"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 music mistress at the bow, taking in the sights. The Major's Helena hired couple huddling under the canvas canopy, bewildered as chickens. Himself and Harris, chauffeurs by land and water. Six folks total on an excursion boat that would hold, what, thirty? "Normal people, I don't take out here this soon in the year," Harris muttered.

Like to meet any of those in this lifetime, normal, Monty's mind raced. *But the man has a point. 'Normal' wouldn't cut it for a shindig like this.*

Notions jittered in him today like fancywear on a clothesline. To be doing something besides picturing himself in full song beneath chandeliers that scintillated like the diamonds in the necklaces and stickpins of the rapt audience one moment and envisioning himself pucker-mouthed and mute as a trout in front of this music woman the next instant, Monty scanned the range of mountains

stacked around the canyon. As scenery went, the Big Belts struck him as dead-end views: gulches to nowhere, slabs of cliff around every corner, round-shouldered summits that didn't amount to that much. Not like his boundless Two Medicine country, with its dune shapes of the Sweetgrass Hills way over east there as if they were pretty mirages that just never faded and the great reefs of the Rockies up everywhere into the sky to the west. This river was something, though, rolling its way mile after mile through this rock-solid canyon. The hum came without his even trying.

Oh, Shenandoah, I long to see you

Away, you rolling river.

The memory voice came along with it. *"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, although these canyons held in the wide. Helena had spurned the river in favor of gold-flecked gulches, so by

now the city, the capitol dome or the fancy turreted houses or Clore Street or any of that, lay far out of sight behind the boat. Around another bend now, and Monty craned out enough to catch a glimpse of the higher reaches of the Big Belt Range. Nice clean fresh snow on those slopes; good tracking snow. He half wished he were up there hunting, cutting the tracks of a bull elk in one of those open parks near timberline, instead of down here at this. But wishing was what had landed him into this, wasn't it.

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

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

The Dusenberg had a couple of hundred. "Just wondering. I been around engines quite a little bit myself." Monty gratefully rubbed his hands in the radiated heat from the cylinder block. Fingers long and tapered but strong from years of milking cows; pinkish palms that had known their share of calluses--these hands had been his ticket to chauffeuring, that time during his recuperation when he took it upon himself to tinker Mister Whit'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' was one thing that meant what it said. With all due satisfaction he recalled washing these hands over and over at the end of each day spent in the grease, carefully cleaning under the fingernails with the point of his jackknife blade, to look slick as a whistle when he sat up to the Double W supper table with the hard-used riders and hayhands. The hands had done their job, flagged the Major's attention when he looked around for someone new to be his car man after Frenchy went on one drinking spree too many. Monty kept on rubbing them here for circulation and luck. Now to see what his voicebox could manage.

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

"How do you do, again, Miss Susan," he heard come out of his mouth when she stepped aboard the boat and walked up to him as if examining a bad painting. He had no earthly idea why *again* hopped in there that way. It wasn't as if he was on speaking acquaintance with her--although he had heard enough

rumors about the Major and her, back a while ago before he was driving for the Major--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.

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

Nervously he rubbed an eyebrow with the knuckle of his thumb. Nobody around but the clam running the boat and the dumb-cluck hired couple to watch

him make a fool of himself, at least. That wasn't always the case when he hit the Helena country. Helena had played hell with him, all right, Monty reflected with overdue wisdom as the boat slowed to a kind of aquatic waddle in the presence of the most imposing cliffs yet. He grimaced, the reminder of his last time in there still so fresh. The dust-up over his fantan debt, nothing really hurt except his dignity; but on top of that, the brush-off from Leticia. 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 all the way to the heart. 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 had gone with that slickback head waiter from the Broadwater Hotel.

Maybe it had taken him too long to get himself in gear, maybe he shouldn't have needed yet another dose of Clore Street to teach him. But in any case he had dragged his tail back to the ranch admitting to himself that life there was never going to provide beyond what it already did--the room on the back end of the wash-house, the choreboy's place at the long table three times a day, wages

that were gone before you could clink the dollars together. Which is why he had mustered himself and asked the proper source:

"Major? You know anything about those singers, on stage and that? I was wondering if I could make some money with it."

"Pity." Wes was peering critically at the Missouri's volume of water, lapping against the sheer base of the cliffs.

"What is?"

"Oh, nothing. It would've made a wonderful place to put a railroad through."

"You and your railroad notion," 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 periodic prices of Wes's wealth, and she knew there had been everlasting 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 Montana's latitude would be balmy?

She centered her attention back on the matter of Monty. The taproot of talent is ambition. This man was quite far along in life to be wanting a career; what had he been saving himself for until now? Not to mention far along the palette of pigmentation, compared to the flesh tones of the audiences he seemed to crave. Yet she knew he had already come some way up in life. The dawn-and-

dusk chores of the Duff homestead would never leave her, and when she multiplied those by what must be the drudgeries asked of a choreboy on a ranch as huge as the Double W, yes, this Monty person had come considerably up. The emphatic crease of his trousers, the good hat. And he smartly wore a greatcoat, nearly as capacious as that on Wes. She wondered how on earth he and his mother had alit with the Williamsons: two shakes of pepper in that salt-white confederacy of riders and masters.

