Version 10
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(then diary epigraph
taken out)

Night on

192

"This is a story I am more

unearths this old account of the th

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

no italics on diary entries?
catgut?

"The evening brings all home," the last ringleted girl had finished off the ballad on a hopeful note--she would have given her ears for a praising word from Miss Duff--and night and quiet came again to the house on Highland Street. Regular as the curtain of nightfall was Susan Duff's routine in closing away her teaching day. Shoulders back, her tall frame straightened, even though there was no one in the house to meet for the evening but herself, she briskly tallied the hours of lessons in the secondhand mercantile ledger she kept handy atop the piano and cast an eye over the schedule of impending pupils, then the balky old doors of the music parlor were slid shut. Next a quick stop in the hallway bath to freshen her face with a rinse of cold water; an

Let my people go."

Wes listened, back through time. Through here Lewis and Clark had come exploring, twenty-six soldiers under their command and Clark's slave, York. Wes had checked his leather-bound Thwaites edition of their journals, and the 1805 entry could have been written this very day: *This extraordinary range of rocks we called the Gates of the Rocky mountains....there is not a spot, except one of a few yards, in which a man could stand between the water and the towring perpendicular of the mountain. The convulsion of the passage must have been terrible, since at its outlet are vast columns of rock, torn from the mountain, which are strewn on both sides of the river--the trophies, as it were, of a victory.* The journal passage stirred him, but the thought sat odd: the victory of nature over nature? He let that paradox go for another: York, Angeline Rathbun, Monty, the colored troops who had marched past his own into the bloodbath at St. Mihiel, the burden of their lives lofting into this song. Back nearly as long as he could remember, Angeline's spirituals had hovered over the white clotheslines in the back yard at the ranch, indeed like angelic sea chanties wafting above a ship under sail. The carry of Monty's voice, though, had mostly been prominent at branding time and roundup, when the other riders would encourage him to yell the cattle

cut ?

adjusting glance into the mirror; hairpins taken out, and her chestnut hair shaken down. Onward to her stovetop supper, which she raced through as though still making up for her father's interminable graces over expiring food. Now, with a pat to the kitchen and a cursory locking of doors and windows, she was ready to ascend.

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

This night, however, no sooner was she upstairs than she whipped to a halt in front of the alcove of window, her gaze drawn down the hillside to the state capitol dome, resting as it did on the center of the government of Montana like a giant's copper helmet. The dome still was alight with the festoon of bulbs that had greeted 1924 four months ago, which seemed to her uncalled for.

"Blaze," Susan addressed the civic constellation in the coarse-ground Fifeshire burr she was born to, "see if I care."

She gave a throaty chuckle at herself and wended her way toward her desk. The attic-like room extended the full length of the house--loft quarters for a married pair of servants, this must have originally been--and Susan used the expanse like a rambler cottage perched above the formal quarters of downstairs. The rolltop desk, a divan, a phonograph, what had been her father's Morris chair and footstool, onyx-topped sidetables, a blue-and-black knitted comforter on the sill seat of the strategically aimed gable window, sets of bookshelves, a spinet piano, the whopping Duff family Bible on a reading stand of its own, all populated what was in actual fact her bedroom.

This mob of comforts drew her up out of public day as if lifting her into a lifeboat, and Susan tallied the necessity of this each time, too. Liberal with the night, resourceful as she probably ever was going to be in her fortieth year under heaven, she held to the belief that she was most herself in these private hours, this room where the minute hand did not count. The time of footlights and the song-led marches for the right of women to vote were tucked into the past as firmly as could be, and as to the tongues of the town down there beyond the base of the

stairs, she could do nothing about those. But up here, she at once got busy at life's amended version of Susan Duff. There were encouraging letters to be written to favorite former pupils. (Tonight's, which took lip-biting concentration, to the breathy young soprano whose recent *lieder* recital in Milwaukee had not found favor there.) The afternoon's newspapers to be devoured, the *Herald* for spite and the *Independent* for sustenance. Books in plenitude; at this point she was determinedly attempting the novels of D.H. Lawrence. Music, of course; the phonograph sang perfectly on command, restorative in itself to a teacher of voice. And she still was secretary of the Montana chapter of the Flanders Field Remembrance Alliance, which took her to a drafty meeting hall once a month and obliged her to see to official correspondence, clerical enough to cross the eyes, in between. Tonight, as always, she shifted scene every so often, her tall solo figure suddenly on the move as if she were a living chess piece. Time did not lag here in her industrious garret; it was not permitted to.

