Highland Night

1924

"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 shuffled sheet music into its rightful order, 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; one adjusting glance into the mirror, never two; 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~~ three 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 gramophone, 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~~ elevated 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

elevated (for private)

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; currently she was trying to make her way through E.M. Forster and the murky doings in the Malabar Caves. Music, of course; her half-finished operetta *Prairie Tide* always awaited, always unnavigable, but the gramophone sang the songs of others 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 General 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 her eyes that put you in your place and made you like it--during their love-making those eyes had stayed open, learning and teaching even then--and the always intriguing extent of Susan, down to her industrious 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 when she's like this, 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, his wife was under the impression he was in Minneapolis at this moment, 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 diffused glow of the strings of bulbs on the capitol dome, the butter-yellow Dusenburg could be seen parked down the hill from dozing Highland Street. 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 believe I see the unfinished musical masterpiece. 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 upped the ante: "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 ...different. Unformed, of course, 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 politician in the state had stung back as fiercely at the KKK as its flaming crosses flared on the bald hills above Catholic towns and railheads bringing immigrants to Montana land: *"This cuckoo Klan, they seem to be scared the Pope 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 will 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.

"Your old place, then," he regrouped. Not for nothing, he reminded himself, was this prideful woman the daughter of Ninian Duff. Ninian the Calvinian. "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 broke through in her voice. "Wes, who in this world means that much to you?"

He appeared stunned at hearing it put that way. 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 misbehaving 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."

"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 Potter'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 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 spades 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

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

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

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

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

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

Of its own accord his turned-up overcoat collar all at once drooped and let the wind in on him, surprising him the way just about everything was surprising him today. No reason to be jumpy, he told himself as he turned the unruly collar back up. Yes, there was. White lady variety. He sneaked another peek toward the bow of the boat and wondered again about 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 before he was driving for the Major--but somehow the fact that he and she both were from the Two Medicine country seemed like a kind of knowing each other.

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

"He's giving me a good help, with this." He had not really known what more to say about the Major providing all of outdoors as a music hall. Being a Williamson, the Major could do these things. With that, the two of them ran out

of things to say, although chitchat went on until the boat chugged to life and pulled out onto the river.

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

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

Nervously he rubbed an eyebrow with the knuckle of his thumb. Nobody around but the clam running the boat and the dumb-cluck hired couple to watch him make a fool of himself, at least. That wasn't always the case when he hit the Helena country. Helena had played hell with him, all right, Monty reflected with overdue wisdom as the boat slowed to a kind of aquatic waddle in the presence of the most imposing cliffs yet. He grimaced, the reminder of his last time in there still so fresh. The dust-up over his fantan debt, nothing really hurt except his dignity; but on top of that, the brush-off from Leticia. A man could hardly come to town any more without getting treated like Job's dog. *"Leticia?"* those joyboys in the Zanzibar had razzed him unmercifully,*"call out the militia!"* This time his

wince cut all the way to the heart. He had been stuck on Leticia. She wasn't street baggage, she was a good decent copper-brown woman with a part-interest in a millinery establishment and a sideline in cosmetics. He had sounded her out on marriage, even. *"You're a lovely man, Monty, but you are no provider."* And off she had gone with that slickback head waiter from the Broadwater Hotel.

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

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

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

"What is?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

motion picture women. Glowering brows, but his eyes held no belligerence; quite to the contrary, they seemed to be all negotiation. Small ears, tight to his head. Hair that hadn't been fiddled with, no misplaced faith in doses of straightener. Spotless hands and fingernails. In outward appearance, she was forced to admit, so far so good with Montgomery Rathbun, songbird on the edge of the Williamson nest.

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

"You might say that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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, proffering him his moment in grand style, testing him. Deliberately?

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

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

"When Israel was in Egypt land,

Let my people go.

Oppressed so hard, she could not stand,

Let my people go."

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

the upside-down steeple of his fingertips meeting, very much as he did when he was in the confessional.

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

"You'll not get lost in the wilderness,

Let my people go,

With a lighted candle in your breas',

Let my people go.

"Go down, Moses,

Way down in Egypt land,

Tell old Pharoah

To let my people go."

