

Night on Highland

1924

Version 70
May 11 '00
revision

*"This is a story I am more fit to tell now, through whomever
unearths this old account of the three of us, than when I was alive."*

--jotted on the flyleaf of the diary of Susan Duff

"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 briskly 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; an

adjusting glance into the mirror; 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 brought in 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 phonograph, 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, inventive 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; the phonograph sang 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.

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"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 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 its benefits. 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. 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 their comical first clasp of love and all it led to, and her laugh which started somewhere down in the Scotch gravel of her family footing, and that violet concentration in her eyes--everything was there to be missed, as he watched Susan across the frozen distance between bed and desk.

"Wes?" She put down her pen. "Do I get to know why you're here?"

"I'm working on that." Reluctantly giving up his inspection of Susan, his gaze lit on the open pages in front of her. "A woman armed with a diary. Not the best company for me to be keeping, I suppose."

Susan only 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 said:

"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 marriage. "*She's not a well woman, Susan. I can't face leaving her, 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, she thinks I'm in Minneapolis 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, don't you think? This isn't like you, Wes. At least your word was always good. When we stopped seeing 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. You're not doing either of us any good by barging in here in the middle of the night, are you. If I remember, 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 streetlights and diffused glow of the strings of bulbs on the capitol dome, the butter-yellow Dusenburg could be seen. 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 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 a pupil 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, all the sheet music you can stand, whatever you need to arrange in the way of accompaniment, name it." Watching to see how she was taking this, he quickly said: "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 ...unformed. But wonderful 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 he 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 Wes send crowds into a rising roar as he uncoiled his campaign tagline, "*I promise them an epidemic of it!*" No other Montana politician had stung back as fiercely at the KKK when it snaked into the state: "*This cuckoo Klan, they seem to be scared the Pope of Rome will descend on them in their beds, else why do they wear their sheets around with them?*" 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'll 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. We can't--well, you'll see..." He frowned. "I'll wedge the idea into Wendell's skull, but we may need to make arrangements around him."

Susan shook her head no and then some.

Wes considered himself notified. Not for nothing, he reminded himself, was this prideful woman the daughter of Ninian Duff. Ninian the Calvinian.

"Your old place, then," he regrouped. "You stay could 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 came out in her voice. "Wes, who in this world means that much to you?"

He appeared stunned at how she'd put it. 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."

Whiteface

1914

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 he knew 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 out, "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 slouched, lanky and loose-jointed, mopping 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 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 cosmetic cream. 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 six feet. 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, even before he did

the milking, Monty stuck his head in the 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 habit, 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; a clawbar had been found. 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 Williamsons' 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. Monty 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."

"It's quite the life if you don't weaken," Dolph said as if he had been rodeoing since biblical times.

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 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. "Mr. Wendell already--"

"What's that have to do with the price of peas in China?" Dolph looked at him in surprise. "You got something against 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 washwoman. 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 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 ⁹in 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 savoring the thought of Clore Street and the good times waiting. 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, another ten might be added to the sack and that was a full Bull bag. Drop one of those on 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 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.

Gates of the Mountains

1924

"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 advanced, bearded scarecrow of a man and gangly girl in overalls, and climbed the corral 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 saw, and lately that included the father whom everybody said she was a copy of.

"Ay, *Williamson*," her father called 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 poised 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 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 McCaskills wore their hearts on 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 old 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.

To be doing something with himself besides stewing in his own excitement, Monty again studied the mountains stacked around. As country went, the Big Belts struck him as dead-end scenery: gulches to nowhere, slabs of cliff around every corner. Not like his old loved Two Medicine country, with its dune shapes of the Sweetgrass Hills way over east there as if they were unfading mirages and the great reefs of the Rockies up into the sky to the west. This river was something, though, rolling its way mile after mile through this rock-solid canyon. *'Oh, Shennandoah, 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 the 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?" Monty asked, to get the boatman to talking. Best way to be was to listen more than you spoke.

"Two. Who wants to know?" Harris eyed him as if he resented the challenge to the boat's horsepower.

The Dusenberg had ninety-five. "Just wondering. I been around engines quite a little bit myself." He gratefully rubbed his hands in the radiated heat from the cylinder block. Fingers long and tapered but strong; 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 Chambers 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 recalcitrant collar back up. Yes, there was. White lady variety. One more time he wondered 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--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.

