

Sand Map

1924

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

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

change
pagination

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Suits me."

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

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

Monty was decidedly staying out of this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you not getting along with Susan Duff?”

“It’s not that, so much.”

Angus waited him out.

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

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

Monty absorbed this, staying wary.

Angus looked off up the creek. “She’s been a while gone from here.” He turned to Monty again. “I wouldn’t want to see her come back just to be disappointed.” Preparatory to going, he snapped his fingers above the dog,

which crouched and sprang high against the leather of his chaps, and was scooped to its nestling place between lap and saddle horn for the ride home.

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

“Say on.”

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

“Just everything about them.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I wouldn't know."

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

"Do?"

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

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

while that was out of the question for him. Not even Browning, the Reservation town to the north where the men went when they proclaimed they wanted dark meat, was safe that way for him; long memories on those Blackfeet. Clore Street or nothing, for him, and that wasn't anywhere in the picture until the Major had enough of New York, and why did Dolph have to start yapping about this anyway?

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

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

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

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

I answered to the effect that Major Williamson can afford any price we could ever cost him. Monty's expression told me he was not remotely satisfied with that, so I added that really, he needn't worry, the Major had no shortage of either funds or hope for this musical endeavor of ours.

He wagged his head as if considering that and after a moment said:

"Well, he is a praying man."

His skeptical tone surprised me, given his mother's life of gospel. ("Angel Momma" is long dead but still ticking, from the way he cites her.) Without thinking I said:

"For him it seems to have worked."

He wanted to know how I meant. Monty is bright enough to realize that Wes and I did not find each other in baskets in the bulrushes, and so I went so far as to say:

"The Major once told me he felt the cupped hand of God around him, in the war."

By now Monty has seen, any number of times, Samuel's picture on my makeshift desk. I may be imagining, but I think sometimes I catch him studying it. This time, he did me the cold kindness of not looking in that direction when he said:

"I guess maybe in any kind of situation, there's soldiers and then there's officers."

That woman was going to drive him to desperation.

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

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

Even this day off from her tasted bad, thanks to her. *"Breath capacity,"* she had kept after him, last thing yesterday. *"Yours is lazy. That's not your fault,*

it comes with chasing around the countryside with the Major and otherwise never exercising."

"I'm exercising now, seems like," he had pointed out.

"It doesn't come out in your singing, yet. You must keep at it and at it."

Her and her *at-it-tude*. All he wanted was to sing. No, that wasn't quite all. He wanted to sing as free and easy as Angel Momma had, and have the world sit up and listen, and make enough money at it that one wrong turn of a card wouldn't leave him flat busted, and for that matter not have to shine up another man's car and then right away be called on to drive it over these dustbaths called Montana roads. (It went without saying that he was always going to have a general desire for a Leticia Number Two, which he had not had much time to have on his mind lately until damn Dolph touched it off the other day.) Granted, turning yourself into something took work: he knew that in every fiber of his being, he had put himself through plenty back there in rodeo clowning. But these dippy-doodle nose and gut exercises she kept after him about--it was like she was trying to turn him into one of those carnival freaks who could tie parts of themselves in knots. "Smell the rose, blow the bugle," he mimicked.

Not only that, but she was keeping the Major posted on his every up and down. *How do I know that?* Because he did know, was as sure as anything that she was making his ears burn. Yet there she was, still persevering on him when she any number of times could have said "*That's it*" and folded the whole deal.

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

He was Johnny-on-the-spot at the Valier depot. Swaying under its pushing finger of smoke, the locomotive of the Two Medicine & Teton Railway teetered across a final coulee on a trestle that had seen better days and came laboring across the last mile or so of prairie into the scant town. Monty was as ready as he could be when the private coach drew to a halt exactly even with the waiting car. "How you doing, Major?"

"I expected you to set that to music."

"Not just yet." Monty contrived not to notice that the train porter wanted him to take the Major's suitcases off his hands, instead holding the trunk of the car open for the man to heft the luggage in. Enough bags that it looked as if the

Major was here to stay for a while, so at least there might be some stretches of driving when he wouldn't have to be huffing and puffing trying to please the unpleasable over there on the North Fork. Seeking some topic of conversation other than that, Monty asked: "How do you like your railroad?"

"At least it's wide enough."

Monty shook his head as if that was a good one. When he tenderly shut the trunk of the Dusenburg, he turned around to find the Major still looking him over.

"You can't keep me in suspense, you know," Wes prompted as if the report was considerably overdue. "How are you and Miss Duff coming on your musical education?"

"Scuffling along. She probably can fill you in on me better than I can."

Monty ducked into the driver's seat, and after a moment, Wes climbed into the rear seat. But before starting the car, Monty mustered the request he had worked on all the way from the ranch. "Major? On that. Ask you a favor, can I?"

"It depends on the calibre of the favor, doesn't it."

"Keep Dolph at the ranch, when I go for my lessons? Dolph is the sort, anything that comes into his head runs out his mouth."

“Am I hearing right, Monty? Here I thought the two of you were fast friends, all this time.”

“Something like that, I guess. Doesn't mean he hasn't got a tongue on him like a ^{longbox} wagon.”

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

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

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

Only at times such as this did Wes long for his military service, when he could snap out an order and watch everybody involved fall all over themselves following it without any quibble. “Damn it, Monty, this is Whit's department,”

around to do it." This was an original approach, Wes had to admit; he hadn't expected Monty to already be finicking over the exact composition of his entourage. He would need to ask Susan if artistic temperament was the first thing she taught.

Head still turned to implore, his erstwhile chauffeur kept on: "Couldn't we work something out, he be the audience or whatever when I'm at my lessons, and I pitch in on his chores?"

Only at times such as this did Wes long for his military service, when he could snap out an order and watch everybody involved fall all over themselves following it without any quibble. "Damn it, Monty, this is Whit's department," he confined himself to. And he knew Whit wouldn't speak to Angus McCaskill if he met him in Hell in charge of the ice concession. Still, if it would smooth Monty's feathers any, maybe someone else from the ranch crew could go in Dolph's place. "Oh, all right, I'll take the matter up with Whit. But I don't promise anything. Now, does this car still have a motor?"

Monty wheeled away from the depot, creeping the car over the potholed byways that passed for back streets here in Valier. At the intersection where the

three-storey hotel anchored the young town, he was actually looking forward to the road back to the ranch when he heard the back seat command:

“The other direction.”