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

"Again, please, Monty."

Monty sagged.

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

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

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

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

Wes broke their deadlock. "Harris?" He twirled a finger at the boatman, and the launch coughed to life and turned back upriver to where Monty had aimed his voice at the canyon amphitheater. As soon as the engine was cut, Monty squared away, this time closed his eyes against the challenge of Susan's, and in slow measure summoned up from wherever he could reach in himself: *"Go down, Moses..."*

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

"Well."

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

Ninian's Land

1924

Scotch Heaven may not have amounted to much as a site,

but you cannot beat it as a sight.

--from the diary of Susan Duff

Susan scrubbed the floor a second time. The homestead house had stood empty since 1918. Almost the same could be said of the valley.

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

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

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

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

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

The cat licked its chops remindfully.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He petted the Dusenburg for luck.

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

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

"Angus! Hello, you!"

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

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

"It's been ages, Susan Duff."

"'Ocean's ebb, and ocean's flow/Round and round the seasons go.' There. In Mother's name, I've beat you to the rhyming stuff."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Susan?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They laughed together.

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

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

"Yes, I see to that."

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

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

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

Susan had her own tightness of throat to talk past.

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

"Ah. Have you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That night she put into her diary:

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

Early sun was sorting the green plaids of spring--blue-green of the timberline on Breed Butte, mossy green of the doddering barn roof, meadow green of the volunteer hay fostered by the creek--when Susan stepped out into the morning and around the corner of the house to gaze north. From growing up here, she could catch sight of a coyote the instant its lope broke the pattern of the grass on the farthest butte. So, she now spotted without effort the horseback

figure on its way across the benchland from Noon Creek, then could not blink away the duplicate figure next to it.

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

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

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

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

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

Looking doubly doleful, Dolph moved off in search of buckets and the nearest clay bank as Monty traipsed into the house. He was surprised to see it wasn't much of a layout. The kitchen was the center of everything, as was to be expected, but this one appeared to have had a boxcar of peddler's goods emptied

into it. All of it made his own room at the back of the Double W washhouse seem snug as a ship captain's. But through a doorway to the room beyond the kitchen he glimpsed a spinet piano, its white keys like bared teeth. He kept on looking at every possible thing in the house except her. All of a sudden he remembered to take off his hat and then had no idea what to do with it.

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

The piano sitting waiting, Monty edged into the room.

"Ready, I hope?"

"Miss Susan--"

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

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

The flutters in him saw their chance again. Kill this off before it got started. Croak out the spiritual, off-key; cough in the middle; tell her his voicebox

had come to the belated realization that it was too old to go to school. *Quit before you even start?* some banshee in his conscience howled back at that. *Why not scoot on home under your mama's bed and play with the cat, while you're at it?* Resigned to doing his best, he gathered himself to put what he could into the air.

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

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

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

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

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

"No doubt."

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

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

He looked disappointed. He had come here to sing his way to the top of the world, not to take his nose for a walk.

She drilled into him that he had to breathe from deep down, bulge his middle so his diaphragm would let air all the way into the lower region of his lungs. "It's like cleaning out the bottom of a closet so the rest of your things will hang right." He gave it try after try, and his intake still was the worst part of his vocal wardrobe.

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

He gave a minimum sniff.

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

How does she know these things?

"Monty? What is it?"

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

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

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

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

His flanks felt as if they were an unwilling topic of conversation. "Some, I guess."

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

"That's what you must practice," she decreed. "At home, in the mirror. Do it a dozen times first thing each morning and again over the noonhour and again at night, and I assure you, I can tell whether or not you have been doing

them." Monty considered himself notified. "Next let's acquaint you with the notes."

While he listened apprehensively, she demonstrated how to sing the scale. Her voice was smooth, each note up the ladder a tease of song; how was he ever going to get there? She would hold pitch, he would frown in concentration and then sic his voice onto hers. After considerable of this she called a break, with tea and honey for his throat and enough advice from her to make his head swim. Then back to traversing the notes. It took many tries, but finally she granted that he had approximated the scale.

