

*Prairie Nocturne leftovers:*

Watching to see how she was taking this, he immediately upped the ante: 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.'

*A story wants to be told a certain way, or it is merely the alphabet badly recited*, the king's remembrancer told the king who had no patience, in the book of stories that they closed each week with at the one-room school on the South Fork of English Creek.

*"It is like perpetually neighboring with Jonah's whale,"* Ninian Duff had been known to say.

A number of times they had served as camouflage for Wes, in the audience with him when she sang.

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

"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 lightnined out of nowhere to her. That time in their growing years when everyone thought they were intended for one another and Davey Erskine had

accordingly asked her to a dance at the Noon Creek school, the next valley over. As he led the way through the dark from the hitchrack to the tuned-up schoolhouse he kept bashfully muttering, "commoner." Commoner than what? she wondered. She came to realize when they reached the lighted doorway that Davey had been doing his unsuccessful best to pilot her with warnings of 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."

everybody and their distant cousins

*"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.

then to the sheep. The herder I have to resort to these days, I never know if he might have starved to death in his bed."

*Would that I were from the Rio Grande instead of the North Fork, Susan: after all, 'Thermopylae had its messenger of defeat, the Alamo had none/Because Texans are too bowlegged to run'*

*I can just hear Wes: 'hare out of place.'*

Wes had wondered that himself. Many times.

*"Words to that effect, yes. They still go."*

He used the prybar gently, gently, to start the hinges from the frame, then was able to get the clawhammer working on the nails. And the Major, what was he trying to work?

Open to the elements now.

As alone as she had ever been, which was saying a lot,

Guess what, it hadn't.

given what he had been dealt by life,

He had taken quite a risk for that woman--hell's bells, had risked the precious stripes on his arm--that time in Havre in the Montana Concert Hall, so-called. It had been the kind of night when the Tenth was sassing back to the Irishmmen in the infantry on their side of the hall, claiming that they too had started out white before they were baked in Arizona for twenty years. Then in came Lieutenant Pershing on inspection duty. Mose waltzed Angeline right up to the painted line that divided the white and colored sections of that dancehall-and-drink-all establishment. Pershing had been right there, eyeing around the place. "Sir, I'd like for you to meet this woman of mine." Stiff looker that he was, Pershing stepped on across the line to say hello to Angeline and make some conversation,

exactly the kind of behavior that got him the nickname "Black Jack" from those Irish infantrymen across there.

*I hear yankee,* Mose thought with relief

Mose hesitated. He reported it to Pershing, he had to do that much.

Veteran at keeping an eye on the country around him, Mose swiveled to look back toward the scanty town tucked away behind the line of cottonwoods along English Creek. Gros Ventre or for that matter any of the other map specks in here along the big Rockies didn't amount to more than a wide spot in the road, but the whole of Troop D had broken out in grins at the drifts of cottonwood fluff halfway up their horse's hooves and more of it sifting down on the little town as they and the Indians clattered through. Cottonwood snow on a summer day; not much for a place to crow about, but Mose had seen plenty of worse in his soldiering. Fort Assinniboine, where the Tenth Cavalry had been stationed since pulling in from Arizona however many years back in a white-out blizzard that was *not* cottonwood, sat on the bald prairie, the only canopy over it unreachable heaven. The sergeant rested his gaze now on the woods along the creek, vein of green on the land turned tan by the sun this time of year. He couldn't swear to it, but he thought he detected motion in the underbrush upstream. Damned if he was going to tattle to the lieutenant, though, and be sent back to beat the bushes for stray Indians. *By the book, the man always wants, that's as much as I'll do.*

You never knew if an officer would even look at you sideways after he had no need of you. Black Jack, though, had come through. Didn't say much, that day last week, but stepped right back in to officers' quarters and wrote out the paper while Mose stood on the porch waiting with his still respectable campaign hat

swatting nervously against the leg of his best civilian pants. *To whom it may concern: the bearer of this, Mose Rathbun, served honorably under my command in the Tenth Cavalry. I would judge him worthy of employ. John J. Pershing, Lieutenant, Troop D, Tenth Cavalry, Fort Assiniboine, Montana Territory.*

Handed it over, looked at Mose man-to-man and said, "Good hunting, Rathbun." It still dazzled Mose: whether it was West Point slant to the ink or what, Black Jack's affidavit for him had worked its magic.

Let the Crees think what they think.

He had been a platoon sergeant piling into the Comanches on the Rio Grande before John J. Pershing was even a plebe at West Point. Something like that allowed an officer-- even one who otherwise believed going by the book--to turn an eye from the fact that Rathbun was more than half a scalawag around the fort, known to be too ready with his fists and doubtless responsible for the occasional empty brandy bottles in the surgeon's office and other minor sharp dealings. Pershing already had a sense of how much a little strategic overlooking could help loft a military career, and he was content to wink away that side of Sergeant Rathbun as long as the man did his job on horseback.

