horizon of hills was dimming away into the sky’s haze. He knew it had to be cloud, but the formation was strangely edgeless, almost more a tint that anything else. “Does rain always have that much trouble making up its mind in this part of the country, I wonder?”

Monty sneaked a look, then jerked his foot off the accelerator and all but stood on the clutch and brake pedals until the car slewed to a halt. He rolled down his window and stared west to be sure.
“Dust,” he said as if afraid of the word. “We better get ourselves there before it does.”

The butter-bright car sped on the dimming road for the next five minutes, ten, fifteen, with Monty pursed and restless over the steering wheel while Wes tried to simultaneously watch both the road and the phenomenon to the west, the earth rising in wrath. A half-light, yellow-green, descended, perceptibly darkening as if a shadow-dye from the dust storm was flowing ahead into it.

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

Monty braked and veered, swearing, and just managed to miss the last leaping animal. “Your headlamps!” Wes ordered in a shout and Monty already had darted a hand to the button on the dashboard and refastened his gaze to the road. Wind began buffeting the car, and the pair of men now saw in the headlight beams dust blowing across the surface of the road like wisps of brown snow.

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

Before Monty could see it coming, a rolling washtub met the Dusenburg’s radiator grill and bounced away.
He managed to steer in close to an abandoned barracks that sat broadside between them and the dust storm, the building's turret dim over them like a castlement in the fog of some terrible era. The dust fury went on for nearly an hour. They could hear it stinging wherever it could find wood, scouring off the paint of buildings around them. And the two men watched, astounded, out on the grounds between this barracks and the next as not just dirt but gravel, actual small stones, blew into thin drifts. Tumbleweeds spun tirelessly across the parade ground, and every so often a stovepipe flew by.

Wes peered out into the lessening hurricane of murk. "I think we can give it a try, now."

Monty crept the car through the ghostly fort until Wes pointed. An aftergust of the storm caught them before they could make a run for it to the agricultural station office. The brown blown grit could be heard doing no favors to the glossy finish on the Dusenburg, and they could feel the dust collecting on them as deep as their teeth. Wes tied his handkerchief over his face like a bandanna, and at a motion from him, Monty quickly followed suit. They struggled against the wind to the door of the office. When they clambered in, the small crowd of extension agents and ranchers looked around in alarm at the...
masked invaders. Wes yanked his bandanna down, and Monty rapidly followed suit. As they swatted dust off themselves, Wes said to those assembled: “The agriculture of Montana, gentlemen—we had better hope it’s not blowing by for good, out there.”

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

“Wendell, he has a voice. You’ve heard him many a time.”

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

“For Lord’s sake, man, you had him sing for the Archbishop.”

“Nnhnn. That was here. Under our own roof.”

“Monty deserves this chance. He’s not ours to do with as we please.”

“Next thing to it. Monty wouldn’t have a pot to piss in if we hadn’t given him jobs.”

“Given him?” Wes grated the words out. “Or owed him?”

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

“Susan Duff came into this of her own free will. She can take it.”
those assembled: “I’m state senator Williamson, here to talk about the future of Montana. We had better hope it’s not blowing by for good, out there.”

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

“Wendell, he has a voice... You’ve heard him...”

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

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

“So you’ve already proved, once.”

Wes looked at him.

“What she gets out of this is the pupil of a lifetime. I’m seeing to it that she’s taken care of. Wendell, I don’t tell you how to run the cattle—”
“Good thing, too. When it comes to cows, you don’t know which end eats.”

“--and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t volunteer your observations about this.”

There were times when he wondered whether Wes was glad to have been cut out of the governor’s race. Not glad, exactly, but relieved. Wendell still couldn’t tell. Wes was too complicated for him.

The small hours of night, here. (Wes visits Susan, alone?)

“I feel that it’s due him.”

“Monty in particular? I’m just asking.”

“Wes? This isn’t simply to...involve the two of us again, is it? Tell me if it is.”

“Susan, no.” I don’t think so.”

“I need to borrow Monty back for some driving. Two days should do it.”

“Make him practice his breathing.”
Mrs. Gustafson brought his breakfast with a look of intrigue. Wes tried to recall anything he knew about Swedish history. The third time she swept in with fresh coffee, he told her: “All right, tell him I want to see him.”