By the time they called it a day, he felt as if he had gone fifteen rounds with The Real McCoy. Heading for his way out, he made his manners and said he would see her tomorrow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She fed the fire next, last of the night's chores except for the load of good intentions she had brought here with her. Piqued by Monty's question, she nightly put her voice through its paces before she ever sat down to the diary and the waiting noteless sheets of score. Good thing, too, because if she held off on her vocal exercises until she accomplished what she wanted on the page these nights, she would be in direct competition with Angus McCaskill's rooster as it summoned the dawn up there at the head of the valley.

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

kerosene lamps glowed yellow, puddles of light such as she had come from, she felt singled out by some circular law of the draw.

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

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

In the end, all had been worth it. The overshoe counties, the prairie tide of settlers, carried the day in the so close referendum on suffrage. It was a famous victory, and lacked only its snatches of tune. Susan saw this Scotch Heaven interlude as her chance to remedy that. Here she had solitude, that Cheshire countenance of creation: find the face of what you wanted to do and lock onto it without blink or hesitation, wasn't that the prescription? Here she was even paid to sit and stew over music, sniffy old Potter at the Valley Stockmen's Bank having to forward a healthy sum into her Helena account each coming month at Wes's behest. (Unbidden, the schoolyard song chanted in her: *Teeter-totter,*

bread and water/Oh how I hate Banker Potter! Why on earth should that take up room in her head, and not some passage fit for an operetta? Maybe there was her answer, have Angus's tots compose the lyrics that seemed beyond her.) Here she had but one student--although he frequently seemed like more--standing in the way of the time and strength and patience that ought to set that pageant of mud and glory to music. And tonight again she couldn't capture any of it, the flivver journey of 1914 as scattered as the Milky Way.

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

I am so down I can hardly write. Monty works hard at these lessons, but there is no reservoir of breath in him. It's as it he has no diaphragm! He chops along from note to note. This morning I braced him as to whether he was doing his exercises when he is out of my sight. "Religiously," he had me know. I must hope that did not mean only on Sundays.

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

Monty hung back to the other side of the room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adair, at this early hour?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The bread was still warm from the oven. Susan sent her a look. A woman who had baked bread before breakfast? And then ridden down here in the dew hours to spend, what, the day? From girl on, when Susan had sung at the wedding of Angus and Adair and even to a knockkneed schoolmaid it had been obvious how Angus's eyes searched past his bride of convenience to Anna Ramsay, Susan had tried to fathom what this person's view of things must be. But there seemed no knowing, no way in past those deflecting gray eyes with their odd guardpost of freckles directly beneath each. In the time after Adair's second still-birth when the women of the other homesteads would visit in and always find a deck of cards laid out in columns in front of this woman, Susan's

mother would come home shaking her head and say, *"Adair and solitaire,"* not a commending rhyme. Now Adair was saying, "It's so fresh, it may be hard to cut."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's so. But--"

"That leaves the other days."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A letter for you, Mister Williamson."

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

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

Dear Wes--

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

You will be pleased to hear we have made some strides, or rather, I have pushed and Monty has progressed in some steps. Some, I emphasize; less so in

others. His vocal range is improving, although of course not yet as much as it ultimately must. His tone remains his strongest point. In presentation, he no longer stands as if he were made of warped barrel staves. All in all, after these months, I can say Monty is in better possession of his voice. But his voice is not yet in possession of him, which is the breakthrough for a true singer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sincerely, Susan

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

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

Unfolding Susan's letter again, he ran his eyes down it as if it were a balance sheet. The lowdown on Monty's vocal status could be more heartening

and could be less. It was her remark about buying his way through the alphabet that piqued him. She was supposing that he had made up his mind to buy the TM&T-- "The Empty," he knew people called it, not that he cared--only because it ran from Valier, the Double W's shipping point, to the mainline; another cattle baron grab, another annex to the House of Williamson. True as far as it went, but motives seldom know pure boundaries: he was snatching up the twenty-mile shortline to make sure that the Anaconda Copper Mining Company could not lay hold of that right-of-way. The coal in those prairie hills rimming the Double W range wasn't much, but it didn't take much to attract the Company. Or other scourges. Susan could joke all she wanted, but there was the matter of what the Two Medicine & Teton was likely to carry, other than cattle or coal. Word had it that railway workers were the web on which the Klan was spreading itself through Montana, the skunkholes called Klaverns said to be in forty counties by now. He wasn't having that in the Two Medicine country. He would need to clean and gut the little railroad, fire every one of them and have the sheriff kick them to the county line if that's what it took.