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.

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--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 wear and tear of living in this old pig-iron world, 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?"

"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, Monty reflected 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, 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, three square meals 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. Not to mention far along the palette of pigmentation, compared to the flesh tones of the audiences he seemed to crave. Yet he had already come some way up in life. She remembered the dawn-and-dusk chores of the homestead, and multiplied those by the tasks asked of a choreboy on a ranch as whopping as the Double W.

Yes, he 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 studying 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. 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 rule of the profession," Susan said firmly, "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. 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?

Stiff as a pointer dog, 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, back through time. Through here Lewis and Clark had come exploring, twenty-six soldiers under their command and Clark's slave, York. Wes had checked his leather-bound Thwaites edition of their journals, and the 1805 entry could have been written this very day: *This extraordinary range of rocks we called the Gates of the Rocky mountains....there is not a spot, except one of a few yards, in which a man could stand between the water and the towering perpendicular of the mountain. The convulsion of the passage must have been terrible, since at its outlet are vast columns of rock, torn from the mountain, which are strewn on both sides of the river--the trophies, as it were, of a victory.* The journal passage stirred him, but the thought sat odd: the victory of nature over nature? He let that paradox go for another: York, Angeline Rathbun, Monty, the colored troops who had marched past his own into the bloodbath at St. Mihiel, the burden of their lives lofting into this song. Back nearly as long as he could remember, Angeline'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 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 breas',

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?"

Ninian's Land

1924

*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 Scotch Heaven house had stood empty since 1918. Almost the same could be said of the valley.

The world was definitely a different place on hands and knees. Her knuckles were red from the harsh washwater as she attacked the pine floorboards with the scrub brush, round two. Cows had been in here; Wendell Williamson's drizzling cows, ^{the} Wes's drizzling cows, depending on whichever end of the beasts he held title to in the Double W scheme of things.

She made herself simmer down and take stock of the place. Except for the want of a door, the homestead was habitable enough.

The worn spot in front of the cookstove where her mother had fended. 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 Ninian Duff allowed himself.

She didn't at all believe in the spirit world, but she rather wished she could. Ghosts ought be interesting company. Instead, memory hinted everywhere her glance lit. Her mother, plump as a hen, matching swatches of poetry with Angus McCaskill. Her father, whiskers down his chest. And Samuel.

Ghosts, Remembrancer? I don't believe in them at all. But they're there.

...

Here had begun the life inside her head. The long dreaming, the floated existence which passed by on the tide of hours...She had been born in the East Neuk of Fife, and was five at the time of the America ship.

The mountains reared to the west, a wall at the end of the high plains stretching eastward to nobody knew where. They became like a wall to the Duffs,

too--like the wall of a room, a familiar solidness and design. No matter where you were in the coulee maze of the North Fork valley, scramble high enough and the mountain wall would be there, gray-blue, tilted and pillaring.

...

Montana's seasons declared themselves. They regulated life. (Susan's father did not like to be regulated by much else.) At least once a generation, a giant winter would send the livestock industry to its knees. Farming wobbled with every dry summer.

...

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

She shot to her feet and raced to him, wet hands grasping him just above his elbows. "Angus McAsker."

"Are you trying to make an old gaffer bawl, Susan? You're doing all too good a job of it."

"I knew you were at school. I was going to ride up later."

"You ought to have stopped by. Let my model scholars see the best pupil I ever had."

The first-footing at the turn of the century.

"You'll have coffee and a bite if I have to poke it into you."

Angus lifted his hands in surrender.

"Dair is at Varick's. Nothing like a grandson to draw her. And another on the way, we have reason to believe, toward the end of summer. The McCaskills are becoming downright populous."

...

"I did hear something of the sort."

"Yes. Wes...Wesley Williamson is giving him this chance."

"That's a modest wonder to me. Generosity from a Williamson."

...

"You know my inclination. Teach away." He made the old joke of the deacon urging the timid preacher to speak up: "*'For the Lord's sake, man, fire the popcorn at the porcupine--some of it may stick.'*"

They laughed together.

...

"I see that the graves are kept."

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

"People die everywhere, Susan, so far as I know."

He was sure Ninian Duff went down to his grave still arguing with the Lord.

...

"We'll stay out of your hair."