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

#

"Susan? You might have changed the lock."

He arrived on the wings of that commanding smile. *The very model of a modern genteel Major,* a line of hers teased somewhere back in that diary. Behind Wes, men would have charged Hell; in fact, men had.

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

Voice training had unforeseen benefits. She thought she managed to sound in possession of herself--or at least within her own custody--as she spoke back to the immaculate invader:

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

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

He picked his way through the long room, interested as a museum-goer, to the perch nearest her, which happened to be the edge of her bed. "May I?"

You and your Williamson manners. Walk uninvited into a woman's bedroom, then be solicitous about seating yourself too near. This time Susan's words would have cut through bone:

"Sit yourself down, Wes, please do. I haven't had a good look at a family man in a while."

Wes ducked his head slightly in acknowledgment. At least she had not put the run on him, quite yet. He settled to the bed and wordlessly looked over at her before trying to make his case. The woman there just beyond reach had an enlarged sense of justice, which had been one of the first passions that drew them together. The snip and snap of talk with Susan, their political mustard plasters for the world if they could have had their way; he missed that, and her laugh which started somewhere down in the Scotch gravel of her family footing, and the abandon with which she performed the comical burning of her corset in the

fireplace of that Edinburgh hotel room to prove to him she could be modern in that way too, and the violet concentration in her eyes--during their love-making Susan's eyes stayed open, learning and teaching even then--and the always intriguing extent of Susan, down to her remarkable fingers which, it amazed him to find during some early clasp of love, were appreciably longer than his. The right length, by rare luck of nature, to caress music from piano keys or to coax it from the air when she sang. The heaven-given lilt of her voice he missed most of all, even when she was furious with him, as now. Everything was there to be missed, as he contemplated Susan across the frozen distance between bed and desk.

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

"I'm working on that." Reluctantly giving up his inspection of her, he let his eyes slide over the motley keepsakes in attendance around her, the brass paperweight shaped like a treble clef, the tiny mock strongbox which held pen nibs, the soldier photograph with its tint going drab, the silver letter-opener with the French maiden of liberty, one breast bare and glinting, in bas relief on its

handle. His gaze lit on the open pages in front of Susan. "A woman armed with a diary. Not the best company for me to be keeping, I suppose."

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

The silence stretched. At last Wes brought out:

"You know I couldn't."

"I know you *wouldn't*," she said as if correcting his spelling. They had been through this and through this. A proven hero who could not or would not undergo a tug-of-war with his church. *"Wes, the Pope has no need of the divorce law. But you do."* Who had broken his vows six ways from Sunday in half the countries of Europe and in this very room and then would not break his misbegotten marriage. *"She's not a well woman, Susan. I can't face leaving her, it's against everything in me."*

Susan, from a family that had the stamina of wolfhounds, held no patience for the delicate constitution and strategic indispositions of Wes's wife. She couldn't resist asking:

"How is the tender Merrinell?"

For a start, she thinks I'm in Minneapolis buying grain consignments.

Wes shifted a bit on the bed. "She is...holding her own. At Lake George, with the gold-dust twins. Easter break. Although they aren't especially twins any more. Sisters by luck of the draw, more like." Once again he regarded Susan as though taking the opportunity to stock up on her. "How is the Lord's gift to the musically inclined?"

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

"--When you dropped me like a bushel of hot peppers--"

"--When we were this close to being the flavor on every gossip's tongue and I said I'd have no more of it if I couldn't have you, we agreed that was that."