Like the mills of the gods, the drivewheels of faith sometimes could grind exceeding fine, and Wes took what satisfaction there was in that. He knew

Adams would relish this railway venture, a homely little set of tracks as an excursion for exquisite theorizing. "But this is perfect, Wes," he could all but recite the conversation to come at lunch, "a chance to operate a railroad as something other than organized robbery of the public." "Yes, Brooks, and I'll maintain it by passing the hat here in the Club." (But he thought he would not make the case to Adams about the railroad as necessary angle-iron against the Ku Kluxers; he had learned more than was in the curriculum as a Catholic student at Harvard.) They would spar from there--the East tended to be a sparring match; the West always was a wrestle--and he knew it was time, past time, to go on up now for asparagus and epigrams.

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

governor I'll make this state so hot for you, you and the Company will need to go around in furnace pants."

"Wes, Wes," the politico chided. He put down beside Wes's brandy glass a newspaper clipping. *"Miss Susan Duff, Helena's renowned alto, will give a recital this evening at the Missoula Atheneum for the benefit of the Flanders Field memorial where so many of Montana's men at arms lay..."* That was followed with the receipt for the Missoula hotel room. Under Wes's staring eyes, the man crumpled the two pieces of paper and flipped them into the fireplace. "Naturally, there are more where those came from."

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

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

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

"The very lads I'm looking for," Angus sang out. "I have some well-traveled livestock for you." He whistled low to the dog. "Heel them, Bobby." With the border collie industriously coursing behind them as close as the tassels of their tails, the cattle galloped past the paused pair of riders.

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

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

"But you are drawing wages from the Double W, and the brand on these specimens looks very much like one W followed by another," Angus's voice had shoulder in it now. "Either you take them, or I sic Bob here"--the short-tailed dog

keenly looked up when his name was mentioned--"onto them until they're halfway to Canada."

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

"Suits me."

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

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

Monty was decidedly staying out of this.

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

"That old scissorbill." Dolph saw the expression on Angus and amended: "Excuse my French. But he was always putting the jump on me whensoever I'd

ride anywhere close to the North Fork. Acted like he had this whole country in his pocket."

"Man, he did. The one over his heart."

"Have it your way," Dolph muttered. "C'mon, Monty, those cows are making miles on us."

Angus inched his horse closer to Monty's. "A minute of your time?"

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

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

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

"Brave of you, to undergo tonsil exercises when you wouldn't have to."

Monty continued to meet Angus's gaze, although it wasn't easy. Those agate eyes were too wise for comfort. Why prolong the malady?

"Tell you the truth, I'm about to bunch it. It's just not working out."

"Are you not getting along with Susan Duff?"

"It's not that, so much."

Angus waited him out.

"I'm maybe not cut out for this," Monty finally said.

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

Monty absorbed this, staying wary.

Angus looked off up the creek. "She's been a while gone from here." He turned to Monty again. "I wouldn't want to see her come back just to be disappointed." Preparatory to going, he snapped his fingers above the dog, which crouched and sprang high against the leather of his chaps, and was scooped to its nestling place between lap and saddle horn for the ride home.

"Mister?" Monty did the detaining now. "'Curious' is a habit I never been able to break."

"Say on."

"You make it pretty plain there's some things you don't like about the way the Williamsons operate."

"Just everything about them."

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

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

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

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

"He's known Miss Susan forever. Felt he had to give me a bit of the mother hen treatment about her."

"Probably stuck on her himself. Scared we'll beat his time with her." When that didn't bring a rise out of Monty, Dolph cleared his throat. "She's not so bad a looker."

"I wouldn't know."

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

"Do?"

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

In no way did Monty like this territory of talk. Dolph and the other Double W hands could trot into Gros Ventre any Saturday night and have their needs taken care of by a bottle-blonde whore upstairs at Wingo's speakeasy, while that was out of the question for him. Not even Browning, the Reservation town to the north where the men went when they proclaimed they wanted dark meat, was safe that way for him; long memories on those Blackfeet. Clore Street or nothing, for him, and that wasn't anywhere in the picture until the Major had

enough of New York, and why did Dolph have to start yapping about this anyway?