"Don't you dare be scarce, you and Adair. Ham supper here, just as soon I can get the ingredients."

Angus brightened at the prospect of better food than his wife's. "You're on." He looked at her. "I've yammered away. There's not that much conversation to be made hereabout, any more. Well, I'm off to the sheep. Davey has them on the other side of Breed Butte." He saw she didn't register. "Davey Erskine."

"Of course. Give him my best."

...

That night she put into her diary: *So much for wishing for ghosts, when they line up in the mind to volunteer.*

...

It put her in mind of the time Davey Erskine had asked her to a dance at the Noon Creek school. As he led the way through the dark 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 Jimmy had been trying to pilot her with warnings of "cow manure." Now as then, especially sharp translation was required.

Spring was the disappointing time. Other seasons would let you down in their own way: summer might be too rainy for good haying, autumn too brief or to cold, Winter might be one blizzard after another. But spring had its special disappointments. With the cold clog of winter supposedly broken, you looked forward to warm weather and dry earth. Instead, there might be weeks of mud, every step outdoors taken in overshoes heavy with mud. Spring weather would be just warm enough to make you shed a winder^t coat, just cool enough to chill you into taking a cold. And a spring without rain or a late, wet snow meant the grass and hay would not be good when summer ever came. The melting snow...slugh^s... The deep banks up the coulees could be watched shrinking, crusting into dirty iciness before finally vanishing.

... Had Wes gone out of his mind? Launch a career in song from here, this valley gone silent? It seemed an idea worth its weight in moonbeams. True, Montgomery Rathbun had a sound.

The temples of music were back there, and in Europe. She had gone to Madame 00, in a room smothered in velvet. In six months she learned two things: how not to teach, and that she had a silver voice in a universe where the currency was molten gold. You could make up for lack of upper register with stage bearing or phrasing. But you couldn't substitute anything for purity of voice.

She knew the chapters of her life did not sit well together. The homestead, the one-room school--she had come from the equivalent of a birdnest. Then teachers' college, where she worked the curriculum to death...

And here was Monty Rathbun, set on writing himself anew...

He showed up full of obvious second thoughts.

Dolph reported unwillingly, "The boss says I'm 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. But one was white.

"You can chink." She indicated the gaps between the logs of the house.

"The whole place can stand chinking. Monty, come on in."

Susan knew there was no putting him at ease, so she put him to work.

Or was the moving hand that of Wes. It was not at all clear to her yet, how far Monty's urges reached and how far they were being pushed by Wes's own. This stint of lessons would find that out.

Monty's voice seemed to linger. Somehow you heard more than he had sung. The sound has a shadow. At the Gates of the Mountains, she thought it was an effect of the echo; but here too his tone stayed on for a moment after he ceased. Stayed on in the ear, the theater of the head...

...

With the cottonwoods that rose old and tall along English Creek, the streetside forestation produced almost a roof over the town. The businesses along Main Street looked considerably better than they otherwise would have, somehow

seemed to be trying not to disgrace the trees. The neighborhoods, with all that green over them as shelter from the sun and as a breeze-catcher whenever any air was moving, were wonderful for walking.

Besides the street columns of cottonwoods, a colossal old one with a trunk as big around as the wheel of a hay rake stood in the yard beside the front gate.

..., their gravestones matched humps of marble against the broad and lofty lines of the valley.

"It'll be a humdinger if we can get it all," 00 predicted. That is, if the rain didn't resume and keep the hay too wet to stack, or if hail or a windstorm didn't knock it flat.

...

He showed up bright and early, keen but guarded.

"First, you must learn to properly draw air into yourself."

He looked disappointed.

"Imagine you are smelling a rose."

Monty gave a short sniff.

"*Smelling.*" She looked stern until he inhaled. "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 own 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, Mr.

Warren. It was his father's.

"Then you know what I'm asking of you. Put your hand up, no, against your lips. Now smell the rose, but bring the air in through your fist. *Deep* breath, make it sound like a tea kettle, there. Feel the muscles work?"

His flanks felt as if... "Some, I guess."

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

"See you tomorrow, Miss Susan."

"You will not," she said with a slight smile. "Three lessons a week are as much as a voice can stand--every other day and Sunday off. Wait, let me give you a list of some provisions I need. Tell Warren Williamson that I was promised..."