Monty gingerly stepped into the breakfast room.

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

“Things got a little out of hand, is all.”

“A little? I have to bail you out of jail and haul Doc Walker away from his breakfast to wrap you like a mummy?”

“Major, I got more than I bargained for. Knocked up, locked up, and doctored up, like they say--I didn’t go looking for any of those.”

“How are your ribs?”

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

“What was it this time? Fantan again?”

“No, sir,” indignation ringing through. Pause. “Cold dice.” He could still see the fatal twin dots of snake-eyes wiping him out of the crap game. “Had them loaded, is what I think, and slipped them in on me despite how I was watching. I called this bruiser on it, and next thing I know, him and another ugly case were giving me what Paddy gave the drum.”

*I am so down I can hardly write.* She moved the lamp, annoyed at how spoiled the electricity of Helena had made her. *Monty works hard at it, but there is no reservoir of breath in him. It’s as it he has no diaphragm! He chops along from note to note...*

“Makes no never-mind to me what you do,” Monty was saying crossly to Dolph.

“Ma’am? Would you mind if I was to go fishing? I’d be right down there at the creek, first hole or two.”
“Dolph, I would very much like for you to go fishing, especially if you are going to catch a batch for my supper.”

“The fish doesn’t live that can resist me, Ma’am.”

She had him do the 00. Same result: the notes did not hold.

“Your breath.”

“I have as much breath as anybody,” he protested.

“It doesn’t come out in your singing. Lung capacity. Yours is lazy.

That’s not your fault, it comes with driving for Wes and otherwise never exercising.”

He hugged his elbows warily.

“I saw Jack Johnson in his prime,” Susan sailed on. “He had a chest like an ox, he could have sung Caruso off the stage in 00.”

“I’m no kind of a Jack Johnson!”

He stopped, seeing the resolve in her face.

“Monty, I can’t understand this,” she went right on. “You don’t have that many years on you. You haven’t led as dissipated a life as some, I wouldn’t think.” He looked askance at her, but she seemed to mean that as a high compliment. “Why isn’t your breathing working up, the way it should?”
Monty shifted around, trying to decide. She would wear him down to a dishrag, with these exercises, if he didn’t own up to it.

“There was this bull.”

One moment your feet are under you, dancing zigzag in the arena dirt, the scarred steel barrel all the barrier you’ve ever needed between you and the horns, then you take the least little step wrong and stumble, maybe on a hank of a rider’s grip rope, maybe on a heel-size stone brought up by the frost since last year’s rodeo here, maybe just on the blunt edge of the law of averages. The crowd responds with glee, thinking you are teasing, pretending to go down on a knee in prayer in front of the bull. The noise reverses to a gasp as the bull piles in on you, butting, hooking. Over by the chutes they all yell at the bull and someone dashes out and bats it across the face with a pair of chaps, keeping the animal off you until Dolph can wedge his horse between. Wendell Williamson charges down on you, whey-faced. “Snowball! It get you?” You can’t quite catch your breath to answer. Somebody knows enough to keep them from moving you until the doctor waddles from the grandstand with a black bag in his hand.
"How deep did the horn go?" Susan demanded.

"It collapsed my lung."

"Aha. And when exactly was this?"

"Same year as all the flu." Laying out there in the arena dirt after getting gored was nothing to the terror of two weeks in a hospital with influenza corpses being wheeled past almost hourly.

Susan thought furiously. If the diaphragm muscles on this man were torn to shreds, she was never going to be able to...

"Take off your shirt, please."

Monty looked around. "I can’t do that. It wouldn’t be right."

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

"That’s why it wouldn’t be right."

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

He shook his head.

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

His "No!" filled the corners of the room.
He didn’t want the whole Double W bunkhouse in on this. “Please. I can come back tonight, on my own. Get Mister Angus here, can’t you? His missus, too, if she’ll come.”

“Honestly, Monty.”

Angus whimsical, Adair intent, and Susan grim, the three of them gathered on straightback chairs. “Now then, Monty. Please show us.”