She kept watch on him now as Wes beckoned him from the stern. He had a roomy chest, which gave her hope. Ropy in build, and as yet 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 open belligerence; quite to the contrary, they seemed to be full of negotiation. Small ears, tight to his head. Hair that hadn't been fiddled with, no misplaced faith in doses of straightener. Spotless hands and fingernails. In outward appearance, she was forced to admit, so far so good with Montgomery Rathbun, songbird on the edge of the Williamson nest.

"All of a sudden you feel that it's due him?" she had tried to press Wes.

"You might say that."

"Monty in particular? I'm just asking."

"Why so suspicious? You make it sound as if I have more motives than Rasputin. Isn't the glimmer of a voice enough for you to go on?"

"Wes, you yourself say that your ear is straight from the tinsmith."

"I knew what I was hearing when I first heard you, didn't I?"

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

"It's a hard and fast rule of the profession," Susan headed this off, "that Monty must sing with an empty stomach."

"Then we'll listen, in hungry concert," Wes said. He looked around at the cliffs, like opera-house walls grown to five hundred feet: La Scala fashioned out of a fjord. "Will this do?" He seemed to be serious.

Susan smiled a little. "As good a place as any."

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

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

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

As if feeling the need for correction in her look, he grasped the lapels of his coat, thought better of that stance, and let his hands drop to his side. There they opened and closed. He drew in an audible, open-mouthed breath, but no voice issued forth. Standing as if rooted to the deck, he seemed dry-lipped, apprehensive. It suddenly dawned on Susan that Wes was making it hard for him, depositing him out here in this magnificence, proffering him his moment in grand style, testing him. Deliberately?

"Ready when you are, Monty," issued from Wes now, not exactly an order but close enough.

Stiff as a cactus, Monty aimed himself at the crowding cliffs and suddenly let out:

"When Israel was in Egypt land,

Let my people go."

There was a catch of breath, Monty's and everybody else's, then he sang on in a tone as deep as a bronze bell.

"Oppressed so hard, she could not stand,

Let my people go."

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

Susan keenly watched Monty's every breath, as the echoes chorused off the cliffwalls.

"You'll not get lost in the wilderness,

Let my people go,

With a lighted candle in your 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, with his eyes closed this time against the skinning-knife 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 homestead house had stood empty since 1918. Almost the same could be said of the valley.

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

Troughs of the past pooled with sudsy water as she slaved away at the old floor. The oblong worn spot in front of the cookstove where her mother had fended, morning, noon, and night, for thirty years. *"Susan, see to Samuel, pretty please. The taties are refusing to boil, the devils."* Over there where the table had sat, the most seriously rubbed groove was the spot where her father's sizable workshoes shuffled. *"A man needs a firm understanding,"* topmost in the tiny horde of jokes he allowed himself. Her father could quarrel with the wind, then turn around and recite from heart the most lilting Bible passage. It picked at her that contradictions were still the fare of this house. Ninian Duff had swept into this pocketed-away valley in 1887 with a bemused wife and a daughter inquisitive beyond her three years of life and a ramrod determination to make his chosen acres of American earth a homesteaded Eden, whether or not the land had those ingredients. *And here I am, back at his old haunt. I can just hear him. "Ay, Susan, we couldn't have kept you in Scotch Heaven with heavy fetters, and here you are back because of a notion worth its weight in moonbeams?"* She knew the chapters of her life did not sit well together, she didn't need telling by the echoes here.

In mid-swipe at the next offending floorboard she froze. Motion and furriness where none should be, in the open doorway.

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

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

The cat licked its chops remindfully.

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

The vagrant cat dispatched, she made herself simmer down and take stock of what all else needed doing to make the place livable. Except for the want of a door, the house was still in one piece, at least. Windows were filthy, half a dozen years of grime and fly life on them, but they would feel washwater before the day was out. The roof seemed sound, although she knew the test of that would arrive with the first cloudburst. Other necessities for her stay here--the pump at the well outside that gaping doorway, the cookstove and stovepipe, the outhouse--she had found to be extremely elderly but in working order. By nightfall, assuming that

Whit Williamson's roustabouts didn't tip over in a coulee with her truckload of promised furniture on the rutted road into here, she would be installed in a reasonably presentable household or keel over in the attempt.

But an academy of music here for one pupil, and the pupil it is? Launch Montgomery Rathbun, poor, dark, and not exactly handsome, into a career in song from anywhere, let alone here? Every kind of doubt applied, despite her best efforts to send them on their way. *Has Wes gone out of his head?* Absconded to New York meanwhile, Wes had, to spend time in the shallow bosom of his marriage. Susan allowed herself a vixen smile over that, but her mood returned as she had to stoke up the reluctant old stove to heat a bucket of rinse water.