Monty was doing unwelcome arithmetic in his head. "Miss Susan? How long am I going to need to take lessons?"

"Oh, always," she said absently as she wrote her his grocery list.

"How--how's that work? I'll be coming here *forever*?"

"No, no. I just meant that every singer needs referesher lessons, all through life."

"Miss Susan, mind if I ask--who gives you yours?"

"I administer them myself. I take my own medicine, don't worry."

"As if you were taking snuff."

"I don't know, Miss Susan, I've chewed plug in my time, but that snuff always makes 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 he was making fun or losing the line of thought. "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."

"Monty. Lacking proof that you can't, assume that you can."

...

"Can't reach that high one."

She stared at him. Then rose to her feet and yanked a straightbacked chair in from the kitchen, its legs skreeking notes of protest. She righted it and climbed up on it. "This," she informed him, "is a high note." She sang... "All else is within reach."

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 if he has no diaphragm! He chops along from note to note...*

...

Swaying under its pushing finger of smoke, the venerable locomotive of the Two Medicine & Railway teetered across the coulee on a trestle that had seen better days.

In his private coach, Wes took in the prairie prospect. He always put aside his business papers as soon as his coach was shunted off the mainline at the town of Conrad.

He went to the front of the car. On the wall the slots with his railroad passes, courtesy of his fellow owners. Elegantly printed. The Atchison, Topeka

& Santa Fe; the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul; the Soo Line. John Ringling's White Sulphur Springs & Yellowstone Park. In the rack a sheaf of passes for this line of his own. TM&T: "The Empty," he knew people called it. He didn't mind. He owned this twenty-mile shortline so that the Anaconda Copper Mining Company couldn't. The coal in these prairie hills wasn't much, but it didn't take much to attract The Company.

Bald-faced cattle on the dun hills, the WW brand seared on their left hips. Wes frowned at the number of cows and calves in this section. Wendell swamped the prairie with cattle. He himself had rapacity schooled out of him. Pounds-on-the-hoof were what counted, rather than how many bony specimens could be crammed onto the range.

"Ay, Williamson, any cows ever I had could knit socks with their horns.

These seem to be wanting in mentality, not to mention poundage."

Ninian Duff. Dead but still formidable.

Behind him on the route from the East, the puddled settlements on the great prairie. (Name the towns), drying up after

He had come to believe there was a limit to how much land a man could swallow without turning himself into an island.

Back when he had been safely loveless, with only a war to worry about.

The evening in the Placer Club. "Pull out? When I'm governor I'll make this state so hot for you, you and the Company will need to go around in furnace pants."

"Wes, Wes," the politico chided. He put down on the table a newspaper clipping. "*Miss Susan Duff, Helena's renowned alto, will give a recital...*"

He followed that with the receipt for the Missoula hotel room...00 crumpled the two pieces of paper and flipped them into the fireplace. "Naturally, there are more where those came from."

In the turn of a hand, a governorship was lost. But they hadn't taken the blood and breath out of him.

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

"Miz? 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, Miz."

"I have as much breath as anybody," he protested.

"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. You don't have that many years on you. You haven't led as dissipated a life as some, I'm sure." He looked askance at her, but she seemed to mean that as a compliment. "Why isn't your breath 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 say 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 somebody 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 after getting gored was nothing to the terror of two weeks in a hospital with influenza corpses being wheeled past almost hourly.

"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."

She colored. "I need to see your ribcage. If you're going to be bashful about it, it's only 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. "Get Mister Angus here first. 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. "But 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 part of town.

They couldn't ever savvy is, her and the Major. Helena was town, with a capital T. Not like going into Gros Ventre...The reservation town of Browning was out of the question; long memories on those Blackfeet.

"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."

"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 may be a while."

Holy Rollers

1892

“Could I sing? Just sing?”

Double W

1924

"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."

"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." 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."

"So you've already proved, once."

"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.

...

Her mind was back on the summer, the situation so far and what could come in the time ahead. None of it was easy thinking.

... ..

"Person can have more than one wish in him, can't he?"

...

"Miss Susan, I don't know. I was going along in life, and the Major gets this wild hair, excuse my French."

She whirled on him. "He told me you wanted this."

"I did. I do." He gestured. "It's hard to explain."