Slowly he tugged the tail of his shirt out of his pants, unbuttoned, and pulled the cloth up. The scar where the horn went in.

“Missed your gizzard by a little.” Angus contributed. “There was luck.”

Susan studied him. “Wait. Those scraped places—those are still healing.”

She waited. Monty let out a weary sigh.

“Those were something else. Couple of people jumped me, when I was in town.”

The look on Susan said she knew which town and which part of town.

“What do I need to do?”
Breed Butte loomed in front of him. He gasped.

She rode along behind him, leading his horse. "A little farther if you can stand it."

He had the gait of

They stopped at the brow of the butte. While Monty tried to take in breath, Susan took in the view...Tufts of wool were caught in the barbwire fence...

"More running," she prescribed, "we have to get your breath up. We'll work at it until you're blue in the face."

He stared at her.

"Monty, I--"

He allowed a small smile. "That could be a while."

"Why didn't you tell me I'm dealing with damaged goods?" Wes's face showed no comprehension. "His goring?"

"His what? When?"

"He said it was during the--1918."
"Susan, I was overseas. All I ever heard from Wendell about ranch doings were..."

Tell her. See how she likes knowing. Carrying it around...Bring the thing with me from New York one of these times. Say to her, "Here. This is the tangle our lives are. Undo it if you can."

"I have me something of my own I want to sing."

She folded her arms. "Be my guest."

"Why must I wander..."

This ol' pig-iron world."

Susan rested her chin on her fist, studying him. "I know most gospel songs. Why have I never heard the likes of that?"

Monty shrugged. "Just one I learned when I was little."

"Are there," she could not wait to pounce, "more where that one came from?"

"Some."
“Then let’s have them.” He watched as she went in search of paper, hesitated, and tore pages out of the back of her diary. “How did you come by these songs, exactly?”

“You won’t laugh?”

“Of course not.”

“Promise not to think it’s loco?”

“Monty, I will not think, I will not laugh, but I will sic 00 on you in about half a minute if you don’t...”

The tip of his tongue...

“Momma and the Holy Rollers.”
The congregation was short on ecstasy, and Webb was having to bide time
by dinning Deuteronomy into them.

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

Sister Satterlie, usually the first to quiver with the possession of the spirit,
was barely even swaying. Webb himself was trying his best to will the outbreak,
but you could never hurry the Lord. The jolt of exaltation would happen when it
happened, that was the weekly history of it all the way back to their knotholed
church in the mountains beyond Gatlinburg. Their Appalachian faces hung out
from under Stetsons and mercantile-store bonnets these Sundays, but they kept to their strenuous religion here in the Montana foothills where the whole passel of them had been shipped in as tie-cutters for the Great Northern Railway. Third- and fourth-generation sawyers, the men were proud to call themselves timber beasts and the women made do in the gulch logging camp up Noon Creek from here. Looking out over the little assembly, Webb as their lay preacher duly loved every one of them, but he did wish somebody would feel the call and start thrashing or declaiming in tongues; he didn’t have all Sunday up here at the portable pulpit.

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

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

The door peeped open, then swung wide to reveal a Negro woman, lank as a carpet-beater, with a wide-eyed seven-year-old clasping at her dress.
She gestured apologetically. "I don’t want to bother, in no way. We were chokecherrying," she indicated the boy at her side with a lard can half full of wine-colored berries. "But I couldn’t help but hear. Voices like your ones—I don’t know what got into me."

"We’re having church," Webb hardly had to point out.

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

"The sunrise side of Tennessee did not follow Jeff Davis to perdition,"

Webb stated with pride. No one in this room was ever going to forget the Confederate Army’s clamp on the Cumberland. The oldest of the congregation, Brother Cruikshank, had fought in blue at the battle of Pigeon Forge and had the minie ball wound to prove it.

"My husband, he was a soldier, out here."

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

Angeline Rathbun identified herself, the boy peering around at the hawknosed faces.

"That’s all well and good," the lay preacher allowed, "but if you’ll excuse us now, we have the Lord’s business to tend to yet."
“Couldn’t I sing with you? Just sing? I could”—she swallowed—"wait outside between songs, if you’d want.”