Before the next bout of scrubbing, she stepped outside and took her leisure at the perimeter of the yard, idly whacking cockleburrs and nettles out of her way with a stick. Nearby, the creek ducked past behind its stand of diamond willows, plump at their ends with budbreak. A well-behaved school of white clouds coasted over the highest peaks to the west. Door or no door, Susan conceded, she at least had lucked into the picture-perfect time of the North Fork valley, with wild hay surging in the bottomland along the creek and fresh grass on

the buttes and foothills that tilted the valley to the spring sun. On a day such as this when the clear air was a delicate shellac on every detail of each gray-blue pillaring cliff, the mountains castled up even closer than she had remembered over the Duff homestead and the dozen other deserted ones of Scotch Heaven.

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

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

Her ears took in the solitude while her mind stayed busy with the comings and goings of the dead and the momentarily absent. *"Ghosts, Remembrancer? I don't believe in them at all. But they're there*." She chuckled, catching herself at this, falling back on the old loved book of stories that the eight grades of the South Fork schoolhouse had read to tatters. The truth of the matter was she didn't at all believe in the specter world, but right now she rather wished she was capable of it. Ghosts ought be interesting company, she reasoned, particularly here. Not gauzy visitors who popped out of walls and gabbed when least expected, she could do without those. But why shouldn't leftover spirits, to call

them that, constitute a kind of echo of the soul, lingering tunelike in the air after life was gone? A nocturne, she wouldn't be surprised: ruminative, tending toward melancholy--*after all, the poor things are no longer the freshest notes in the musical arrangement, are they*--yet with a serenade melody that would not leave the mind. Chopin, she decided, pensive a moment herself; Chopin surely would be the court musician of eternity's nightsingers.

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

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

Again, nothing met her ear but the cockleshell ring of silence. Instead, memory hinted behind her eyes everywhere her glance lit. Her mother, plump as a hen, forever there in the front room used for gatherings, trilling one of the songs

of the old country with Donald and Jen Erskine or grandly matching installments of poetry with Angus McCaskill. Her father, whiskers down his chest, striding off up the slope to the scattered band of woolies with the fatalistic tread of that first keeper of sheep who ever came to grief, Abel. And Samuel, *oh God of my father, where in the tune of things is there any explanation of Samuel?*

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

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

Monty fingered the new ones with respect, intrigued as he always was by the notion of bits of fire igniting gasoline in the cylinder heads. He twirled each fresh sparkplug into its place in the rank atop the engine, tightening down just so with a socket wrench. Try as he would, though, to confine himself to what his hands were doing, his mind insisted on going like sixty. *You are stark crazy, a man your age,* ran one line of self-argument about this bright idea of trying to turn himself into a singer at this stage of life. The other camp just as vigorously

pointed out that a man gets in a rut, and the next thing you know, that rut is six feet deep and there's an epitaph over it.

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

Overly picky, his mother would have called that was the sort of thinking. He extracted the last grimy sparkplug and spun a fresh one in. *There. Firing on all eight. That's where I better get myself to.* His engine work finished, he washed up and then applied bag balm to his hands to keep them nice, wishing he had something similar for his voice and for that matter the rest of the inside of his head. Tomorrow already he had to start lessons from her. Rubbing the balm in and in, he stood there beside the long yellow car for a minute, looking off to the prairie he had been born to, and around at the Double W ranch buildings that were such home as he had ever had. The jitters kept bumping into his other feelings. What it came down to was that he was a little afraid, at all that lay ahead. But then

he'd always had to be a little afraid. This schooling of his voice that the woman was going to do might be a way out of that. And wouldn't that be something.

He petted the Dusenburg for luck.

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

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

"Angus! Hello, you!"

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

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

"It's been ages, Susan Duff."

"'Ocean's ebb, and ocean's flow/Round and round the seasons go.'

There. In Mother's name, I've beat you to the rhyming stuff."

"No fair," Angus protested, his craggy face full of indignant amusement. "I was standing here struck dumb, and you took advantage. Besides, that wasn't Burns, so it only counts when said on Sundays."

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

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

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

"Don't. What does that make me?" It was comically said, but she caught a glint of rue. His mustache, which came and went according to private seasons in this otherwise open man during all the time she had been one of his schoolgirls, had turned drastically gray and looked permanent now, and in the lines around his eyes she could read with clarity every one of his decades of fending here. The world and its whirls had shaken this valley empty of all the others, but he was still on the land at the top of the creek as sheepman, as teacher over at the South Fork school, the last burr clinging to the swatch of homesteads called Scotch Heaven.

"You couldn't quench Angus with the Atlantic Ocean.," her father often said of the nimble spirit of this man, not entirely admiration from a Calvinist.

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

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

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

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

Angus gave a grin. "I'll see that it does. You have your work cut out for you, it looks like. I shouldn't be keeping you from it."

"You'll have coffee and a bite if I have to poke it into you," she had him know. "My pantry is the Lizzie, at the moment. I'll be back in two shakes."

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

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

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

"He'll be company, I suppose, although his manners can stand some--"

"Susan?"

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

She looked around at him. "Would you believe, I'm here to teach singing."

"I did hear something of the sort. And to whom."

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

"You heard right," she sorted her way through these words, "Wes...Wesley Williamson is giving him this chance."

"That's a modest wonder to me," Angus said with equal care. "Generosity from a Williamson."