"It has to be your idea more than his. Or we're all wasting breath."

...

He switched around to something he knew would take her in a different direction. "Why'd you ever leave here?"

"It takes terrible patience. If you don't want to go on with this, Monty, that's all right."

...

"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."

"I don't think so."

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

"Make him practice his breathing."

"It's going to be some distance."

Monty thought he was accustomed to Montana's long-legged miles. But the journey went on and on, methodically, doggedly, hypnotically.

They passed Fort Assinniboine.

"Do you remember it?" Wes asked shortly.

(Monty memory of detail)

"Major? Something I did?"

"Is there something on your conscience?"

"Not any more than usual."

"Monty? Are you a praying man?"

"Some." He looked cautiously over his shoulder to the backseat.

Tawny country, flat beside the road and 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, owl in a yellow speedboat.

"Hateful weather," Monty eventually offered above the motor-noise of the Dusenburg. Wes entirely agreed. The afternoon had turned sultry, hot air blasting in through the car windows. In more than two hours they met no other travelers, black-locomotived Great Northern trains passing them by the only other moving things in the late blaze of afternoon.

The vaguely Dutch gable-top of a grain elevator appeared on the horizon ahead, Monty tiredly hoping this was the place.

"This is only Culbertson," Wes said and at the town's main intersection told Monty to turn onto a road arrowing straight north. "Another forty-five miles or so."

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. 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 than 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. 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 advised 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 city limits before they could discern any of the buildings of Plentywood.

Before Monty could see it coming, a rolling washtub met the Dusenburg's radiator grill and bounced away.

He managed to steer into an alley where the Plentywood Mercantile sat broadside between them and the dust storm. 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 the mouth of the alley as not just dirt but *gravel*, actual small stones, blew into thin drifts in the street. Tumbleweeds spun tirelessly through town, 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 town until Wes pointed. An aftergust of the storm caught them before they could make a run for it to the meeting hall. 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 look from him,

Monty quickly followed suit. They struggled against the wind to the door of the meeting hall. When they clambered in, the small crowd stared at the masked invaders. Wes yanked his bandanna down, and "I'm state senator Williamson, here to talk about the future of Montana. We have to hope it's not blowing by, out there."

These people had big educations and experience of the world. Why were they bothering with the likes of him?

"They will try your air." Monty lost the meaning in the roll of rrr's. Susan fixed him with a look. "If you don't dominate the audience, the audience will dominate you."

"If I was to go to town, that'd be fine."

"That's probably wise," Susan thought out loud. "Gros Ventre..."

"Miss Susan. 'Town,' I mean Helena."

Flanders

1919

Not for nothing was Susan minted from Scots; the first nickel she had ever earned, she knew the whereabouts of.

The French noticed the number of Montanans being interred. Bold of ill-fated...Clerical error also turned out to be in the picture; they were drafted far more heavily than the state's population justified.

She traveled with the president of the Flanders Field Remembrance Alliance and his sad-faced wife; then stayed on... Wesley went as the representative officer...

(memory of seeing Wes in the Two Medicine country when she was a schoolgirl) The Williamsons' lordly ways.

She recalled his speaking at their Equal Suffrage congress in the Helena hall. That would have been 1912. He was the state senator from Pondera County, as a Williamson or one of their bootlickers customarily was...In one of those whirlpools of politics that fascinated and rankled Susan, the hope for the vote lay in the homestead counties, the land where she had grown up. Jeannette Rankin...The enemy of my enemy is my ally, ran the rule of Montana politics-- Susan was always bemused by its resemblance to children choosing up sides at recess...But Wesley Williamson came with convictions.

One of them, his Roman Catholicism, was to cost him Susan.

His speaking voice sounded sandy, hard-used, and the more appealing for that. He spoke not in thunderous phrases, but as if concerned to find the right words, the path to their ears.

She had been amused that day. Then came the time of hating him. And then they were lovers.

Samuel came to live with her in Helena. It was with an eye to that, and the music academy, that she took the great step of buying the house on Highland Street.

They walked the battlefield. Of the war that did not end all wars but definitely did take the tongues of a generation.

Samuel was plowed under here because he was Adam's ilk. Her gender had spared her.