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

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

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

“Fort Skin-and-Bone?” Monty blurted. “I thought there's not much there anymore.”

It was true that the abandoned fort persisted in burning down, from vandals or lightning fires or spontaneous friction with the prairie it so incongruously reared out of. But there had been so much of it, when it was built as a Presidio of the north to make sure the plains tribes did not rise from defeat, that rambling buildings still stood and the land that had pastured hundreds of cavalry horses still grew grass.

“Enough to buy,” Wes replied mildly.

Monty glanced at him by way of the rear-view mirror. "The Double W need its own fort now? You gonna take on Canada?"

"Very funny. The whole military reservation is being auctioned, the buildings come with." In turn there was something he could stand to know. ✓

"Remember it when, do you?"

Remembering had already taken Monty over. In his farthest reach of mind the Tenth Cavalry wheeled on the vast parade ground at Fort Assiniboine. The big, big horses, clatter of everything on the men and animals, the band tootling on horseback too. Here and there a white officer, but all the blue riders, faces on them like his mother's and his. "*See him, Montgomery? See your papa? Can you salute him like a little man?*"

"Only just barely," he finally answered the Major. Those first three or four years of life might as well have happened in Bible times, so far removed were they from growing up under the crisscross of clothelines at the Double W. The road unrolled straight ahead of the car, Monty calculating the time to the Marias River and a similar stretch after that to Big Sandy Creek, and then they would begin trending north. "The fort, it's a ways."

"This will give you and the Doozy some exercise," Wes replied, settling his tricky leg as comfortably as he could and reaching his attache case to him.

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

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

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

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

"It would have been different, yes." Wes, older, all too well remembered Mose Rathbun. The same dark brow on Monty, maybe some of the same slant of

shoulders from a life on horseback. If Monty was lucky, all resemblance stopped there. Mose's ilk, in denatured white form, Wes had met up with again and again in the AEF: lifer sergeants who thought the stripes on their arm meant they could get away with anything. He'd had to bust some of them so far down in rank they slunk around saluting civilians. ✓

"Major? Something I did?"

"Why, is there something on your conscience?"

"Not any more than usual."

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

Monty clammed up and Wes settled back with the maze of papers that were the route to bring bald-faced cattle to the dun hills of the Fort Assiniboise country, the **WW** brand seared on their left hips. But this other business, the Rathbuns and their wander into nagging orbit around his own father and now Whit and him... ✓

"Monty?"

A *What now?* pair of eyes met Wes's in the rear-view mirror. ✓

"How's that voice of yours?"

"In operating order, I guess."

“Then let’s have a sample. What sort of thing are you and Miss Susan working up?”

For once Monty was glad of all her bellyaching at him about posture, what with the man asking him to sing sitting here like a lump. He squared himself up behind the steering wheel, pouter-pigeoned his chest for all available capacity, lifted his chin to a goodly elevation and here came the song:

“There’s a man going around

taking names.

“There’s a man

going around

taking names.

He has taken my mother’s name...

He has taken my father’s name...

Death is the name of that man...

“Very moving,” Wes stated when the last verse was finished, leaving Monty in doubt as to whether it was high praise or he merely acknowledged that

the song had propelled them over a few of the day's many miles. Back to his documents went the Major and Monty once more settled into chauffeurdom.

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

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

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

Time upon time now, the big car topped a rise and the two men were gazing down at lustreless expanses. There had been a distressed air to farms all along the way, the houses and outbuildings brown howls of dry wood, the fields themselves 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. He knew this turn of weather would furl up even more of the homesteaders, those who were still left. He had been reluctant to see it on his route from the East, but the hard seasons of the past years all led to this reaping of the wind. The puddled settlements on the great prairie were drying up. Banks were evaporating, entire towns would go next. It was incredible, the reversal of the wave of settlers that had made Montana and the Dakotas the coming places, before the War. *Buy*, he knew he was going to hear out of Whit the minute he set foot on the ranch, *get out there and buy them out*. That had been the Williamson way, it had built the Double W ever since their father had come into the Two Medicine country on the fading hoofprints of the buffalo and swamped the prairie with cattle.

This weather though, good God, how many summers of this weather were there going to be? Wes felt himself turning into hot salt soup in the stifling car. "What do you think, Monty--might this bring rain?"

"Could," Monty responded, as though anything was theoretically possible. "The air's a funny kind of dry, though."

Even though the road ran straight as a rail for a dozen miles ahead, Monty never shifted his eyes from it now. Wes, gandering, was the one who puzzled at

the smudged sky to the west. The horizon there had gradually roughened with hills, breaks, coulees, and now that banked horizon of hills was dimming away into the sky's haze. He knew it had to be cloud, but the formation was strangely edgeless, almost more a tint 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, the earth rising in wrath. A half-light, yellow-green, descended, perceptibly darkening as if a shadow-dye from the dust storm was flowing ahead into it.

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

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

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

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

He managed to steer in close to an abandoned barracks that sat broadside between them and the dust storm, the building's turret dim over them like a castlement in the fog of some terrible era. The dust fury kept on without letup. They could hear it stinging wherever it could find wood, scouring off the paint of buildings around them. And the two men watched, astounded, as on the pathway between this barracks and the next not mere ~~mere~~ dirt but gravel, actual small stones, blew into thin drifts. Tumbleweeds spun tirelessly across the parade ground, and every so often a stovepipe flew by.

Held in confinement by the groundstorm, each man went into himself as they sat waiting it out in the sanctuary of the car. Wes's mind no doubt was reenforcing itself with whatever sound principles there were for investment here, but Monty's thoughts were speculative. Hidden somewhere out there was everyplace a sergeant of colored cavalry had courted a hymn-singing laundress, and the exact room in the married men's quarters where they had done their business of bearing and he had squalled his way onto this earth. But for the life of him he could not pull back anything substantial from his first handful of years here. What he best remembered--as if he could reach down at this instant and touch its magical cool skin--was the fire escape at the post hospital; it must have been the latest thing, a chute like a metal tunnel that even a mite of a boy could climb up inside, barefoot, and then slide ecstatically down. But that, and nothing beyond dimness about the parade-ground figure whose seed desposited him into this Jericho of the prairie. That and his mother's drumbeat of verdict: *"I tried so, with that man. And for him to pick up on us with never a word."*

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

Monty crept the car through the ghostly fort until Wes pointed. An aftergust of the storm caught them before they could make a run for it to the building where other vehicles were parked and lights glowed wanly in the first-floor windows. 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, the air about thick enough to chew. Wes tied his handkerchief over his face like a bandanna, and at a motion from him, Monty quickly followed suit. They struggled against the wind to the door of the building. When they clambered in, the small crowd of bankers and ranchers and the bowler-hatted auctioneer looked around in alarm at the masked invaders. Wes yanked his bandanna down, and Monty rapidly followed suit. As they swatted dust off themselves, Wes said to those assembled: "The Fort Assinniboine land, gentlemen--we had better hope it's not blowing by for good, out there."