She tended to the boiling coffee, clattered cups onto the cupboard sideboard between him and her, and set down the box of brown crackers with some force before answering. "You know and I know that Whit would kick a blind orphan out of his way. But the Major seems to have Monty Rathbun's interests at heart, don't ask me why. Angus, I've given myself a good talking-to

about this, any number of times since I heard the man sing. This all may seem dotty"--she swept a gesture around at the dilapidated room, farthest thing from a proper music parlor--"but the thing worse is not to see what can be done with that voice of his. I've heard singers half the world over. There's something there, when this Monty person stands looking like a hopeless cow chouser and then out pours the majority of a choir."

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

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

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

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

He knew that look on her. The Susan who was the leader of the girls in the garter snake fights with the boys, the Susan who had brains by the bushel and

curiosity by the cubit; the Susan he many a time would have traded places with on the checkerboard of life, truth be told.

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

They laughed together.

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

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

"Yes, I see to that."

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

"People die everywhere, lass, so far as I know." He stepped to the stove and coffeed up, his back to her. "They went like flies here, too, during the flu." She heard him swallow, on more than a bite of cracker. She knew there was

particular loss, Anna Reese by name, his equal at the Noon Creek school and the woman he had waited half his life for, in that slight sound.

Susan had her own tightness of throat to talk past.

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

"Ah. Have you."

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

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

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

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

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

It lightninged out of nowhere to her. That time in their growing years when everyone thought they were intended for one another and Davey Erskine had accordingly asked her to a dance at the Noon Creek school, the next valley over. As he led the way through the dark from the hitchrack to the tuned-up schoolhouse he kept bashfully muttering, "commoner." Commoner than what? she wondered. She came to realize when they reached the lighted doorway that

Davey had been doing his unsuccessful best to pilot her with the warnings, "cow manure."

Now Susan giggled, which was not like her. Then worse: the thought of the prophet Davey and this fertilized floor she was in combat with set her off into a helpless fit of laughing. Finally she placed her hand over her mouth.

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

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

That night she put into her diary:

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

Early sun was sorting the green plaids of spring--blue-green of the timberline on Breed Butte, mossy green of the doddering barn roof, meadow green of the volunteer hay fostered by the creek--when Susan stepped out into the morning and around the corner of the house to gaze north. From growing up

here, she could catch sight of a coyote the instant its lope broke the pattern of the grass on the farthest butte. So, she now spotted without effort the horseback figure on its way across the benchland from Noon Creek, then could not blink away the duplicate figure next to it.

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

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

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

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

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

Looking doubly doleful, Dolph moved off in search of buckets and the nearest clay bank as Monty traipsed into the house. He was surprised to see it

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

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

The piano sitting waiting, Monty edged into the room.

"Ready, I hope?"

"Miss Susan--"

Whatever he had intended to say, he took it back to makings as she watched. Finally he managed a feeble grin and merely said: "I guess I can't count on getting any younger."

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

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

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

"*Go Down, Moses* " came out about as it did with the accompaniment of the Missouri, Monty's phrases like one bell after another, his voice punctuating the melody rather than following it. Again Susan was bothered by the labored way he squeezed air in and out of himself, as if his chest was a polka accordion,

and she despaired for a moment over the lengthening mental list of items to be worked on.

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

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

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

"No doubt."

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

"Let's get ourselves underway," she did away with that distraction and set right to work on what was nagging at her the most, the drag of Monty's breathing as he sang. "First, you must learn to properly draw air into yourself."

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

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

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

He gave a minimum sniff.

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

How does she know these things?

"Monty? What is it?"

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

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

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

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

"You will not," Susan said with a slight smile. "Three lessons a week are as much as a voice can stand--every other day and Sunday off. But practice the breathing exercise in between, remember." He stood there at the door looking as if he had just been swatted with the calendar, but she couldn't help that. "Wait, let me give you my list for some more provisions. And tell Whit Williamson for me that I am going to need a milk cow."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She fed the fire next, last of the night's chores except for the load of good intentions she had brought here with her. Piqued by Monty's question, she

nightly put her voice through its paces before she ever sat down to the diary and the waiting noteless sheets of score. Good thing, too, because if she held off on her vocal exercises until she accomplished what she wanted on the page these nights, she would be in direct competition with Angus McCaskill's rooster as it summoned the dawn up there at the head of the valley.

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

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

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

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

In the end, all had been worth it. The overshoe counties, the prairie tide of settlers, carried the day in the so close referendum on suffrage. It was a famous victory, and lacked only its snatches of tune. Susan saw this Scotch Heaven interlude as her chance to remedy that. Here she had solitude, that Cheshire countenance of creation: find the face of what you wanted to do and lock onto it

without blink or hesitation, wasn't that the prescription? Here she was even paid to sit and stew over music, sniffy old Potter at the Valley Stockmen's Bank having to forward a healthy sum into her Helena account each coming month at Wes's behest. (Unbidden, the schoolyard song chanted in her: *Teeter-totter, bread and water/Oh how I hate Banker Potter!* Why on earth should that take up room in her head, and not some passage fit for an operetta? Maybe there was her answer, have Angus's tots compose the lyrics that seemed beyond her.) Here she had but one student--although he frequently seemed like more--standing in the way of the time and strength and patience that ought to set that pageant of mud and glory to music. And tonight again she couldn't capture any of it, the flivver journey of 1914 as scattered as the Milky Way.