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

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

diary? Samuel? S's exasperation w/ M -

That woman was going to drive him to desperation.

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

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

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

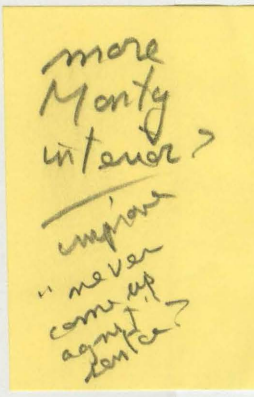
it comes with chasing around the countryside with the Major and otherwise never exercising."

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

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

All he wanted was to sing. No, that wasn't quite all. He wanted to sing as free and easy as Angel Momma had, and have the world sit up and listen, and make enough money at it that one wrong turn of a card wouldn't leave him flat busted, and for that matter not have to shine up another man's car and then right away be called on to drive it over these dustbaths called Montana roads. Granted, turning yourself into something took work: he knew that in every fiber of his being, he had put himself through plenty back there in rodeo clowning. But the dipsy-doodle nose and gut exercises she kept after him about--it was like she was trying to turn him into one of those carnival freaks who could tie parts of themselves in knots. "'Smell the rose, blow the bugle,'" he mimicked.

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



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

"I expected you to set that to music."

"Not just yet." Monty contrived not to notice that the train porter wanted him to take the Major's suitcases off his hands, instead holding the trunk of the car open for the man to heft the luggage in. Enough bags that it looked as if the Major was here to stay for a while, so at least there might be some stretches of driving when he wouldn't have to be huffing and puffing trying to please the unpleasable over there on the North Fork. Seeking some topic of conversation other than that, Monty asked: "How do you like your railroad?"

"At least it's as wide as other railroads."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Something like that, I guess. Doesn't mean he hasn't got a tongue on him like a wagon."

"That's as may be. Wendell insists you have somebody along with you over there."

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

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

Only at times such as this did Wes long for his military service, when he could snap out an order and watch everybody involved fall all over themselves following it without any quibble. "This is Wendell's department," he confined himself to. And he knew Wendell wouldn't speak to Angus McCaskill if he met him in Hell in charge of the ice concession. Still, if it would smooth Monty's feathers any, maybe someone else from the ranch crew could go in Dolph's place.

"Very well, I'll take the matter up with Wendell. But I don't promise anything. Now, does this car still have a motor?"

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

"The other direction."

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

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

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

"There?" Monty blurted. "I thought there's not much there anymore."

It was true that the abandoned fort persisted in burning down, from vandals or prairie fires or spontaneous friction with the prairie it so incongruously reared out of. But there had been so much of it, when it was built as a Presidio of the north to make sure the plains tribes did not rise from defeat, that the state of

Montana picked through the ruins for anything substantial enough to house an agricultural experiment station. Wes himself had been on that appropriations committee and it bemused him a moment now, his part in turning sabers into plowshares. "The Extension boys, that's about all," he answered Monty. In turn there was something he very much wanted to know. "Remember it when, do you?"

That question had already taken Monty over. In his farthest memory the 10th Cavalry wheeled on the vast parade ground at Fort Assinniboine. The big, big horses, clatter of everything on the men and animals, the band tootling on horseback too. Here and there a white officer, but all the blue riders, faces on them like his mother's and his. *"See him, Montgomery? See your papa? Can you salute him like a little man?"*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Major? Something I did?"

"Why, is there something on your conscience?"

"Not any more than usual."

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

Monty clammed up and Wes settled back to brief himself on representing Williamson interests at this session with the state agriculturists. Every so often he lifted his head to take in the prairie prospect. Four times out of five he had occasion to frown at the number of bald-faced cattle on the dun hills, the **WW** brand seared on their left hips. Wendell was piling cattle onto this range, irrespective of the grass drying away in front of a person's eyes. By rights Wendell ought to have been the one to go to this session on long-term drought management of grazing land, but Wendell would rather take a beating than be penned into a meeting. Well, maybe the agricultural experimenters at Fort

Assinniboine would have advice he could inflict on Wendell about how to put pounds on the skinny specimens across the swath of earth owned by Williamsons.

