“Next thing to it. Monty still wouldn’t have a pot to piss in if we didn’t keep giving him a job.”

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

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

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

“So you’ve already proved.”

“I told you at the time Susan Duff is no concern of yours,” Wes was giving this private speech his all. Wendell 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, but relieved. Wendell still couldn’t tell. Wes was too complicated for him. “What she gets out of this is her damnedest pupil ever. Are you listening, Wendell? 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." Wendell settled deeper into the ancient office chair on his side of the desk. "Could we talk business, you think? What pregnant ideas did they have for you at Fort Assinniboine?"

Word always 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.

"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.”

“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 she 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 Wendell 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 Wendell 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-- joined at the hip 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 audl 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 Erkines 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. A couple of days ought to do it.”

“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."

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?”

“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 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." 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. Wendell Williamson charges
down on you, whey-faced. "Snowball! It get you?" You can't quite catch your
breath to answer. Somebody knows enough to keep them from moving you until
the doctor waddles from the grandstand with a black bag in his hand.

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 an excuse or a 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 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 wound 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
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 pleasure in being 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 Wendell 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
the “ohs” of “stone,” “alone,” throne,” and that ending-line surpriser “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,” “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."
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?”

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,
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.”

“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 this entire county."

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

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

"She been sent!" Sister Satterlie shouted, with a lurch that gladdened 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."

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."
“Ol’ Snowball, he thinks the world’s wagging its tail at him.”

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

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

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

Didn’t Dolph wish he knew. Perpetually parched for women, cowboys tended to believe there must be winks of ecstasy waiting for them somewhere, if only the circumstances ever would line up right. But tonight’s perfunctory prostitute whom he had sprawled himself on in one of the rooms overhead was more like a blink. And the Duff woman, she seemed blind to her own kind.

Dolph had to shake his head. Whenever a man met confusion in this life, it almost always wore a dress. How was it in any way fair for Monty to be the object of her eye?

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

"And during these...music lessons?"

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

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

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

“Klansman, Klansman, of the Ku Klux Klan,
Protestant, gentile, native-born man,
Hooded, knighted, robed, and true,
Royal sons of the Red, White, and Blue.”