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

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

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

They slogged on, Susan applying rudiments as if they were poultices and Monty the leery patient. At last, weary from another day of working at getting air into the man, Susan went to the piano. "All right, we can both stand a change. Let's try *'Moses'* once with accompaniment and see what happens."

Monty hung back to the other side of the room.

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

"I haven't ever sang with a piana."

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

"Surely you're not afraid of a musical instrument."

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

The piano music startled Dolph where he was puttying the weathered sash of a kitchen window. Monty's voice thundered out atop the notes, the song lifting uncertainly over the valley.

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

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

Angus's hail sent her to the window. He rode past to his schoolhouse every morning about now, but the figure perched on the saddlehorse next to his--

Adair, at this early hour?

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

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

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

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

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

"Blessed am I, among women," he jested. "If one doesn't tell me what I'm about, the other one will."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Susan resorted to some breathing control. "Adair, really, I'm just here to tutor this one pupil."

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

"That's so. But--"

"That leaves the other days."

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

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

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

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

"Songs with the old country in them," Adair stated. "Your mother's songs would do me."

Susan that night thought long and hard about the populace of solitude. About the dots of humankind, connected and not, strung through the weathered valleys and across the girth of prairie like constellations reflected on the ground. The Adairs, the Anguses--and those between them even when no longer there--of the flivver trip: the women hungry for any other women to talk to, even dressed-up ones from Helena; the men half-bemused and half-alarmed that they would be hearing these suffrage arguments from their wives and daughters forever after. Then episodes began to come back, the elongated memory shadows from the dots. The syrup sandwiches that were all the supper that could be mustered by the host family fresh from their emigrant railcar near Ingomar. The proud pledge of allegiance in Danish by the Frisian colony near Dagmar. The way smoke would fall to the ground before a storm, the smell of the weather riding out to the road to meet them as the *Nina,* the *Pinta,* and the *Susan B.* chugged into view of yet another isolated homestead chimney.

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

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

"A letter for you, Mister Williamson."

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

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

Dear Wes--

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

You will be pleased to hear we have made some strides, or rather, I have pushed and Monty has progressed in some steps. Some, I emphasize; less so in others. His vocal range is improving, although of course not yet as much as it ultimately must. His tone remains his strongest point. In presentation, he no longer stands as if he were made of warped barrel staves. All in all, after these months, I can say Monty is in better possession of his voice. But his voice is not yet in possession of him, which is the breakthrough for a true singer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sincerely, Susan

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

He checked the clock ticking discreetly in the corner of the library. He was late for his lunch with Adams, but Adams was always late himself.

Unfolding Susan's letter again, he ran his eyes down it as if it were a balance sheet. The lowdown on Monty's vocal status could be more heartening and could be less. It was her remark about buying his way through the alphabet that piqued him. *Susan, Susan, you don't have to pour it on.* She was supposing that he had set his sights on the TM&T-- "The Empty," he knew people called it, not that he cared--only because it ran from Valier, the Double W's handiest shipping point these days, to the mainline at Conrad; another cattle baron grab, another annex to the House of Williamson. True as far as it went, but motives seldom know pure boundaries: by him snatching up the twenty-mile shortline, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company could not lay hold of that right-of-way. The coal in those prairie hills rimming the Double W range wasn't much, but it didn't take much to attract the Company.

Or other scourges. He rubbed his temples with a shielding hand, trying to rid his head of the tensions of last night. He had sat up until the bitter end listening to radio voices describe the Democratic Convention tying itself in knots over the Klan. They would go back to endless balloting today, deadlocked over a

simple resolution against the bigotry which everyone knew went under the initials KKK. The Republicans hadn't really been any better, standing by that mute fool Coolidge, successor to that mute fool Harding. Wes wished he had Susan in front of him instead of her all too representative letter. She could joke all she wanted, but he was the one who had to face what the Two Medicine & Teton was likely to carry other than cattle or coal. Word had it that railway workers were the web on which the Klan was spreading itself through Montana, the skunkholes called Klaverns said to be in forty counties by now. *The sneaking bastards.* He wasn't having that in the Two Medicine country. He would need to clean and gut the little railroad, fire every one of them and have the sheriff kick them to the county line if that's what it took.

Like the mills of the gods, the drivewheels of faith sometimes could grind exceeding fine, and Wes took what satisfaction there was in that. He tucked the letter in his inside pocket. Wouldn't Adams would relish this railway venture, a homely little set of tracks as an excursion for exquisite theorizing. "But this is perfect, Wes," he could all but recite the conversation to come at lunch, "a chance to operate a railroad as something other than organized robbery of the public."

"Yes, Brooks, and I'll maintain it by passing the hat here in the Club." (But he

thought he would not make the case to Adams about the railroad as necessary angle-iron against the Ku Kluxers; as a Catholic student at Harvard he had learned more than was in the curriculum.) The two of them would spar from there--the East tended to be a sparring match; the West always was a wrestle--and he knew it was time, past time, to go on up now for asparagus and epigrams.