Gradually the tawny hills gave way to homestead farms, spotted onto flats of land rimmed by benchland on every horizon. Wes caught himself drowsing, snapped awake and checked on Monty; he was peering ahead over the steering wheel the same as ever. Both men were accustomed to Montana's long-legged miles. But this journey on a day that had turned sultry, hot air blasting in through the car windows, seemed to go on and on, methodically, doggedly, hypnotically. On the section-line roads across the prairie they met no other travelers, black-locomotived Great Northern trains passing them by on the distant northern horizon the only other moving things in the blaze of afternoon.

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

Time upon time now, the big car topped a rise and the two men were gazing down at lustreless expanses. There had been a distressed air to farms all along the way, the houses and outbuildings brown howls of dry wood, the fields themselves looked even more stricken. Through his sweat, Wes blinked and

studied. To every horizon, the earth had been plowed and anemic grain was trying to grow, but its stalks would barely tickle a person's ankles.

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

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

Even though the road ran straight as a rail for a dozen miles ahead, Monty never shifted his eyes from it now. Wes, gandering, was the one who puzzled at the smudged sky to the west. The horizon there had gradually roughened with hills, breaks, coulees, and now that banked horizon of hills was dimming away into the sky's haze. He knew it had to be cloud, but the formation was strangely edgeless, almost more a tint that anything else. "Does rain always have that much trouble making up its mind in this part of the country, I wonder?"

Monty sneaked a look, then jerked his foot off the accelerator and all but stood on the clutch and brake pedals until the car slewed to a halt. He rolled down his window and stared west to be sure.

"Dust," he said as if afraid of the word. "We better get ourselves there before it does."

The butter-bright car sped on the dimming road for the next five minutes, ten, fifteen, with Monty pursed and restless over the steering wheel while Wes tried to simultaneously watch both the road and the phenomenon to the west, the earth rising in wrath. A half-light, yellow-green, descended, perceptibly darkening as if a shadow-dye from the dust storm was flowing ahead into it.

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

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

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

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

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

Held in confinement by the groundstorm, each man went into himself as they sat waiting it out in the sanctuary of the car. Wes knew this turn of weather would furl up even more of the homesteaders, those who were still left. On his route from the East he had seen the effects of the hard seasons of the past years, the puddled settlements on the great prairie drying up. Banks were evaporating, entire towns would go next. It was incredible, the reversal of the wave of settlers that had made Montana and the Dakotas the coming places, before the War. *Buy,* he knew he was going to hear out of Wendell the minute he set foot on the ranch, *get out there and buy them out.* That had been the Williamson way, it had built the Double W ever since their father had come into the Two Medicine country on

the fading hoofprints of the buffalo and swamped the prairie with cattle. And he further knew he would look at his brother there in the same room where he had received the same marching orders from their father and continue to wonder how much land a man could swallow without turning into an island.

Monty's thoughts were just as restless. Hidden somewhere out there was everyplace a sergeant of colored cavalry had courted a hymn-singing laundress, and the exact room in the married men's quarters where they had done their business of bearing and he had squalled his way onto this earth. But for the life of him he could not pull back anything substantial from his first handful of years here. What he best remembered--as if he could reach down at this instant and touch its magical cool skin--was the fire escape at the post hospital; it must have been the latest thing, a chute like a metal tunnel that even a mite of a boy could climb up inside, barefoot, and then slide ecstatically down. But that, and nothing beyond dimness about the parade-ground figure whose seed desposited him into this Jericho of the prairie. That and his mother's drumbeat of verdict: *"I tried so, with that man. And for him to pick up on us with never a word."*

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

Monty crept the car through the ghostly fort until Wes pointed. An aftergust of the storm caught them before they could make a run for it to the agricultural station office. The brown blown grit could be heard doing no favors to the glossy finish on the Dusenburg, and they could feel the dust collecting on them as deep as their teeth, the air about thick enough to chew. Wes tied his handkerchief over his face like a bandanna, and at a motion from him, Monty quickly followed suit. They struggled against the wind to the door of the office. When they clambered in, the small crowd of Extension agents and ranchers looked around in alarm at the masked invaders. Wes yanked his bandanna down, and Monty rapidly followed suit. As they swatted dust off themselves, Wes said to those assembled: "The agriculture of Montana, gentlemen--we had better hope it's not blowing by for good, out there."'