Webb blinked and looked around. The congregation had visibly perked up. “What kind of singing do you know?”

“By your leave?” Angeline moved a little farther into the room. She clapped her hands a few times to set a beat for herself, then began to sing.

“Spent many a night

Silver nails...

Where Heaven got hammered up.

Heaven, strong roof of my soul!”

Webb took a fresh grip on the pulpit. “We have our own singing, but that’s a new one on us. Am I right, brethren?” The congregation murmured affirmation. “It sounds like our music,” Webb mulled, “yet it doesn’t, too.” He felt a tingle. “Where’d you ever pick that up, Mrs. Rathbun?”

“My Mama’s slave days, when she was a girl. In the war times. Every day before sun-up, what we called in Kentucky ‘can see’—”

“We call it that to this day,” Webb could not help but put in. “‘Can see’ to ‘can’t see,’ that’s our working day in the woods.”
"--she had to take the mistress’s white saddle horse up in the woods and mind him there. The mistress was afraid the War Department was gonna see that white horse and take him for the army. Then when night come, Mama led that white horse in the dark—"

"In the dark," Webb crooned. "Satan’s satin dark."

"Yes sir. And the mistress would ride that white horse with a black blanket over him. And Mama had to wait, to all hours. She’d pass the time remembering songs, maybe make some up. And when I came along into this world, she taught me them."

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

"Mister, we’re it," Angeline Rathbun smiled a little forlornly down at her son. "No other colored, not in this entire county."

Webb brooded there in front of everybody, the congregants as still as posts.

"She brings songs, brothers and sisters," he felt moved to put the matter to the general will. "What say you?"
“She been sent!” Sister Satterlie shouted, with a lurch that gladdened Webb’s heart. “The Lord ever is mysterious in His ways!”

Brother Cruikshank climbed to his feet and testified: “I for one see no reason our congregation can’t have a colored auxiliary.”

Webb turned back to Angeline. “You may stay,” he spoke for them all.

“We will together sing the songs of one tongue, Our Maker’s. But there’s another consideration.” He pointed a not unkind finger.

“The boy here, he’ll be fine,” Angeline vouched. “He has a voice, too. Don’t you, Montgomery.”
“Ol’ Snowball, he thinks the world’s wagging its tail at him.”

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

“They’re that way,” the man across the table from him ground out. He topped up Dolph’s glass again and then his own, and sat back. The two of them were by themselves in the back corner of the speakeasy, their conversation oiled by the bottle of bootleg blend from Canada that the man sorely needed some company on.
"Snowball's not a bad sort, far as that goes." Dolph wanted this made clear. "But he's latching onto too much of a good thing, if you was to ask me."

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

Didn't Dolph wish he knew. Perpetually parched for women, cowboys tended to believe there must be winks of ecstasy waiting for them somewhere, if only the circumstances ever would line up right. But tonight's perfunctory prostitute whom he had sprawled himself on in one of the rooms overhead was more like a blink. And the Duff woman, she seemed blind to her own kind. Dolph had to shake his head. Whenever a man met confusion in this life, it almost always wore a dress. How was it in any way fair for Monty to be the object of her eye?

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

"And during these...music lessons?"

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

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

The town of Gros Ventre, nippy even on a late spring evening such as
this, lay tucked under its double blankets of darkness and leaf canopy. The man
walked home with great care, taking to the deserted street rather than trust himself
on the undulations of the board sidewalks forced up by the roots of the big
cottonwoods. It had been a night's work, lubricating that homely mutt of a
cowboy. But the little wrangler knew an abomination when he saw one, give him
credit for that.
He tromped on through the dark, filled with an urge to shout to the whole town about the Williamsons and what they spawned. But that wouldn’t do. Late as it was, and quiet, he confined himself to humming fiercely, hymn of him and his kind.

The words to it were:

*Klansman, Klansman, of the Ku Klux Klan,*

*Protestant, gentile, native-born man,*

*Hooded, knighted, robed, and true,*

*Royal sons of the Red, White, and Blue.*

*Owing no allegiance, we are born free,*

*To God and Old Glory we bend our knee,*

*Subline lineage written in history stands,*

*Weird, mysterious Ku Klux Klan.*