"It's going to be the ruin of a good choreboy."

"Whit, he has a rare voice. You've said so yourself any number of times."

"Calling cows is one thing. Putting on a bib and tucker and squalling out

'Doo Dah' is another."

he confined himself to. And he knew Whit wouldn't speak to Angus McCaskill if he met him in Hell in charge of the ice concession. Still, if it would smooth Monty's feathers any, maybe someone else from the ranch crew could go in Dolph's place. "Oh, all right, I'll take the matter up with Whit. But I don't promise anything. Now, does this car still have a motor?"

"It's going to be the ruin of a good choreboy."

"Whit, he has a rare voice. You've said so yourself any number of times."

"Calling cows is one thing. Putting on a bib and tucker and squalling out

'Doo Dah' is another."

Wes swatted dust out of the chair on the visitor side of the desk--his brother made a point of doing the same on his rare New York visits--and settled in. "For Lord's sake, man, you had him sing for the Archbishop."

"That was here. Under our own roof."

"Monty deserves this chance to get out on his own. He's not ours to do with as we please, forever and ever, amen."

"Next thing to it. Monty still wouldn't have a pot to put under his bed if we didn't keep giving him a job."

"Giving him?" Wes grated the words out. "You know better than that."

Whit 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."

"I told you at the time ^{she's} ~~Susan Duff~~ is no concern of yours," Wes was

giving this private speech his all. Whit eyed his brother there on the far side of the

scarred old desk. Was his case of petticoat fever coming back? No, there had

been more to the Duff woman than that. Which must have made it even worse for

Wes. There were times, though, when he wondered whether Wes was glad to

have been cut out of the governor's race that way. Not glad, ~~exactly,~~ that would

be too much to say. But relieved, maybe. Whit still couldn't tell. Wes was too

complicated for him.

"What she gets out of this is her damnedest pupil ever. Are you listening,

Whit? I'm seeing to it myself that she's taken care of, on the money end. 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 every thought about this."

"Have it your way. But this haywire notion of Monty's that Dolph all of a sudden isn't good enough to tag along with him--does he want tea and crumpets, too? I'm not pulling Dolph off this and putting someone else to it, no way in hell. There's no sense in creating hard feelings among the crew." Whit settled deeper into the ancient office chair on his side of the desk. "Could we talk a little business, you think?"

Word always ^{Down} went around the ranch when the Major--natural inspector-general of corral-sitters and dawdlers--set foot out of the house, but for once it failed to reach Monty and Dolph before he did. Splattered just short of polka dots, they halted amid their task of whitewashing the harness room and looked around at him.

"Caught you at it," Wes said sternly enough to maintain his reputation.

"Working. Are you trying to ruin the reputation of the whole crew?"

The two told him that choreboys just didn't know how not to work, which for both of them had an element of truth in it, and stood waiting to see what he wanted, brushes dripping.

Conveyance to the North Fork, he informed them.

Where's this come from? Monty's thoughts lined up in alarm. *Why don't he just go over there with us tomorrow when we do?* Very slowly he wiped his hands. "Take me a little while to get cleaned up enough to bring the car around."

Wes waved that off. "Let's keep life simple. Just hitch up the grays for me, I'll go cross-country." Everybody on the Double W knew singular from plural, particularly when uttered by a Williamson, and Monty and Dolph apprehensively slid away into the main barn to fetch the horses.

They watched the Major drive the buckboard up to the big house, hating to admit to themselves that he handled the reins as spiffily as either of them could. Minutes later, team and well-kept wagon went back past them at rattling velocity and kept on at a smart pace until starting up the incline of the benchland.

"So what do you suppose?" Dolph was intrigued. "He's heading over there to get your report card from her?"

"Or maybe yours," said Monty.

Once atop the broad bench of land, Wes spanked the reins across the rumps of the horses, setting them into a snappy trot again. He anxiously studied the sky to the west for indication of how the weather was going to behave. Indeterminate, as usual in the Two Medicine country. He put the weather question aside as best he could and concentrated on the pleasure of handling fine horses again, the leather feel of the reins tethering him to the moment. Up here on the level divide between watersheds the scope of earth opened, the Rockies suddenly greatly larger with the skyline expanse of cliff and reef and cuts of crag chipped like the faces of arrowheads, and the sun-browned prairie boundless in the other direction, carrying away Noon Creek behind him and the North Fork of English Creek ahead of him. "*Nothing like your Montana prairie as horse country,*" the commanding officer who come up out of the cavalry had singled him out that time, "*except of course for that vapid gloryhound Custer.*" Wes ruminated on that, the assumption that where you were born fitted you to the country. As sure as anything, before his leg wound he would have cantered across this benchland on a saddlehorse as if under a satin guidon. But he didn't mind at all having been dealt out of Indian fighting by chance of birthdate. Cuba and the Argonne had been enough wars to hold him. Those and Montana politics.

Long thoughts ended abruptly as he came to the edge of the benchland and had to wagoneer the still spirited team down the slope and across rough meadow to the ford of the North Fork. He eased the team and wagon into the clear creek. Pulling into the yard with the wheels still shedding water, he whoaed the horses vigorously enough announce himself, but no one appeared. Women's voices in duet carried from the house. Wes had to smile. Susan would not interrupt a song no matter what. He stayed in the buckboard, listening, the ears of the matched horses up sharp in curiosity.

When the singing concluded, the door of the house opened with alacrity. "If it isn't Major Williamson," Susan announced for the benefit of the interested. He saw her shoot a look past him for Monty and Dolph.