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

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

"Calling cows is one thing. Putting on a bib and tucker and squalling out 'Doo Dah' is another."

"For Lord's sake, man, you had him sing for the Archbishop."

"Nnhnn. That was here. Under our own roof."

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

"Next thing to it. Monty still wouldn't have a pot to 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, once."

"I told you once in this lifetime 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. There were times when he wondered whether Wes was glad to have been cut out of the governor's race. Not glad, exactly, but relieved. Wendell still couldn't tell. Wes was too complicated for him. "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 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 significant 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 smiled. 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--"*con*scription is more like it"--at Carnegie Hall with Merrinell's circle. When this ran out they found good things to say about the day's weather, the enthusiastic sun holding the wind at bay, and to look at, they 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 little park that gave an opening of view there near the top of a foothills ridge, where the mile-long rimrock of Roman Reef towered above 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 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 curiosity got the better of Wes.

"All right, I give. What's a sin-eater?"

"If you were lucky enough to be a *Low*lander 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." 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--tight as a tick with Ninian Duff."*

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

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

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

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

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

Her uncanny mimickry of her father sent Wes's blood a bit chill. Susan sobered out of her role, but her lips twitched at the complicated remembrance. "The 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 stared across the carpet-width of tarp at her.

Tell her, it 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-- "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 takes a 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. Can'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. 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 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. *If this's all she wrote, then that's how it has to be.* Telling her lifted the teetertotter off him, the back-and-forth in him 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?"

"Same year as all the flu." White sheets, 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 to the terror of three weeks in a hospital with influenza corpses being wheeled past almost hourly.

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 gonna say, "Oh, by the way, I'm a one-lunger'? 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. Why had he even bothered to come back over here? 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 general 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 fix." 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's not 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."

Breed Butte loomed in front of him. He gasped.

She rode along behind him, leading his horse. "A little farther if you can stand it."

He had the gait of

They stopped at the brow of the butte. While Monty tried to take in breath, Susan took in the view...Tufts of wool were caught in the barbwire fence...

"More running," she prescribed, "we have to get your breath up.

"Why didn't you tell me I'm dealing with damaged goods?"

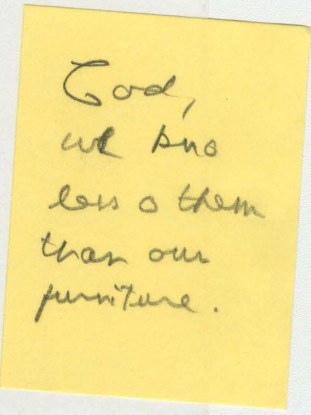
Wes's face showed no comprehension.

"His goring?"

"His what? When?"

"He said it was during the--1918."

"Susan, I was overseas. All I ever heard from Wendell about ranch doings were..."



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 faith 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?"

"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 now as if I had produced a rabbit from a hat. By now Dolph was out in the yard like a cloud without rain, both horses saddled and waiting, but I didn't care. I took down half a dozen, as fast as I could write while Monty chanted or half-sang them, before I could stand it no longer: "How did you come by these songs, exactly?"

He looked as discomfited as if I had asked him to recite the answer in Sanskrit. "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:

"Momma and the Holy Rollers."

Gospel

1892

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

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

Sister Satterlie, usually the first to quiver with the posession 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 little assembly, Jones as their lay preacher duly loved 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,

Heaven, strong roof of my soul!"

Silver nails of H,

Diamain nails of H

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," Jones mulled, "yet it doesn't, too. Am I right, brethren?" The congregation murmured affirmation. He 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 'can see'--"

"We call it that to this day," Jones could not help but put in. "'Can see' to 'can'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 can'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."

Forks of the Creek

1924

"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 late spring evening 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."