Actually, he recalled, she had handed him his walking papers with words more stinging than those. *"If I'm going to be alone in life, Wes, it might as well be with myself."*

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

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

In spite of herself, curiosity drew her over to the window by him. In the streetlights and diffused glow of the strings of bulbs on the capitol dome, the butter-yellow Dusenburg could be seen. Wes's Negro chauffeur, Monty, was caressing the hood of the automobile with a polishing rag. The lanky form leaned into the already burnished surface as if magnetized to the machine. "Monty would sleep in it if I'd let him," Wes was saying.

Susan stood there transfixed. The Williamsons. Their wealth and their fortunes, which were two different things. She closed her eyes for an instant, overcome by the fresh weight of memory. But when she opened them again it was all still there: the penny-colored dome that should have been Wes's by civic right, her reflected outline on the pane of night beside his, the chauffeur stroking the flanks of the costly plaything.

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

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

"Only on rare occasions. Is this one?"

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

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

"I have the pupil of a lifetime for you."

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

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

"I have never wanted your--"

"There's no charity to this, Susan. You'll earn your keep with this pupil, don't ever worry about that. It's a voice I'd say is ...unformed. But intriguing in its way. You'd take it on, if it fell on you from a clear blue sky, I'm sure you would."

His cadences of persuasion tested the walls of the room, as if this familiar floor were a speaking platform over the night-held capital city. Susan knew by heart every gruff note and passionate coax Wes was capable of, and how effectively the mixture worked. *"The copper kings of this state think they are immune to fair taxation,"* she had heard him send crowds into a rising roar as he uncoiled his campaign tagline, *"I promise them an epidemic of it!"* No other Montana politician had stung back as fiercely at the KKK as it crept into the state: *"This cuckoo Klan, they seem to be scared the Pope of Rome will descend on them in their beds, else why do they go around wearing their nighties over their*

heads?" In his other great campaign, in the bloody mud of France, Wes's words were known to have made the difference between life and death. Susan carefully chose her way around his entreaty now:

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

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

Susan shook her head no and then some.

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

"Your old place, then," he regrouped. "You could stay there, why not? I'll see that it's outfitted for you, groceries, bedding, cat and canary if you want."

He paused as if to make sure each of his words was registering. "I'm asking you to do everything you know how for this pupil. The works."

"Wes?" Honest bewilderment came out in her voice. "Wes, who in this world means that much to you?"

He appeared stunned at how she'd put it. Sitting there glazed, pale as porcelain.

When Wes at last rose from the bed edge, was it her imagination or did he lurch more than a tricky knee would account for? She watched him stiffly navigate the length of the room, biting her tongue against calling out to him. Let him march down her stairs and out of her carefully compartmented existence (*Treed!*), let him leave that key in the door, let that be the natural end of it.

But he paused at the gable window and stood there facing out into the night. Over his shoulder he told her: "Monty."

Whiteface

1914

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

concentrate on holding on. *You don't want to let yourself shake loose in there,* the wizened rodeo clown up in Calgary who had given him a couple of lessons in this had warned, *or you'll know what a pair of dice feels like.* Nor, he had found out the hard way, did you want to keep your eyes open during this or you'd end up dizzy as a cat in a churn. His ears told him enough about it anyway: how the crowd loved to be scared at this stunt, the human ball in the barrel and the bull determined to butt the infuriating object until it presented something to gore.

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

Monty gulped air and unkinked himself. A little groggy, but he remembered the routine and tossed his hat out first. Reliably the crowd guffawed. When no harm came to the hat, he stuck his head out the end of the barrel like an inquisitive turtle, gawking this way and that. The rhythm of the laughter built,

orchestral, mass chortles of anticipation as the audience waited for his next maneuver; he'd been right about this, rodeo-goers could handle the idea of him fooling around. He clambered out, spun around and peeked back into the barrel, as if the bull might be in there. Thunder of laughter at that, any more and they'd shake the grandstand to pieces. He quit while he was ahead and picked up his dusty hat, bowing to the announcer with the megaphone who was whipping up a nice round of applause for "our artiste of the barrel after that dosie-doe he just did with the gentleman cow." Then back to business, kicking the barrel along until it was in the vicinity of the bucking chutes again and he was standing ready for the next bull rider who needed his neck saved.