A smaller figure joined Susan at the doorway. Wes climbed down from the wagon, good leg first, and made himself sociable:

"Mrs. McCaskill, isn't it? Don't break up your songfest on my account. You sounded first-rate."

"No, it's time I wasn't here." Adair too seemed to search the air around him, more than addressing him with her eyes.

"Please, don't let me run you off."

Adair looked squarely at him now, as did Susan. Uncomfortably Wes amended: "I didn't know I would be interrupting anything, I only came over to make sure everything is squared away. With the music enterprise and all."

"I dasn't take too much advantage of Susan," Adair said, leaving the impression there might not be enough to go around. She plucked out a pocket purse and paid some coins into Susan's hand. "If I don't go home and get at things, we'll have to eat sin for supper. And probably borrow the salt and bread from you for that, even."

Susan gave a little hoot at the old saying. "Careful, or you'll set off that sin-eater you're married to. He'll be rhyming *sin* and *thin* at you until the dead get up and dance."

"Wouldn't he, though."

Wes let all this pass as politely as if he had wandered into a conversation between Frenchwomen. Adair mounted her horse in climbing fashion as Wes held it by the bridle, then her small solo form went from sight around the bend of the chattering creek.

He assembled himself again for what he had come for. "Here I am, as summoned."

“‘Summoned,’ that will be the day.” The tingle of the song still seemed to be all over Susan. She spun to go back in the house, but he made no move to follow. “Wes? You could step in. Homesteads don’t bite.”

“Actually, I was hoping we could make an outing of it--I haven’t been up under the Reefs in ages.” He stayed rooted in the yard, appearing abashed. “I’d forgotten that even up here there would be the matter of the neighbors.”

For her part, Susan looked highly amused. “Neighbor, singular. You haven’t that much to worry about, here. Adair McCaskill holds to herself, in every way I can think of.”

“Well, then.” Wes drew himself up. “If they won’t hear about this, near or far--I brought fried spring chicken and hard-boiled eggs and biscuits and jam and a jar of Mrs. Gustafson’s dreaded pickles and a bottle of chenin blanc.”

“A picnic! Who would have thought the soldier man had jam in him.”

“Susan, damn it--if you don’t want to go, just say so.”

“Don’t be so touchy, of course I want to go. What’s left for me to provide? Ah. A representation of strawberries. There’s a patch of wild ones along the creek bank. Let me change, and pick those, and I’m at your service, Major.”

Their route took them west on the uneven scrape of road, hedged with brome. After the climb out of the valley they were up onto the shoulder of Breed Butte, the buildings of the abandoned Scotch Heaven homesteads here and there below them like wagons in a looping circle, left to fall apart. Wes clucked encouragement to the horses when he wasn't regaling Susan with everything he had stored up for this. She listened eagerly to his account of what was on in New York, even to his dodgy report of subscription evenings--"conscription is more like it"--at Carnegie Hall with Merrinell's circle, and all the good dirt about politics in Coolidge climes. When this ran out they found enthusiastic things to say about the day's weather, the sun holding the Two Medicine wind at bay for once. To look at, the two of them might still have been lovers unencumbered by discovery.

But Susan was careful not to promote touching against each other in the sway of the buckboard over the thin-tracked road, and they both looked a little relieved when the wagon reached timberline. They agreed on a small park that gave an opening of view there near the top of a foothills ridge, where the rimrock of Roman Reef crowded the entire sky west of them. They found a spot with a colorful smattering of wildflowers and spread a serviceable tarp. Cork came out of

✓
✓

bottle, mutual faces were made in scorn of Prohibition, and they sipped at the wine and the day.

From that elevation they could see the distant gray-tan of drought, off to the east where Wes had told her about the prairie dust storm. Here under the mountains the snowbank-fed coulees held a tinge of green yet, but hayfields and grazing land already looked wan. The country was going gaunt, like the flanks of a greyhound.

“You were right,” Susan gave him his due. “It’s best to be up here, before the summer gets everything again.”

Wes smiled slightly. “Even a tossed coin comes down right half the time.”

He looked back out over the dun grasslands and fields. It was like a sand map, in the vastest headquarters, but instead of the croupier sticks of staff colonels and toy troop movements, the contest for land was deployed to see on that miniature of earth. He could have recited it to the nearest dollar to Susan, if she wouldn’t have batted him off the ridge. There below them, near the head of Noon Creek, was the ranch of the widower Reese, and next to that the early settler Dill Egan, old immovables whom not even Whit had managed to dislodge. But

beyond the last barb of Egan's wire fence the rangeland was the Double W's, all the way to the irrigated farms around the fledgling town of Valier and the blue eye of lake there which seemed to be returning Wes's appraisal. In the boom before the war he'd had to talk like a good fellow to convince Whit to yield that land to the Minneapolis grain concern and their irrigation engineers--*Cattle are no good to us unless there are stomachs around for them to find their way to.* He had been ahead of things then, guessing with terrible rightness that the dry-land farming that was bringing needed people to Montana would someday go drier yet.

Irrigation, roads, towns that amounted to more than wooden tents, progress paid for by taxing the extractors; he had seen the shape of what could be. On what proved to be the sand of a political career. And now he was faced with a brother who wanted blowing-away land bought to make up for the Valier irrigation tract.

Closer under this perch that he and Susan were sharing lay the willow-marked valley of the North Fork, the elbow of the Two Medicine country that the Double W had not got to first. Ninian's land, another story entirely.

Susan brought him back to himself. "Wes. On most picnics, there's food."

"Let's dig in, then."

The wicker picnic basket disgorged. They passed its ingredients back and forth, foregoing conversation for flavor, until Wes no longer could stand not to ask.

“All right, I give. What’s a sin-eater?”

“If you were lucky enough to be a *Lowlander* instead of one of those ridge-runners in plaid skirts,” Susan said with mock severity, “you wouldn’t have to ask such a silly question.”

The ins and outs of the Scotland-born were beyond him; Williamsons had been this side of the ocean since hiking their kilts after the Battle of Culloden.

“Deprived as I am, you could take pity on me.”