Yet he still could not bring himself to move from the spot in the library, pinned there by the duality of happenstance. The jack of spades, another of Susan's teasing tags whenever she caught him trying to see around himself to both sides of his life, but in blunter truth he figured he amounted to nothing more than the jack of Clubs. Four years ago, the evening in Helena, at the Montana Club. He had sat in a chair very much like this one, looking in astonishment at the man from the other wing of the party, a bald timeserver known for doing little in the legislature except carrying out the mining cartel's bidding. "Pull out? You can count on just the opposite. When I'm governor I'll make this state so hot for you, you and the Company will need to go around in furnace pants."

"Wes, Wes," the politico chided. He put down beside Wes's brandy glass a newspaper clipping. *"Miss Susan Duff, Helena's renowned alto, will give a recital this evening at the Missoula Atheneum for the benefit of the Over There*

memorial where so many of Montana's men at arms lay..." That was followed with the receipt for the Missoula hotel room. Under Wes's staring eyes, the man crumpled the two pieces of paper and flipped them into the fireplace. "Naturally, there's more where that came from."

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

Over There

1919

"Wilkommen, Yankee Doodles! Bist sie Montanischers?" The not unfriendly how-do-you-do had wafted across the few hundred yards of battered ground between the opposite trench and his men as they were digging in.

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

"Haben sie sachs-shooters (like) Alte Shatterhand und Winitou?"

'Sachs? Nein, nein! (For you) wir (needing only) ein (bullet)."

At the time Wes laughed helplessly. If only the conduct of war did match up with Karl May's dashing pages of prairie shoot-em-ups as imagined from

Unter den Linden. But the enemy's attentiveness to newcomers in the stale flat-footed killing match that was the Western Front was understandable: Montanans were the mould for reinvented soldiers, American Expeditionary Force-style--hunters from the time they were boys on ranches and homesteads, well acquainted with shovel calluses and dirty chores and rough quarters. Most of all, not worn down as the Europeans and British were by the routine of trench life, mud and boredom interspersed by the warning whizzes of every calibre of weapon known to man. Wes remembered thinking that Company C handled better that day, their first in the frontlines, than they ever did on the grumblesome troopship or in the poker-wild disembarkation camp, and that sort of thought had told him he was thoroughly an officer again. At the time, of course, only newly commissioned as an old captain, not yet a young major; but back in command comfortably enough. *"Sergeant, instruct Private Imhoff to limit his conversations with the other side,"* he had issued the order just to keep matters rolling his way, before jauntily setting off to inspect the remainder of the position. Not twenty minutes later, a salvo screamed in on the Montana battalion. He and Lieutenant Olsen had to make themselves thin together behind a shared snag of a tree, shrapnel whining around them.

A year and a half ago? Was that all?

To keep warm, Wes moved back and forth a little on the fresh wood of the parapet the French government had installed for visitors to the battlefield, of whom he was privileged to be the first. *Luck of the draw, if you count mortality tables as any kind of luck.* Forcing that thought back into its den, he made himself concentrate on the now quiet spectacle in front of him, the vast empty butcherworks that had been his second war in one lifetime. Somehow still lethal now that they were ghostly, the trenches gashed for miles in both directions through the once rural valley like vicious whims of an earthquake; somehow worse because they were manmade.

Perhaps because it was the one piece of contested earth anywhere around that vaguely held its original shape, Wes made it known he would like to go up onto the hill. The French military attache was solicitous about whether Monsieur Williamson would wish to walk that far, which meant whether he could. Wes glanced at the officer's own mark of the war, a monocle worn derisively over an unseeing left eye--glass the fitting companion for glass, *non?*--and said he would be all right. Then he set off up Dead Man's Hill with the Frenchman.

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

He and the escort climbed with odd austere care, the dark maroon topcoat and the blue dress uniform the only advancing spots of color in the dun landscape. The rise of ground was so pitted with shell hole upon shell hole there was barely room to walk in single file between, and to Wes's irritation the escort periodically steadied him with a hand to his elbow. Fresh earth was turned wherever the French graves registration teams had been about their business of exhuming and removing bodies to the memorial cemetery. Across about a hundred and sixty acres, Wes estimated--a quarter section, back home--lay the litter of old rifles, helmets, ruptured canteens, even scraps of uniforms.

Beforehand he had made a mental exercise of trying to anticipate what

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

The French officer kept to himself whatever thoughts he had about the formidable American insistent upon the view from the top; merely more of the battlefield. Nevertheless, Wes needed to see back through time in more ways than one. *But Lord, to spell it out in bones*: he swallowed on that as if trying to get rid of an overpowering taste. From the first day he and his company of men marched in here, he had recognized the Western Front for what it was: history's most gargantuan stockyard. Trenches and bivouac quarters and sentry posts rather than chutes and corrals and cutting gates, but the herd-handling system, the organizing principle, was shockingly the same as the Middle Ages abbatoir he and Brooks Adams's son Charles had traced out of its famed ruins near Aylesbury, as a lark, in their wander summer after Harvard. First and foremost, the cattle pens--except that here, the constructed containments had been insanely built in unending quantity, across half a thousand miles from the ocean to the Alps. Then the

commodity on the hoof to fill the expectant channels, in this instance a million soldiers on either side, and when those were consumed, another million and another. Feed them, water them, care for them as best you could, these penned droves: then hope against hope that their weight, the avoirdupois of armaments and guts, would tip the scales. Whether it did or didn't, adjacent to the slaughter yards waited the next sites in the process: the trade yards (replacement depots and hospitals), the tanyards and the bone yards (cemeteries and ossuaries such as this hill). Modern continental war this may have been, here, but in grotesque recourse to the invention of organized slaying it was also fundamentally medieval--a four-year market in the alive, the dead, and the in-between.