'Artiste' now, am I. Hope they didn't hear that across town. He drew another deep breath and concentrated on the gate where the bull would rampage out. Only one more rider in this go-round, and wouldn't you know, there was a hang-up in the chute. He watched the rider scramble up off the bull's back as if it was suddenly too hot a place to sit, while the chute men shoved at the recalcitrant bull. Forced to wait out there center-stage in the arena with only the barrel for company, Monty slouched, lanky and loose-jointed, mopping the back of his neck and under his chin with the red handkerchief. That was another of the jokes,

using the red hanky like a matador's cape when he had to draw the bull away from a bucked-off rider. It occurred to him that it was actually pretty funny to be swabbing at himself this way with the hard-used piece of cloth, because at this point of the rodeo he was an irredeemable mess. The bib overalls six sizes too big drooped on him, and the screaming-red long underwear that was the other part of the costume was darkly wet with sweat. He had fresh green manure up one pantleg. *Angel Momma ought to see me now. Used to worry about me playing in the mud, she'd have kittens over this.* Keeping watch on the chute situation--the bull had jammed a horn under one of the fence planks and was resisting the profane persuasion of the chute crew--he checked around on himself to make sure his props were at the ready. Out of his hip pocket dangled the head of the rubber chicken that came into use when he and the announcer had to resort to chicken thief jokes, and handy in the bib pocket was the hairwork braid for the other surefire gag where he grabbed onto a bull's tail and it appeared to come off in his hand.

Weary and filthy as he was, while the action was suspended this way Monty felt almost like he was back at one of the Sunday picnics along Noon Creek, standing around at the edge of the chute crowd like this. When he and his

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

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

By now Wendell Williamson was parting the sea of riders and hangers-on who were milling around in front of the chutes, on his way to see why three men could not deal with one bull, and Monty straightened up to his full height. It never hurt to be on your toes when the boss was around. That was how he had cozied into this, when word went around the ranch that Wendell Williamson had

bought up a string of bucking stock. The very next morning, even before he was done with the milking chores, Monty stuck his head in the office off the kitchen and mentioned that he'd heard Mister Wendell was turning into a rodeo producer and if he happened to be hard up for someone to do that clown job... Wendell looked him up and down--young and built on springs; a bit of a cut-up, but within limits--and saw no reason why the Double W choreboy couldn't give it a whirl, on rodeo weekends; *somebody* had to put on the clown get-up.

That had been a dozen rodeos ago and here they were at the last and biggest of them all, in the fairgrounds of the capitol of Montana. As was their custom, the Williamsons were using the occasion to play both ends against the middle. Somewhere up there in the shaded side of the stands would be Wesley Williamson with Helena society and the money men from as far away as Boston and New York, while Wendell ramrodded the show down here at the level of hooves and horns. Like the other Double W hands who'd been chosen to try their luck at putting on rodeos, such as Dolph and the stock handlers and the unfortunates trying to pry that bull loose, Monty was along for the ride, so to speak.

Right about now he could have used a little of that grandstand shade. He mopped himself some more, taking care not to touch the mask of makeup. It was Mister Wendell, who had traveled and knew about these things, who decreed the whiteface cosmetic. *"Those minstrel shows, they put on blackening. Be kind of funny if you did the opposite, wouldn't it?"* Monty saw the point.

At last there was hope at the chute; a clawbar had been found. A minute or so more, and he'd be matching wits with a bull again.

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

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

He turned his head not too fast and not too slow to find where the remark had come from. The telltale expression was on one of the calf ropers lounging around the end of the chutes, he and a pal putting rosin on their lariats. *Explains it some*. Calf ropers didn't have enough on their minds, their event wasn't any harder than tying their shoes. He never heard much from the bull riders; they didn't care what color the man was who let the bull chase him instead of them.