“I’m to instruct you in sin-eating, am I. It’s a kind of wake. I wasn’t all that old when Gram Erskine passed away and I saw it done, right there.” She inclined her head toward the Erskine homestead, next up the creek from the Duff place. Wes felt the stir of his father’s voice in him: “*That Erskine is another one-- in cahoots with Ninian Duff.*”

Susan was saying, “Scotch Heaven’s first death, she must have been. So, they were all still full of the old country,” pronouncing it *auld countrrry*, “and nothing doing but they had to have a sin-eater. They take and put a piece of bread

and a little salver of salt --oh, here, I'll show you. Assume for the moment I'm not among the living." She took one of the biscuits and the salt shaker in either hand, lay back on the tarp and carefully positioned them atop her chest, where her clavicles met. With eyes closed and held breath, she made a perfectly still body there on the shroudlike canvas. Wes watched, mesmerized, as one hand ever so slowly came up out of the grass holding a single shooting star and joined the other hand in folded repose beneath her breasts, the tiny flower in mischievous droop there.

"You're spoofing and you know it," he burst out. "That damned posie--"

"You caught on, but it's a nice dramatic touch, isn't it," she sat up and tossed the tiny flower at him as biscuit and salt cascaded off her to the tarp. "The rest of it, though, I swear to you is done just that way. I was surprised my father wasn't the one to do it for Gram," she looked off again to where the Erskine place was in slow descent into kindling. "Anything civic and grim usually fell to him. But maybe he was too much artillery for the occasion. 'Ay, Gram, as ye were better than ye were bonny, it is beyond our imagining that ye could have been up to anything, in your younger time over across the water. But on the odd chance

that ye strayed from the beaten path into yon bushes of sin, we'll relieve ye of that indiscretion now.'"

Her uncanny mimickry of her father sent Wes's blood a bit chill. Susan sobered out of her role, but her lips twitched at the complicated remembrance. "The Erkinés asked Angus McCaskill to be the sin-eater instead. He always had the knack, at any of that old ritual. There he stood, right by the corpse, I can see him yet. Eating of the bread and salt, to lift the sins off the poor old deceased."

Wes seemed to be in one of his deeper mullings. After a long moment he said: "A penitent for all concerned, it sounds like."

"If you have to be Latinate about it."

Stung, he scowled across the carpet-width of tarp at her.

Tell her, it all screamed in him. See how she likes knowing. Let her try all the bread and salt in the world, then judge the lot of us.

"Leave it to me to take the shine off a picnic," Susan apologized, torn by the twist in his expression. Someone who had been patted by Presidents and supreme generals, and she was having him on as if she were a devilish schoolgirl. She never would see why he let a stuffy church stand in the way of all else available in a life such as his, but-- "Wes, really, I'm sorry I got so wound up."

Wes sat up. "Water under old bridges, some in Rome and some not."

His face found its mask of command. "Wasn't I promised strawberries?"

They ate the thimbles of flavor, then Wes, seeing the afternoon go, brought out the name of Monty and it was Susan's turn at serious.

"That's what I need to talk to you about. I have to know, how long are you willing to put into this? He has quite a way to go."

"How do you mean?" Wes took immediate issue. "Training in anything worth doing takes some while, why should singing be different? I thought you told me once there were songs it had taken you all your life to learn."

"Monty picks up most things, he'll outwork the clock," Susan granted.

"With any other pupil, I'd be thrilled silly by now at what comes out of him at times." She stopped to gather the exact words. "But there's something holding him back. I've tried everything on him but a tire pump. His breath capacity just isn't there. Without it, he'll never be more than a kind of human hurdy-gurdy."

Wes had to laugh. "All the wind he puts into conversations when he's ostensibly driving me, I'd have thought Monty has as much breath in him as anybody."

“He needs half again as much as mortals with a tin ears,” she took a bit of the point off with a smile.

The expression on Wes she could no longer read. He retrieved the crumpled shooting star from the surface of the tarp, sniffed it as a bullfighter might a rose, and tossed it back to her. “As long as it takes, Susan.”

She hoped they were talking about the same thing. “Very well, then. We’ll battle on, Monty and I.”

“That’s what I bargained for. Oh, speaking of, I need to borrow Monty back around the end of this week. Helena business, ~~some banking~~. *he can drive me in and out of* A couple of *days* days ought to do it.” *back*

“Make him practice his breathing while he’s in your tender care.”

“What am I, the assistant choirmaster now? Here we go, there’s a drop of wine apiece left. Mustn’t let it go to waste.” They toasted out of habit, then Wes put his glass out of harm’s way and turned half toward her. “I did recognize that song when I pulled in. Not bad, for me.”

“It’s just a ditty.”

“It didn’t sound so, in Edinburgh.”

It came out lightly, but Susan froze, locking a look onto him over her tilted wineglass.

"Susan? Something?"

"Yes. We should be getting back."

5 years
+ old war

insert
European
affair

to those assembled: "The agriculture of Montana, gentlemen--we had better hope it's not blowing by for good, out there."

The Sunday morning of the Helena trip, Wes walked the few blocks home from early Mass at the Cathedral pondering how he had ever thought he was in any way fit to govern half a million people, given his record lately on a number he could count on his thumbs. He tried to put the mood away, box it in the admission that the lives of others are not something you can catechize. But no sooner was he into the house than Mrs. Gustafson came swooping on behalf of his breakfast with a glint of intrigue that would have done credit to a stiletto, and that was that. After her third hovering pass with the coffee pot, he told her: "All right, tell him I want to see him."

Monty gingerly stepped into the breakfast room.

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

"Things got a little out of hand, is all."

"A little? I have to bail you out of jail and haul Doc Walker away from his breakfast to wrap you like a mummy and that doesn't amount to anything?"

dis may
on 7/1/20

new
section
Cottonwood
Snow
Roadwork?
Dread
Bait

“Major, I got more than I bargained for.” This was tricky ground, Monty knew, but it had to be negotiated. Saturday night had to belong to a wage hand, not a hell of a lot else in life did. “Knocked up, locked up, and doctored up, like they say--I didn’t go looking for any of those.”

“How are your ribs?”

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

“What was it this time? Fantan again?”

“No, sir,” indignation ringing through. Pause. “Cold dice.” He could still see the fatal twin dots of snake-eyes wiping him out of the crap game. “Had them loaded, is what I think, and slipped them in on me despite how I was

Prairie Dominion

1924

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

“The other direction.”

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

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.”