She found herself thinking of the dead pile--the heap outside the lambing shed where the dead ones were thrown. Some still were yellow with birth fluids. Pink tongues poking out of others. Stick legs, ribs showing. Eyeless; magpies lost no time. She had never fainted in her life, and did not intend to start now.

"Bist sie Montanischers?"

"Ja, Fritz. Auf Rocky Mountain hummingbirds"

"... Alte Thunderhard?"

'Wir ...'

Wes laughed helplessly. Karl May... "Tell Private Imhoff to limit his conversations with the other side." Twenty minutes later, while Wes was inspecting a position Company A was to occupy that night, a salvo screamed in. He and Captain Olsen made themselves thin behind a big tree, shrapnel whining around them.

"What's this about?"

"The sniper over there, Major. He couldn't hit a bull in the ass with a shovel."

"How do we know that for sure?"

"The men did a Punch and Judy, sir." They showed Wes the pair of helmets strapped onto the ends of bedrolls.

"We'll try Mister Sniper again in an hour--I want to see for myself. No teasing him, any of you, and no firing back."

The bee buzz went past the helmets. "We figure he has buck fever,"

Sergeant Crimmins said. "The shots come awful quick."

Wes tried to put himself in the place of the German officer. The patrols that didn't go out of their way to fight. Wes could imagine that his counterpart didn't welcome the salvos any more than the Americans did: shells that fell short, shells that were overshot... A nervous young soldier? An old soldier told to pester the Montanischers but not make them mad? A malcontent? It bought time, and Wes would take that deal.

A single shot rang out.

"You're in for it now, Sammy."

"Listen to them over there--"Mein Gott, Mein Gott!"

"Too good a shot, old kid!"

Crimmins was coming down the trench crouched over. Wes reached the men first. "What's happened?"

"It's Bucky, sir. Sam Duff bagged him. He fell out of that tree like a ton of bricks."

Wes looked at the big-boned young soldier. "Duff, come with me."

He led the way into the HQ dugout, Samuel ducking his head to follow through the doorway.

We're a long way from the Two Medicine country. We're a long way from anything simple.

"Private Duff, I thought I gave orders to hold fire, where that miserable sniper was concerned."

"I...I didn't get the word, sir. I just this morning got back from the field hospital. Sir, I thought we were to kill Germans at every chance."

Wes rubbed his knuckles. Nuance didn't apply to a Samuel Duff.

The medal from Pershing. Small talk from Black Jack himself. Did Major Williamson know the Fort Assinniboine country? "I know it quite well, sir. Some of our range is adjacent to it." Splendid, said the general. Served time there himself, nothing like the Montana prairie for cavalry, except of course for that vapid gloryhound Custer. "I was not aware you had served there, sir." Most decidedly, escorting the Crees back into Canada. Frightful chore, like trying to

carry water in a basket--the Crees would squirt away into the brush of every creek the 21st Cavalry forded with them.

All that she had been through with the suffrage movement instructed her that she should not care a speck how she looked to a man, and she was perturbed at herself.

They dined..."Madame," the waiter called her, and a smile twitched on Wes when she did not haughtily correct him. After the waiter turned away, she suddenly laughed. At the split in the back of the waiter's jacket. At herself. At the foie gras. At Wes... At the route from the homestead from here.

What could she tell herself? That an assignation didn't count if it occurred on foreign soil?

The noses met, she remembered.

"There's no brass plaque," Wes said reprovingly. "Don't they know who they're dealing with, here?"

The islands were a spatter of rock, and their populations were a spatter, too. She mulled the route, that took people such as the Duffs to another land.

Such as the Williamsons, too.

“We don’t make much of it,” Wes reflected. “We’ve been in America since the earth cooled. Doubtless it was one of us who elbowed the dinosaurs into LaBrea.”

Susan recalled Angus McCaskill’s saying that the Williamson family escutcheon read: *Formerly robbers, now thieves.*

“How much longer can you fib by cable?”

Wes said nothing, then touched her cheek. “Until Monday. I have to be aboard the 00 or they’ll be sending a search party for me.” Wes looked out over the islands. “Ef I c’d inconvenience ye further wi’ my lusty presence, Miss Duff,” he said in absolutely the worst Scottish imitation she had ever heard, “whurrr w’d ye like to spend the week’s end?”

“Edinburgh. Provided we can do so in sound English.”

“You’re on.”