Monty tried to read the grins on this pair of lasso twirlers. If he was lucky, the show-off one was joshing about the whiteface makeup.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Jesus, what's life comin' to."

The megaphone of the announcer heralded readiness in the chute at last, and Monty went back to a bullfighter frame of mind.

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

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

Some bulls just stood there in confusion at the sight of the clown, some tamely turned away. This animal lowered its head and looked like it meant business. Monty backpedaled until he had the barrel between him and the bull. When the bull charged one way, Monty dodged to the other side of the barrel.

Back and forth, beast and man, like drunks trying to navigate past one another in a narrow space. This was another part the crowd ate up.

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

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

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

Monty aimed for a stout corral post--if you made your jump onto the middle of a section of plank fence and the bull plowed it out from under you, then you were in a hell of a fix--and leaped, grabbing for the post with both arms and pulling his legs up under him. The fence shuddered below him as the bull slammed into it, but he was high and dry, and giddy at having pulled off the stunt.

Dolph rode up to encourage the bull to the exit gate, then reined around to check on the puff-cheeked clown as he slid down off the fence. Hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath, Monty admitted: "This is getting to be a long day."

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

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

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

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

"I'll have to remember that."

"It makes for quite a show, though," Dolph granted with a chortle, "you lighting out across there with that bull's horns tickling your hip pocket." He sized

up the riders and ropers and hangers-on clotted around the chutes. "Now's a good a time as any to pass the hat for our hardworking rodeo clown, don't you think?"

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

"What's that have to do with the price of peas in China?" Dolph looked at him in surprise. "You got something against extra money?"

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

"So how about it?" Dolph persisted. "Halvers?"

Monty glanced at the men along the chute. Everybody looked in good cheer, but you never knew. He drew out deciding until Dolph started to give him a funny look, then nodded. *Go for broke, why not. Last show of the season, any hoodoos in the bunch will have all winter to get over me.* "If you're gonna be the one that does it, Dolphus, sure."

Dolph had already had his Stetson in one hand and was fishing into his jeans pocket with his other. "I'm just the man what can." He held up a fifty-cent piece as if to fix the specific coin into Monty's memory. "We split halves *after* I get my four bits back, got that?"

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

"DOLPH!"

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

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

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

As Dolph set to work with the hat, Monty stood there savoring the thought of Clore Street and the good times waiting. Silver dollars were definitely the ticket. Like in the blues he'd heard the last time he hit town. *Flat to stack and round to roll/ Silver dollar, lift my soul.* Not that he had any use for the blues, but

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

So, hoist a few in the Zanzibar before the KC boys hit town, then try find that sporting girl from last time, the one who took it slow. Couldn't pray for that to happen again, but it didn't hurt to hope. When a man came to town all stored up, he didn't want a hurrying woman. Then the fantan game, in the Chinese

gambling place. He should have half his money left by the time he drifted into the game, and with a stake like that there was every chance he could win back what he spent at the Zanzibar and the cathouse. Head on home to the ranch with a good stake for next time, even.

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

By nightfall the Bull Durham sack was flat empty.

Gates of the Mountains

1924

"You're awfully quiet, Susan."

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

Wes yanked down on the brim of his hat one more notch. "We could do without this wind." A sharper gust through the canyon buffeted the motor launch as he spoke. "I hope it doesn't snatch Monty's breath away."

In the sway of the bow, like a bundled statue being borne into a white-walled port, Susan stood braced as she gazed ahead to the Gates of the Mountains. Half the sky of her younger years had been the arching northern palisades of the Rockies, but here the mountains made fists. Precipice after precipice stood guard over these waters, pale limestone cliffs materializing straight up out of the river and lifting pine forests on their shields of stone and catching on their summits the fresh flags of snow. Every whiff of air held the scent of fresh pitch. Off to starboard--at least she still knew right from left--a stand of snow-flecked jackpines on the nearest clifftop filtered what there was of the early-spring sun through the shade of their branches, and she watched this lattice of the seasons until the river left it behind. As the boat puttered deeper into the corridor of channel, Wes kept himself propped against the deck railing near her, resting his leg and evidently his thoughts as well. Her own mind was a maddening merry-go-round, thanks to him. When she insisted on auditioning Monty in private, but someplace spacious to hear how his voice carried, Wes simply commandeered a mountain range.