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

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

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

She stayed close by the stammering Missoula haberdasher who was state chairman of their committee for the memorial project; his red-eyed wife, with two sons in the cemetery which all but surrounded this town, was worse than no help in this situation. Gently pummeled with hospitality as they were, Susan let her stage sense steer her through. Back when her voice was still regarded as finding its promise rather than having reached its limits, she had performed in Europe--cities a cut below Paris and Vienna and Berlin--but never at an occasion so bedecked as this. Franco-American tricolors aside, everyone there knew this gathering was intrinsically auspicious, coinciding as it did with the imminent date on the calendar which would put the worst of wars one full year into the gentling distance of the past, into calculable history. There at St. Mihiel where *poilus* and

doughboys had fought together and broken the German salient, their countries would erect for all the world to see a monument of that hardest alloy to attain, peace. If her given part in that was to hold herself high enough tonight for the French to sight along, she could stiffen herself to it.

Yet under it all Susan, for all her common allegiance with the other Americans who had been sent, was there decidedly to represent the postage-stamp trust territory populated entirely by herself and Samuel. The colossal memorial statue, to rise out of the field of white crosses marching in place, she had not bothered to have an opinion about, and could not believe Samuel would have. But the archive proposed by the French, to hold forever the letters and diaries of the killed soldiers--their stories in whatever scrawled moments, adding up to the last chapter of a sacrificed generation--she would have skated the Atlantic to see done. Tucked in her luggage back at the clammy hotel was the packet of Samuel's letters, the most costly of donations.

Dear Susan--Funny place this world, where they put a fellow on a troop train at ----- and he gets off a ship at ------. Where's any progress in that? She had seen him and the other recruits off at the Great Northern depot at Havre, therefore he had alit at Le Havre, the first of the pushpins she deployed on the

wall map of Europe newly put up in the music parlor. Without him, the house seemed howlingly empty. Four years, his high school years when his rambunctious intelligence broke the boundaries of the homestead as her voice once had done, he had lived under her wing. It was with an eye to Samuel's future, and the music academy for wherewithal, that she had taken the great step of buying the house on Highland Street.

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

Susan, mon cherie--"Solve this, Erasmus," as Mr. McCaskill would say: With my size 11 1/2s, I am now a runner. My lord and master hands me orders, I twist and dart and squirm through--there is no flat-out running in these slits in the ground crowded with thousands of us, it is more like carnival dodge 'em--and deliver the message, wait for the reply, then struggle back to HQ. There were

three letters after that, brimming with the intrigued jottings of a big-shouldered bright man somehow singled out to trot slips of paper through Europe's artificial canyons of men and earth--*Would that I were from the Rio Grande instead of the North Fork, Susan: after all, 'Thermopylae had its messenger of defeat, the Alamo had none/Because Texans are too bowlegged to run'* --and then instead of the mail one day, the apologetic adjutant from the armory across town was at her door, sent specially.

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

The rest of it this initial evening was a matter of maintaining a measured smile and accepting apologies for the weather within the confines of France. She played the role of weatherproof visitor to the hilt until inevitably her little group was brought face to face with the famous Major Williamson, whom they surely knew? Oh, they did not?

"Sad circumstances to meet in, Mr. Averill, Mrs. Averill," the distinctive voice undiluted in the several years since she had heard him speak at the Equal Suffrage congress in Helena--he was the state senator from Pondera County, as a Williamson or one of their bootlickers customarily was--and the commanding mien that even then had his listeners whispering *higher office* was similarly undiminished, quite the contrary.

As amused as the occasion would allow, Susan watched him turn in her direction and read her family resemblance with surprise and probably worse; you could not be the daughter of Ninian Duff and pass for anyone else. He must be here, she realized, as the representative of the veterans, which was to say the survivors, the lucky ones. But how does one qualify for luck? *The Lord called Samuel,* her father had put a trembling finger to the Bible passage so many times the page bore a smudge, *and he answered, Here am I*; she herself would no longer go near a God who let that happen.

But that was neither here nor there, the concern of the moment was to come up with enough manners to obscure those grudges, older than themselves, that met at fencelines back in the Two Medicine country. Fortunately the occasion was running over with politeness, so she and he could simply extend a hand to

each other and apply a little as needed. For public consumption one or the other of them murmured something to the effect that their families long had been acquainted--each would later tease the other for being so slick at watering it down --and that was the extent of it.