Wes still eyed him, standing there stubborn as a government mule. From long experience he knew you couldn't take the spree out of a man, but you could shunt the man out of a spree. He would make sure there was no more Helena for Monty for a good long time. For the here and now, what harm had been done, other than to Monty's epidermis?

“This stays between us, you hear? It's not to reach the ranch, and particularly not the North Fork.”

The North Fork was murmuring a diminished tune now that spring runoff was past, and Susan could hear the first splashes of the pair of saddlehorses finding their footing as they forded the creek these mornings. Readying herself, she kept track of the scuff of hooves coming up from the creek crossing, then heard tones of voice that sent her out into the yard.

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

“I still bet you there are fish in there big enough to halter, now that the creek is down.” Dolph dismounted and came over to her at just short of a trot.

“Ma’am? I’m pretty much caught up on the chores except milking and the woodpile and little stuff like that. Would you mind if I was to go fishing a while? 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 guarantee a batch for my supper.”

“The fish doesn’t live that can resist me, Ma’am.” Whistling, he headed off to dig worms for bait.

Monty was a case of another sort today, she saw at a glance. His trip into Helena with Wes did not seem to have refreshed him. His eyes were not exactly bloodshot, but they were not the picture of milk-like calm either.

He hugged his elbows warily, aware that she was looking him over as if she were candling an egg.

“Ready?” she asked in a tone that was pretty close to a verdict.

She put him through the same songs as before. As the last note waned prematurely, she did not even have to say the obvious.

He ventured: “Can’t I stick to songs that don’t take that much breath?”

“Only if you want a career of singing Mother Goose ditties,” she snapped back and stormed across the room. She swung around and stood gazing at him as if he were put together wrong. “Monty, I can’t understand this,” she said, her voice wound tight. He watched her warily. She could crank out indignation like a jay when she got going, but he had never seen her like this. “This runs against human nature,” she let him know further in no uncertain terms, “that your breathing isn’t working up the way it should. I saw Jack Johnson in his prime. He had a chest like an ox”--elbows flung back, she dramatically held her hands wide either side of her own not inconsiderable chest--“he could have sung Caruso off the stage in *Pagliacci!*”

“I’m no kind of a Jack Johnson!”

“That’s not the point, you’re not any approximation of a living breathing singer and by now there’s no reason you shouldn’t be!” She flung out a hand as if to indicate him to himself. “You don’t have that many years on you. And you haven’t led as dissipated a life as some, I wouldn’t think.” He looked askance at her, but she seemed to intend that as a compliment. Susan dropped silent for about a breath and half, then said as if draining the last words out of herself: “I have tried until I’m sick of myself at it, you seem to give it all that’s in you, and

we get nowhere on this. I have to tell you, I don't know why but we're up against it."

Monty shifted around, trying to decide. She would wear him down to a dishrag, with these everlasting exercises, if he didn't own up to it.

"There was this bull."

One moment your feet are under you, dancing zigzag in the arena dirt, the scarred steel barrel all the barrier you've ever needed between you and the horns, then you take the least little step wrong and stumble, maybe on a hank of a rider's grip rope, maybe on a heel-size stone brought up by the frost since last year's rodeo here, maybe just on the blunt edge of the law of averages. The crowd responds with glee, thinking you are teasing, pretending to go down on a knee in prayer in front of the bull. The noise reverses to a gasp as the bull piles in on you, butting, hooking. Over by the chutes they all yell at the bull and someone dashes out and bats it across the face with a pair of chaps, keeping the animal off you until Dolph can wedge his horse between. Whit 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.

The hell with it, he tried to maintain to himself after the story spilled out of him. *If this's all she wrote, then that's how it has to be.* Telling her lifted the teetertotter off him, the ceaseless back-and-forth in himself about whether the goring was a mere excuse or an everlasting pinch his body was in. But at the same time it emptied him, took him down to slag. Dully he looked back at the fierce face throwing questions at him.

"How deep did the horn go?" Susan demanded again.

"Collapsed my lung."

"Aha!" Apparently sympathetic as an ice pick, she pressed him: "And when exactly was this?"

The terror of that time flooded back. White sheets, unnaturally so, and while he was flat on his back like death warmed over, the real thing kept trundling by, its spore maybe in every labored breath he took. Laying out there in the arena dirt after getting gored was nothing compared to weeks in that Helena hospital with corpses being wheeled past almost hourly. Remembering, he gritted all the

way to his wisdom teeth before managing to get the words out. "Same year as all the flu."

For a moment Susan seemed stopped in her tracks. Then she asked in steely fashion: "Why on earth wasn't I let in on this?"

"Wasn't any way to, was there," he burst out. "What was I supposed to say, 'Oh, by the way, I'm a one-lunger'? The minute you figure I'm some kind of cripple in the chest, you'd drop me like a bad habit."

"That's not so!"

Isn't it? everything in his stance asked.

Susan thought furiously. All this time she had been trying to build up diaphragm strength in this man but if the muscles in there were mangled beyond repair--she glanced in despair for her copy of Hargreave's *Illustrated Musical Corpus*, snugly on its shelf at the house in Helena, then rounded on the living subject.

"Take off your shirt, please."

Monty looked everywhere around, then directly at her. "I can't do that. It wouldn't be right."

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

“That’s why it wouldn’t be right.”

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

He shook his head, eyes cutting to the nearest window. You never knew.

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

His “No!” filled the corners of the room. The last thing in Creation he wanted was to have the whole Double W bunkhouse in on this.

“Please.” He angled half away from her, but his plea was painfully direct.

“If this counts so much, I can come back tonight, on my own. Get Mister Angus here, can’t you? His missus, too, if she’ll come.”

“Honestly, Monty.” The rosettes were not entirely gone from her face.

“If that’s what you want, I can fetch them.”

Angus contemplative, Adair indeterminate, and Susan grim, the three of them gathered on straightback chairs.

Susan leaned to the lamp and turned up its wick as far as it would go, casting a little more light to where Monty was standing tense as a stag.

“I’m still sorry about the need for this,” she said delicately to him, knowing he was on simmer, “but I don’t see any way around it. Now then. Please show us.”

He stayed still, gazing across the circle of light to the jury of their eyes. Even the cat came out from between ankles and leveled him a green gaze, its pupils like black darts. Monty felt like the biggest fool there was. Why had he bothered to come back over here on his own? It wasn’t as if he was able to trust white people, even these toned-down ones. Yet how could he get anywhere in this pig-iron world without them, most especially her, sitting there as if she held all the secrets.