Williamsons had always owned.

Susan turned her head just enough to study him as he bent to coil a mooring rope that didn't pass muster, seeing in the intent lines of his face the Wes Williamson she had first laid eyes on. At the time she was twelve and snippy and inseparable from her father, particularly on trips to town, and they had gone in to the stockyards at Valier to settle up with the railroad agent on the shipping of their lambs. Commotion bawled out over the prairie from the loading pens. *"Ninian Duff! And Ninian's likeness!"* the shout came from on high, the ringmaster of cattle himself, old Warren Williamson in the catbird perch above the cutting chute. *"Come to see what real livestock looks like?"* Susan's father had begun with cattle and advanced to sheep, and along the way contended for every spear of grass with Warren Williamson and his bony-hipped Double W specimens. From day one Ninian Duff knew when to stand his ground, and now he barked a laugh and shouted back: *"Livestock are those, Williamson? Here I thought the flea circus had come to town."* Taking their time about it, the two Duffs approached the corral, bearded scarecrow of a man and gangly girl in overalls, and climbed up to inspect the mooing mess. The cattle were being chuted into railroad cars: dogs worked at their heels, dismounted riders stamped around trying to look useful, the stockbuyer slapped the corral boards with a tasselled whip thin as a wand. The

herd of brown-red backs was wound tight against the end of the corral, a rivulet of steers banging up the high-walled ramp into the rail car. Down there in the muck hazing his crew as they hazed the cattle was the next of the Williamson breed, Wendell, installed by his father to run the Double W ranch in the next valley over from the Duff homestead. *"It is like perpetually neighboring with Jonah's whale,"* Ninian Duff had been known to say.

At her father's side above the milling cattle Susan fiercely took it all in, alloting grudge where she knew it was due--to the grabby Williamsons, high and low--and something like hunger toward every other face around her. The poor riders, unfit on foot. The stockbuyer, like a big gray jay in his suit of gabardine. The familiar thicket of dark whiskers that marked her father's presence, at the corner of her vision. *A story wants to be told a certain way, or it is merely the alphabet badly recited,* the king's remembrancer told the king who had no patience, in the book of stories that they closed each week with at the one-room school on the South Fork. Faces, Susan had decided, were the first letters of those stories all around a person. So, she was at the stage of ravenous wondering about anyone she laid eyes on, and lately that included the father whom everybody said she was a copy of.

"Ay, Williamson," her father hooted across the corral to Warren as a steer broke back past his swearing son, *"any cows ever I had could knit socks with their horns. These seem to be wanting in mentality, not to mention poundage."*

It was then that she caught sight of Wes, his expression minted into her memory the way a likeness is stamped onto a fresh coin. He had been half-hidden next to the stockbuyer, flipping through the shipping papers, but her father's gibe brought him immediately hand over hand to the top of the corral, still clutching the paperwork like a crumpled bouquet. She knew him without ever having laid eyes on him before: Wendell's younger brother, the citified brother, the one everyone said was the prize of the litter. She kept her gaze glued to him as he poised atop the corral across from her father and her. It had been drilled into Susan, as only recitative Scotch parents could drill, that it was rude to stare. But to really see you had to keep looking. To this day she could bring back that sight of Wes studying her father as he would a wild creature: with fascination and apprehension and something more--pity? For her age Susan knew a substantial amount about life. She had grasped almost as soon as he did that her teacher at the South Fork was dreadfully in love with the new schoolma'am over on Noon Creek. She had deduced for herself that Banker Cooper's "vacations" to Minneapolis were to dry

out from whiskey. She had the Scotch Heaven neighbors down cold--the Speddersons would exert themselves only to avoid work, the Frews were tight as ticks where money was involved, the Erskines would lend you the elbows out of their sleeves, the Barclays kept everything up their sleeves--and accepted the principle that each family had some exception that proved the rule. But whatever this look on Wesley Williamson's face represented was beyond her; she had never known anyone to be sorry for her father.