Curious, Susan checked to either side of him in the crowd, but the high and mighty Wesley Williamson seemed to be unaccompanied. Somewhere he had a wife to tend to, rumored to be high society, doubtless taking in Mont St. Michel or Lourdes while he dirtied his hands with this obligation. By now the mingled Montanans had become the object of toasts. Tonight and tomorrow belonged to them. Missing no chance to underscore the cost in lives caused by the foe across the Rhine, the French had expressed the wish to honor before the great gathering of memorial delegations from all of the United States those from the state that had bled most grievously *per capita* in the war.

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

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

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

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

"In the style of St. Gaudens, is all I am saying. I have in mind 'Sorrow,' a statue which a family I've known--"

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

"You have seen it then, Miss Duff?"

"Of course. It is weepy to the point of sopping."

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

"And you aren't one for weeping?"

"Oh come, Major. Tears have their time and place. But we can't bawl our way through life or we'd end up drowning in them, wouldn't we. St. Gaudens is irredeemably that way. And Clover Adams, I'm sorry to have to point out, took her own life. The tragedy we're trying to commemorate is of a different order."

"You're a hard critic."

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

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

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

Nerves were one thing, brain cells were another. Yesterday's tour of the cemetery had set matters off. All during it and up to the present moment, she found herself thinking back to the homestead and the dead pile--the heap outside the lambing shed where the dead ones were thrown. Some of the lambs when they ended up there still were yellow with birth fluids. Pink tongues poking out of others. Stick legs, ribs showing. Eyeless; magpies lost no time. Similarly

Samuel was plowed under the lifeless mass of crosses here, torn who knew how by a barrage somewhere in the labyrinth of trenches. The sickening aptness, rising to mind the way an insistent nightmare would, she had not been able to get rid of in the past twenty-four hours. Breathwork came to her rescue in this waiting time, the cadence she made herself feel in the rise and fall of her trained diaphragm muscles, the calm of air supporting her from inside. She had never fainted in her life, and did not intend to start now.

To distract herself further she directed her gaze--very much as if she were taking all this in for the sake of writing it down for Samuel--to this homely old town's black iron lampposts, so ornamented atop that they seemed to be wearing ponderous crowns, and to the ambling patterns of its spotless policemen, making their rounds at the edge of the crowd like, well, like gendarmes sampling from one patisserie to the next. Almost before she knew it, she was being beckoned up to the platform by the beaming mayor of St. Mihiel.

This had not been her own idea at all. After someone had put it in the mayor's ear that she was a singer--Susan strongly suspected Molly Applegate of the Oregon delegation, a colleague from the suffrage campaign and given to indiscriminate enthusiasm--His Honor had come importuning in person for his

most favorite of American songs, could she possibly oblige? Resigned to doing what she could with something like the hurdy-gurdy tiresomeness of *"Over there! Over There! The Yanks are coming..."* as she had in the war-bond rallies, when she heard his request she burst out laughing, she couldn't help it. *So much for Irving Berlin.*

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

As I walked out in the streets of Laredo,

As I walked out in Laredo one day,

I spied a dear cowboy wrapped up in white linen,

Wrapped up in white linen as cold as the clay.

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

She had been up half the night polishing this presentation, but it was paying off. When her voice was in good working order like this, the audience became a kind of pantomime accompaniment, she had never seen it fail: heads nodding, feet patting out rhythm. This crowd, pensive to start with, had begun

to sway, American shoulders and French shoulders touching as they wove the air in unison, and verse by ode-like verse Susan gave the song her alto all, to the immemorial last lines:

We beat the drum slowly and played the fife lowly,

And bitterly wept as we bore him along;

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

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

The applause thundered off the stone buildings of the town square. She bowed her head the sufficient number of times in acknowledgment and deftly made her exit. Schoolchildren followed on to the platform, shyly waving handkerchief-sized flags. The band pranced into action again.

At ease and pleased enough with her performance, Susan relaxed into her seat. Spectator now, she could watch as a contingent of military braid thickened in the nearby archway leading in to the square. Some of the American military leaders in the cluster she could match to their newspaper pictures, others not. Her attention was taken by what must have been a staff officer who detached from the group and made his way along her row of dignitaries to the far end where Wesley Williamson sat, obviously sent to fetch him. So Susan witnessed it: Wes rising

and following, the surprise impromptu ceremony at the archway obviously keyed to this place where Major Williamson had saved the day, the medal being pinned to the lapel of his highly unmilitary topcoat by an officer whom she realized with a start was Pershing himself. The tidy cookie duster mustache, the tannic personality that could be felt from here: the supreme general chatted in rapid-fire fashion, Wes showing commendable aplomb during the medal ceremony but appearing a little startled to be held in conversation.

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

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

Within a matter of moments, up in its mechanism some venerable laborious sledge struck a sounding iron repeatedly, one short of a dozen. Once

again, the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, when the guns had stopped.

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

When it was over, the crowd had trouble making itself leave. Handshakes, embraces, kisses upon cheeks. Promises to keep in touch. Wes shouldered his way along the dignitary row past the awe and clinging congratulations. Now or never. He caught up with her at the archway. "You're staying a few days, Averill tells me."

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

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

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

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

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

"Whatever about?"

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