Hating the moment, all it brought back--*Memory is what we forget with, Monty*, his mother’s baffling prescription whenever he pestered her too much about then instead of now--slowly he tugged the tail of his shirt out of his pants, unbuttoned, and pulled the cloth up. He looked at it with the rest of them. There on the right side of his rib cage, centered on the dark bronze skin, the puckered scar where the horn went in was the size of a large tire patch.

Susan arose and came over. As if with her head down into an anatomy text, she traced spread fingers back and forth above the wrecked skin, careful not to touch him.

“Missed your sausage works,” Angus contributed. “There was a bit of luck.”

“Mister Angus,” Monty set him straight, “there’s been too many times when if it wasn’t for bad luck, I wouldn’t have any luck at all.”

Nodding to herself, Susan still was studying him. “Wait. Those scraped places--those are still healing.”

“Those were something else.”

“Such as?”

“Little difference of opinion.”

“At the level of your chest?”

Monty wadded his shirttail in his fist, then let out a weary sigh. “Couple of people jumped me, when I was in town.”

Susan’s face said she knew which town and which part of town.

“Poor old body.” Adair’s murmur surprised them all. “It’s all a person can do to rub along in this world, isn’t it.”

Not sure whether that was specific sympathy or ready-to-wear epitaph, Monty attended to the matter of his bare skin. He looked straight at the one who had put him through this. "Miss Susan? Are you happy now?"

Susan managed to meet his eyes. "Monty, hear me out. As much damage as we can see there, I can tend to." He closed his shirt, dubious. "I promise you," she insisted, "I see now how to build up your breath. A lot was learned from the lung cases in the war, there's an entire literature on it. But there isn't one thing easy about it. You'll need to work at it until you're blue in the face."

He stared at her. Angus and Adair, their heads cocked like fascinated owls, kept mum.

"Monty, I only meant--"

He allowed himself the smallest of smiles. "That could be a while."

Air was at a premium. How had he ever outrun all those bulls but one?

Breed Butte loomed over him, he was barely halfway up its slope and pretty far toward done in. He gasped, trying to make more breath gust into him than was whooshing out. Both directions, it burned between the back of his nose

intensity?

and the bottom of his chest. The rest of his laboring body simply wanted to call it quits. His feet, in the kid leather sparring shoes, felt heavy as buckets of water.

Riding a dozen yards behind him, leading his horse behind hers, she called out: "A little faster if you can stand it. The day is hotting up in a hurry."

Susan was having him run on the shank of the morning, before the blaze of noon bore down on them. "It's merely roadwork of the sort Dempsey and Gibbons put themselves through all the time," she told him at the onset, sheer reasonableness. "And at the end, you don't have to do battle with either of them." No, only with her. Monty concentrated on the ground in front of him, picking out a stunted jackpine ahead alongside the baked set of wheeltracks and forcing himself to keep in motion that far, then taking aim on the weathered gatepost beyond that and closing his mind to anything but making it to that stout pillar of wood.

Water was the reward when he jolted into the yard of the old Barclay place at the brow of the butte and could at last pull to a halt. Susan swung down out of her saddle and handed him the waterbag. She watched critically as he swished water in his mouth, spat it out, then took a few moderate gulps from the bag. They did not speak much, Monty generally too winded and Susan absorbed in

putting him through his pulmonary paces. The Barclay homestead here was the halfway mark on the course she'd picked out, the steep half as he could have told anybody. The next leg was the old sheep trail angling west under the shoulder of the butte, across the dry cracked reservoir, and gradually down the long incline of the valleyside to the road, where she permitted him a cooling-down horseback ride home to the Duff place. In Susan's mind it was a perfectly logical circuit, uphill at first and then coasting downhill. To Monty it was like running up one side of a Nile pyramid and down the other.

Barely visible back at their starting point, Dolph was hammering battens over the cracks in the barn walls, and Monty imagined that even at this distance he every so often could see him gawking up here and shaking his head in disgust over these jackrabbit games.

"Ready?" she asked promptly as a metronome.

"Not so you could notice, but let's go," he said as usual, and set off onto the sheep trail at a lope. His gait improved with every long stride on the more level trail and by the time he was jouncing down the welcome incline toward the creek, you could see hints of the limber rodeo clown.

Susan would not exactly have said she was glad to be out here running him ragged, but there was undeniable pleasure in being on horseback again. She rode astraddle, in a divided skirt, as natural on a steed as only someone brought up on the back of one from the age of three could be. The first day Wes came across the butte in his buckboard to take a bemused look at this new regimen, she galloped down on him as if he were the buffalo and she the huntress. Whirling to a stop, she lit into him. *"Why didn't you tell me I'm dealing with damaged goods?"*

"That's a bit strong, isn't it? Maybe Monty is a little beaten up around the edges, but--"

"His goring? That's more than edges."

"His what? When?"

"He told me it was during the--it was in 1918."

"Susan, I was overseas, wasn't I. All I ever heard from Whit about ranch doings in those scraps of letters from him were the sky-high prices of hay. I didn't know Monty had caught a horn, I swear to you."

She had looked at him as if she could not believe it. But neither could she doubt it. His brother's negligence toward the human race seemed to irk him, she

was glad to see. Monty, standing at a distance, panting, had his mind solely on the swimming bath he would take in the creek when this sweaty jaunt was over, the water as warm as fresh milk.

Weeks went this way, then a month, but time of this sort can't be so easily summed. For there came a particular day when Monty did not plough to a stop and seize the reins of his horse from Susan when he reached the road but instead loped on for another quarter of a mile, the ease of it leading him on and on in astonishment at himself, until he finally spun around to her with the realization he had run years off himself.

I must take care to put this down with every exactness, she wrote of their turning point. Angus would have the poetry appropriate to it, Adair its cockeyed essence, Wes would chalk it up to the wily ways of God and the reward of duty. I have only my pair of astonished witnesses, my ears.

It already had been a day to mark on the wall. Monty's vocal exercises had gone well--this in itself is like saying the earth took a turn around the moon--and his performance of the practice repertoire grows stronger as he does; it is the sort of leaping progress that a teacher always hungers for. He had just ripped

through "Moses" without evident effort (at last!) and I was about to call it good for the day when he announced: "I have me something of my own I want to sing."