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

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

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

"You can want."

In that exchange of thunders Susan had seen something, and if she had, the young man so intent across the corral surely must have: in the contest of the fathers there at the stockyard, Warren Williamson looked away first.

Aboard the motor launch, the ancient impatience of water moving them steadily into the mountains, she scrutinized Wes as he placed the coil of rope where it belonged. A quarter of a century and then some, on the visage across that corral; the same Wes but more so, if that was possible. The boxer's jawline. The philosophical eyes. Jack Dempsey met the jack of trumps in that face. After all her trying, in love and its opposite, this was still a puzzle to her, the different ways of adding up Wes.

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

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

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

Harris hunched farther into his mackinaw and steered toward the middle of the river, giving plenty of leeway to the blunt set of cliffs rearing at the next bend. Monty followed the boatman's glance around the vessel. The Major and the

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

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

Notions jittered in him today like fancywear on a clothesline. To be doing something besides picturing himself in full song beneath chandeliers that scintillated like the diamonds in the necklaces and stickpins of the rapt audience one moment and envisioning himself pucker-mouthed and mute as a trout in front of this music woman the next instant, Monty scanned the range of mountains stacked around the canyon. As scenery went, the Big Belts struck him as dead-end views: gulches to nowhere, slabs of cliff around every corner, round-shouldered summits that didn't amount to that much. Not like his boundless Two Medicine country, with its dune shapes of the Sweetgrass Hills way over east there as if they were pretty mirages that just never faded and the great reefs of the Rockies up everywhere into the sky to the west. This river was something,

though, rolling its way mile after mile through this rock-solid canyon. The hum came without his even trying. *'Oh, Shenandoah, I long to see you/Away, you rolling river'--Can you sing that one by yourself, Monty? Mama's mama taught me it, when I was little like you . Here, I'll help you with it--'Oh, Shenandoah, I'll not deceive you/Away, we're bound away, 'cross the wide Missouri.'* Bound away; maybe that was as good a way as any to look at this dizzying excursion on what was indubitably the Missouri, and wide. Helena had spurned the Missouri River in favor of gold-flecked gulches, so by now the city, the capitol dome or any of that, lay far out of sight behind the boat. Around another bend now, and Monty craned out enough to catch a glimpse of the higher reaches of the Big Belt Range. Nice clean fresh snow on those slopes; good tracking snow. He half wished he were up there hunting, cutting the tracks of a bull elk in one of those open parks near timberline, instead of down here at this. But wishing was what had landed him into this, wasn't it.

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

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

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

Of its own accord his turned-up overcoat collar all at once drooped and let the wind in on him, surprising him the way just about everything was surprising

him today. No reason to be jumpy, he told himself as he turned the unruly collar back up. Yes, there was. White lady variety. One more time he wondered about the singing teacher.

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

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

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

What if he got buck fever, in front of her, and couldn't remember the words? Couldn't possibly forget words to something you'd known all your life. *Sing with Mama while she washes, Montgomery. Ah* ah *AH! That's it, sing with Mama.* Just to make sure, he ran the song through his head.

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

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

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

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

"Major, I got more than I bargained for. Knocked up, locked up, and doctored up--I didn't go looking for any of those."

"How are your ribs?"

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

"What was it this time? Fantan again?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is?"

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

"You and your railroad," Susan made fun of him. "You would levitate it, would you?" Actually, it occurred to her, magic carpets were his stock in trade. Wes had but to say *abracadabra* and this steam launch awaited where the Missouri swept into the mountains. Monty and the Doozy presenting themselves at the dock, both looking newly spiffed up. She herself had been royally fetched from Highland Street by the Swedish couple who took care of Wes's Helena house, the Gustafsons. Susan had stiffened when she learned the Gustafsons were to be her escorts. A number of times they had served as camouflage for Wes, in the audience with him when she sang.