High piles of clouds over the city. The Castle various in its stone textures--all dark, but subtly different, like some natural palimpsest of the centuries. Susan felt as if she had stepped into someone else's life.

"My father marched here."

"He never did! Ninian Duff, on parade at Edinburgh Castle?!"

Susan failed to see amusement in it. "Wes, you're a famous soldier. But you're not the only soldier there ever was."

"No, no, not that. All I meant was--kilts on your father?"

"Maybe this is the clearing-up shower."

In a black taxi with *Mackay* lettered on its door in gold, they were trundled up the hill to Arthur's Seat. Standing on the promontory, Wes theorized that Scottish weather being what it was, Arthur may have frozen off that part of his anatomy there.

In the hotel in Dean Terrace, the Waters of Leith purling past.

"The shins of the fathers are not visited upon their daughters."

"Your heroic side. Tell me what it's like to be famously brave."

"Accidental."

"And Samuel? What do you think there?"

"Your brother was no doubt a better soldier than was good for him."

"I had a pupil who died of the war, too."

"In what action?"

"Alcatraz."

Wes lifted his head to look at her.

"Could I talk you into singing for me?"

"The evening brings all home, 'tis said

Those who stray, and those who roam,

The evening brings all home.

"The untented cosmos my abode,

I pass, a willful stranger;

My mistress still the open road

And the bright eyes of danger."

The evening brings all home, 'tis said

From islands far, and Heaven's dome.

The evening brings all home."

Black Jack

1888

“Mose? Isn’t that over by the Blackfeet? And the Crees?”

“Way south. I’ll be riding for a big ranch, Angeline. Be driving cattle
instead of Crees.”

Debut**1925**

Wes was at work, speaking into the phone.

"Major, talk to you a minute, can I?"

"Tomorrow night on your nerves? That's to be expected."

"It's not that. Just wanted you to know--I need to go out for a little while."

Oh God, why can't he steer clear of that, for once. Wes kept command of his face, but his voice sharpened. "Clore Street maybe isn't the best place to be, tonight."

"Got to do it, Major. If I don't show my face there, tonight of all nights, I'm written off. They'll think I'm uppity. Say I caught that skin condition: white-itis."

Wes flipped a hand over helplessly.

"That's just the way it is."

"Of course."

In the Zanzibar, the bartender...

"What's this I see around town, your mug on every lamp pole? Singer of spirit-you-alls? You been holding out on us, Sticks."

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

"What does a famous person drink?"

"A Kessler, same as ever." Monty did an estimate along the bar. "Give the Sunday school a round, while you're at it." He took out a pocket change purse, leather still new to the touch, and reached in for a trio of silver dollars. He carefully stacked them like poker chips and pushed the little pile toward the bartender.

"We need a man..."

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

"I'll watch, a little."

Wes was dozing on the divan, a pillow under his leg. He heard the front door open and close.

"Monty?"

"How did everything go?"

"Got it done. No games of chance. Good night, Major."

Monty peered out the curtain.

"Looking for somebody, is all." The dark faces were streaks in the crowd, a row here, a row there. Leticia was stage left.

Monty held the note. The chandelier above the crowd began to sway.

"Monty, you can't let this get you down." She searched for consolation.

"Caruso was in San Francisco in that earthquake, and he went on to--"

"I'm no kind of a Ca--"

"Worse than this is going to happen you." She fixed her eyes on him.

"Depend on it."

"What do you mean--what kind of worse? More than an earthquake, worse?!"

Under Steam

1925

Wes looked around at them all. "There'll be a sleeper on the siding at Conrad. Private quarters for all."

A load of worry the size of a haystack lifted from Monty. No cattle car this time. Pullman...

"Blackie!"

The bastards, Monty thought to himself tiredly. *Have to start in with that, even when we're out here like this.*

The engineer wasn't even looking his way, yelling instead to the fireman.

"Damn it, Blackie, we've got to get more steam up."

"I only have two hands, and that's a shovelfull."

"I thought we were going to have eight cars of cattle."

"Threw in a few extra."

Wes scrutinized the couple of hundred head of cattle yet in the loading pen, then his brother.

"We're running a little short of hay on the lower place, all right?" Wendell said as if it was costing him teeth. "Figured we're better off shipping them than letting them turn into hides. "

"You think Pinckney has stock cars under his hat, do you, Wendell?"