I was surprised, to say the least. What could I say but, "Be my guest."

Looking very determined he took his position in the middle of the room, studied off into nowhere--the next habit I have to cure him of--then clapped his hands a couple of times and out it came:

"Does the hawk know its shadow?

Does the stone roll alone?

I am vexed,

I am hexed,

I come before Your throne.

One out of many

Just another praying Jones."

That was the first verse of several confounding ones. The song sounded as old as the hills and yet unknown as the next heartbeat. Monty's is a propitious voice for such a song. In his new bottom range, he can put such resonance into

This a 7
Man

need
1

the "ohs" of "stone," "alone," throne," and that ending-line surprier "Jones" that it makes one wonder, How could one throat hold that?

When he had finished I remember that I rested my chin on my fist until I could trust my words. Finally I managed: "I know most gospel songs. Why have I never heard the likes of that?"

Monty shrugged as if to say my musical education, or lack of, was no doing of his. "Just one I learned when I was little."

"Why did you sing it now?"

He puzzled at that a moment himself. "It runs through my head sometimes, and this time I guess I wanted to try out my new air on it, is all."

I hardly dared ask. "Are there more where that one came from?"

"Oh, some."

"Then let's have them." I at once got out music sheets, Monty as surprised as if I had produced a rabbit from a hat. By then Dolph was stomping around out in the yard, both their horses saddled and waiting, but I didn't care. I took down half a dozen--"Mouthful of Stars," "Unless I Be Made To," all of them music up from the bones--as fast as I could write while Monty chanted or

half-sang them, before I could stand it no longer: "How did you come by these songs, exactly?"

He looked as discomfited as if I had asked him where the wind keeps its nest. "You won't laugh?"

"Of course not."

"Promise not to think it's loco?"

"Monty, I will not think, I will not laugh"--at this point I probably could have been heard a mile up and down the creek--"but I will take the broom to you in about half a minute if you don't tell me where on earth such songs came from."

He said, word for word:

"Angel Momma and the Holy Rollers."

Gospel

1892

The congregation was short on ecstasy, and Jones was having to bide time by dinning Deuteronomy into them.

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

Sister Satterlie, usually the first to quiver with the possession of the spirit, was barely even swaying. Jones himself was trying his best to will the outbreak, but you could never hurry the Lord. The jolt of exaltation would happen when it

happened, that was the weekly history of it all the way back to their knotholed church in the mountains beyond Gatlinburg. Their Appalachian faces hung out from under Stetsons and mail-order bonnets these Sundays, but they kept to their strenuous religion here in the foothills of the Rockies where the whole passel of them had been shipped in as tie-cutters for the Great Northern Railway. Third- and fourth-generation sawyers back in the Smokies, the men were proud to call themselves timber beasts and the women had long practice in making do at gulch logging camps such as the one up Noon Creek from here. Looking out over the small assembly, Jones as their lay preacher duly cherished every one of them, but he did wish somebody would feel the call and start thrashing or declaiming in tongues; he didn't have all Sunday up here at the portable pulpit.

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

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

The door peeped open, then swung wide to reveal a Negro woman, lank as a carpet-beater, with a wide-eyed seven-year-old clasping at her dress.

She gestured apologetically. "I don't want to bother, in no way. We were chokecherrying," she indicated the boy at her side with a lard can half full of wine-colored berries. "But I couldn't help but hear. Voices like your ones--I don't know what got into me."

"We're having church," Jones hardly had to point out.

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

"The sunrise side of Tennessee did not follow Jeff Davis to perdition," Jones stated with pride. No one in this room was ever going to forget the Confederate Army's clamp on the Cumberland. The oldest of the congregation, Brother Cruikshank, had fought in blue at the battle of Pigeon Forge and had the minie ball wound to prove it.

"My husband," the high-tan woman was saying, "he was a soldier, out here."

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

distinct face
in world
- lkg back @
Jones

check
&
improve

Angeline Rathbun identified herself while the boy peeked around at all the hawknosed faces. He wanted to show the people how many chokecherries he had picked, but it wasn't nice to interrupt grownups.

"Service in the uniform of our country, that's all well and good," the lay preacher allowed. "But if you'd excuse us now, we have the Lord's business to tend to yet."

"Mister? Couldn't I sing with you? Just sing? I could"--she swallowed--
"wait outside between songs, if you'd want."

Jones blinked and gave her fresh regard. The congregation had visibly perked up. He posed the question: "What kind of singing do you know?"

"By your leave?" Angeline moved a little farther into the room. She clapped her hands a few times to set a beat for herself, then began to carol in a voice dexterous as fine fiddling:

"Take a mouthful of stars,

Set your ladder 'gainst a cloud.

Go hammer up Heaven,

Oh hammer up Heaven,

Fixin' up Heaven,

Slickin' up Heaven,

Silver nails of Heaven,

Driven nails of Heaven,

Heaven, strong roof of my soul!"

Jones took a fresh grip on the pulpit. "We make our own singing, but this's a new one on us. Yours sounds like our music," he mulled, "yet it doesn't, too. Am I right, brethren?" The congregation murmured affirmation. Jones felt a tingle. "Where'd you ever pick that up from, Mrs. Rathbun?"

"My Mama's slave days, when she was a girl. In the war times. Every day before sun-up, what we called in Kentucky 'cain see'--"

"We call it that to this day," Jones could not help but put in. "'Cain see' to 'cain't see,' that's our working day in the woods."

"--she had to take the mistress's white saddle horse up in the woods and mind him there. The mistress was afraid the War Department was gonna see that white horse and take him for the army. Then when night come, Mama led that white horse in the dark--"

"In the dark," Jones crooned. "Satan's satin dark."

lix: 1892 -
1500
Monty is 7;
Angelina col
have been a
slave herself -
mother 7k her
in to work...

married,
-
-
visitation
lix

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

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

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

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

“She brings mighty fine songs, brothers and sisters,” he felt moved to put the matter to the general will. “What say you?”

“She been sent!” Sister Satterlie shouted, with a lurch that gladdened Jones’s heart. “The Lord ever is mysterious in His ways!”

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

/ix

Jones turned back to Angeline. "You may stay," he spoke for them all.

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

"The boy here, he'll be fine," Angeline vouched. "He has a voice, too.

Don't you, Montgomery."