"An outing for the servants, is this to be?"

"Your old friendship with Mrs.Gustafson must be kept green." Then in his married tone: *"It's that usual matter, how things have to look. Please, Susan."*

Appearances. Keeping those up was one of the prices of Wes's wealth, and she knew there had been other costs as well. She was one of them.

Clasping her scarf to her throat against another incursion of the raw wind,

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

She centered her attention back on the matter of Monty. The taproot of talent is ambition. This man was quite far along in life to be wanting a career; what had he been saving himself for until now? Not to mention far along the palette of pigmentation, compared to the flesh tones of the audiences he seemed to crave. Yet she knew Monty had already come some way up in life. She remembered the dawn-and-dusk chores of the homestead, and multiplied those by the drudgeries asked of a choreboy on a ranch as huge as the Double W. Yes, he had come considerably up. The emphatic crease of his trousers, the good hat. And he smartly wore a greatcoat, nearly as capacious as that on Wes. She wondered how on earth he and his mother had alit with the Williamsons: two shakes of pepper in that salt-white confederacy of riders and masters.

She kept studying him now as Wes beckoned him from the stern. He had a roomy chest, which gave her hope. Ropy in build, young enough yet that he had no belly to speak of. Full-lipped, but no more so than the bee-sting look that

was popular on motion picture women. Glowering brows, but his eyes held no belligerence; quite to the contrary, they seemed to be all negotiation. Small ears, tight to his head. Spotless hands and fingernails. In outward appearance, she was forced to admit, so far so good with Montgomery Rathbun, songbird on the edge of the Williamson nest.

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

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

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

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

"Harris, can you let us drift?" Wes called to the launch operator. When the engine was shut off, the silence was overpowering. The wind stirred the

swags of branches far above them, but evidently was blocked by the oxbow turn of the river.

Monty took a position in the center of the boat. Susan was dismayed to see he stood like a cowboy, hip-sprung, spraddled. But then that's what he was, among a confusing number of other things, she reminded herself. As if feeling the need for correction in her look, he grasped the lapels of his coat, thought better of that stance, and let his hands drop to his side. There they opened and closed. He drew in an audible, open-mouthed breath, but no voice issued forth. Standing as if rooted to the deck, he seemed dry-lipped, apprehensive. It suddenly dawned on Susan that Wes was making it hard for him, depositing him out here in this magnificence, giving him his moment in grand style, testing him. Deliberately?

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

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

"When Israel was in Egypt land,

Let my people go.

Oppressed so hard, she could not stand,

down out of distant coulees. That, and shouting tag-ends of jokes back to his interlocutor, the announcer, in his rodeo period. Listening to Monty now, Wes put his head down and focused on the upside-down steeple of his fingertips meeting, very much as he did when he was in the confessional.

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

"You'll not get lost in the wilderness,

Let my people go,

With a lighted candle in your breas',

Let my people go.

"Go down, Moses,

Way down in Egypt land,

Tell old Pharoah

To let my people go."

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

"Again, please, Monty."

Monty sagged.

"Don't be down in the mouth," Wes consoled at once. "She's known to be hard to please."

"If you could possibly hold off on the man-to-man sympathy," Susan shushed him. "Monty? Again?"

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

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

Wes broke their deadlock. "Harris?" He twirled a finger at the boatman, and the launch coughed to life and turned back upriver to where Monty had aimed his voice at the canyon amphitheater. As soon as the engine was cut, Monty squared away, this time closed his eyes against the challenge of Susan's, and in

slow measure summoned up from wherever he could reach in himself: *"Go down, Moses..."*

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

"Well."

"Susan, blast you," Wes was nearly laughing in exasperation, Monty scarcely daring to breathe, "what's the verdict?"