Wes went off to confer with the stationmaster.

"Poor cows."

Wes looked miffed. "Poor all of us, if we can't get rolling."

Monty studied out the window.

"What now?"

"We don't have enough power to pull through the cut. Besides that, we're going to have to flange the track. It don't take much snow covering the track for this outfit to go on the ground."

The prospect of derailment got Wes's attention. "Good Christ. This weather isn't letting up."

"Sorry, sir, but the weather isn't my department."

"Get at it, then."

They waded into the snow with grain shovels, each scooping a valley over one rail. "Don't have to clear the iron," 00 shouted, "just down close enough that the wheel flanges can reach it." The snow flew.

The human hide knows a spring blizzard is unfair. A matter of hours, or a dump of snow that went on for days.

"Blackie and I talked it over. We're not riding it across. Nobody better be on it."

Wes looked at the trestle and the boisterous creek below. "All right, Dan. Let's send the train on its own."

Soldiers

1890

"I don't see the brockle-face."

"Nor my cow with the one horn," Donald said bleakly.

"Let's try over across."

They came onto the rustlers at the head of Noon Creek.

"They think it's so easy, walking over us."

"One's a black fellow, Ninian."

"Thieves are plaid."

Ninian shot the horse from under him.

"Williamson is going to be cross, toward us."

"I doubt that he will. I would wager that two empty beds at the
bunkhouse will give him something to think about."

"We'll need to butcher it."

"That'll be twice today, won't it."

"Donald. They had rifles, we had rifles. The race is to the swift, man."

"I know it is, Ninian. It's been a while since the Crimea."

"Let's get cracking. We've still to shoot the other horse."

"Never a word, Donald."

"Jen knows my every breath."

"Jen will need to forebear. As will Flora."

New York**1926**

“Major? Do you think we could go riding? They wouldn’t ever let me, by myself.”

“Not unless you fetch me a new knee.”

“I meant, maybe Miss Susan and me? If I put on enough of a monkey suit...I could borrow some rig from Yerby. People here don’t know how we do things in Montana, they’d maybe think I was her--what’s that the French have?”

“Equerry,” Wes rolled the word. “The English Creek equerry. I like that.”

“Do I have any say in this?”

...

They cantered along 00 early the next morning. Susan was astride, Monty staying at her elbow. He wore Yerby's best bowler hat and a ruffled vest that had once graced Wes at a state dinner. They rode without saying anything for a few minutes, accustoming themselves to the feel of their saddles and fit of their stirrups. True daughter of her father, from the side of her eye she studied his potbellied mare and its plodding gait. Son of a cavalryman, he dolefully eyed her broadbeamed bay as it waddled along.

"Plugs," he said it for both of them.

They rounded the 00, a clear stretch ahead. Susan leaned forward a little in her saddle and held her horse back until his was even with hers. "Race you to the 00." She whipped his horse across the flank with the end of her reins, then hit hers on its bountiful rump.

The horses seemed to shudder into life. They bolted down the riding path, eyes wild, hooves pounding in alarm.

...

"Ah, Franz Lithp," the 00 lisped.

"Miss Duff, you are in-cor-ridge-able."

Monty had closed his eyes.

"Are you doing all right?"

"Just listening."

...

"Rathbun, are you asking for surefire death? The last time I looked, that woman was white, white, white."

"She's--I'm showing her Strivers' Row."

"Right. You be busy *showing* her and some ofay going to come along and blast your ass for you."

"Out--" Monty gestured west "--it's different."

"How different's 'different'? Montan-i-o or anywhere, you're still of the nigger persuasion and she's Miss Pond Cream."

"She's my teacher. Wasn't for her, the most I could look forward to would be changing sparkplugs every three months."

"You got to watch your step. You'd be better off shoveling coal to him than her."

...

Wes had never had the experience of thinking of himself as one of those people that trouble follows around. Yet now it was beginning to seem so.

...

"Goddamn miracle." Wendell nodded sharply toward the radio. It was not clear whether he meant the apparatus itself, bringing song through the air, or that the voice singing was Monty's.

"He's doing splendidly," Wes chose to remark on.

"I never meant for it to turn out this way."

"Are you so sure?"

...

"Miss Duff is...with me. A friend of long standing."