You never really knew about officers, but this hardhided one seemed to give a man room to operate, and that was all Mose ever asked. Given half a chance, he could come out clean when he mustered into civilian life, then have a shot at some civvie job around the fort or the Indian Reservation right next to it. Maybe a wage and a little something else to boot, if he played it sharp. There was usually side money to be made in the vicinity of a Reservation, by a man who knew what he was doing.

even though this was the time he would be hanging up his cavalry boots for good,

But instead his precious stripes were up there at the top his sleeve, giving him the authority he'd been able to put to good use at a posting like Fort Assinniboine. The place had caused his heart to sink at first, big sprawl of a thing out there on the bald prairie, the only canopy over it unreachable heaven, but he had made himself fit the post and it him. By now he'd even grown used to something he had never expected to take advantage of in a gypsy outfit like the cavalry, married man's quarters. Old bull of the barracks that he was all those years, his surprise had been as great as anybody's when Angeline got him to tie the knot. *For better and for worse*: the marriage vow had that about right. Angeline and her churchy ways had put a crimp in some of his doings, there was no getting around that. But it made for some good sessions of being forgiven under the quilts. Mose smiled to himself. There was the boy, now, too. Little stinker, running around half the fort, everybody spoiling the daylights out of him. It sobered a man a little, Monty and Angel waiting for him back at the fort and him turning in his stripes at the end of this month.

broke in on his speculation

Gives me time to start my boys on rounding up some steers for you," Williamson told the provisioner, simultaneously nodding a goodbye in Mose's direction.

"You get stripes like these on yourself someday, you'll savvy better.

The lieutenant did not particularly mind that Rathbun was more than half a scalawag. the strapping sergeant who was known to be too ready with his fists; the occasional empty brandy bottles in the surgeon's office... Not the usual career move, commanding Negro troops. But Pershing had not fought this assignment, he had a hunch that even this dab of service on the Indian frontier would stand an

officer in good stead. The Tenth Cavalry joked that they were white before they started baking us in Arizona.

His thoughts moved off east to the fort, and Angeline. He never would have believed it when he and the rest of the Tenth Cavalry pulled in there in a white-out blizzard four years back, but Fort Assiniboine had been the making of him. Big new fort,

And pretty quickly that detail when some of the woodhawks cutting in the Missouri bottomland for the steamboats were spooked by Indians and by damn, there she was, laundress on that steamboat. He was aboard that boat and sweet-talking her by nightfall. He had been as surprised as anyone when he married her.

“Bovard, get this man buried, up on that sidehill.” Mose Rathbun... “Pretty place for it, anyhow.”

To see the strapping sergeant who was known to be too ready with his fists sweep by with her in his arms must have registered with Black Jack...

C Troop had drawn the candy end of this assignment, back there lackadaisically strung out around the Indians who were herding the horses. The Crees had not raised a hand when their coulee shacks were burned and their pitiful possessions were piled into wagons, but they were plenty touchy about their herd of ponies. Enlisted men and officers alike, the Tenth Cavalry could savvy that. Mose would not have been surprised to learn spiffy young Lieutenant Pershing had volunteered D Troop for the harder duty up front here; it would look good in reports.

Take his hat off to any white man who would

Mose Rathbun had seen them come and seen them go, and... The sergeant would take a hard-shell commanding officer over a lilywhite any day, though.

Driving Indians through tree snow in August, it did beat all.

Blue bangles around the ragtag procession

If you are hard when those around you are soft, you'll make it.

D Troop pushed the Crees through the town of Gros Ventre. "Scanty place." Ambition poked out all over the lieutenant.

Mose kept his mouth closed.

"Don't preen yet," she warned him.

"If I was to go to town, that'd be fine."

"That's probably wise," Susan thought out loud. "Helena..."

"Miss Susan. By 'go to town,' I mean New York."

"Major? Do you think we could go riding? They wouldn't ever let me, by myself."

"Not unless you fetch me a new knee."

"I meant, maybe Miss Susan and me? If I put on enough of a monkey suit...I could borrow some rig from Yerby. People here don't know how we do things in Montana, they'd maybe think I was her--what's that the French have?"

"Equerry," Wes rolled the word. "The English Creek equerry. I like that."

"Do I have any say in this?"

...

They cantered along 00 early the next morning. Susan was astride in a divided skirt, Monty staying at her elbow. He wore Yerby's best bowler hat and a ruffled vest that had once graced Wes at a state dinner.

...

"Ah, Franz Lithp," the 00 lisped.

“Miss Duff, you are in-cor-ridge-able.”

Monty had closed his eyes.

“Are you doing all right?”

“Just listening.”

...

“Rathbun, are you asking for surefire death? The last time I looked, that woman was white, white, white.”

“She’s--I’m showing her Strivers’ Row.”

“Right. You be busy *showing* her and some ofay going to come along and blast your ass for you.”

“Out--” Monty gestured west “--it’s different.”

“How different’s ‘different’? Montan-i-o or anywhere, you’re still of the colored persuasion and she’s Miss Pond Cream.”

“She’s my teacher. Wasn’t for her, the most I could look forward to would be changing sparkplugs every three months.”

“You got to watch your step. You’d be better off shoveling coal to him than her.”

...

Wes had never had the experience of thinking of himself as one of those people that trouble follows around. Yet now it was beginning to seem so.

“I never meant for it to turn out this way.”

“Are you so sure?”

Wes was at work, speaking into the phone.

“Major, talk to you a minute, can I?”

“Tomorrow night on your nerves? That’s to be expected.”

"It's not that. Just wanted you to know--I need to go out for a little while."

*Oh God, why can't he steer clear of that, for once.* Wes kept command of his face, but his voice sharpened. "Clore Street maybe isn't the best place to be, tonight."

Wes flipped a hand over helplessly.

"That's just the way it is."

"Of course."

Monty peered out the curtain.

"Looking for somebody, is all." The dark faces were streaks in the crowd, a row here, a row there. Leticia was stage left.

Monty held the note. The chandelier above the crowd began to sway.

"Monty, you can't let this get you down." She searched for consolation. A bit of temperament in a singer was no bad thing. A bit. "Caruso was in San Francisco in that earthquake, and he went on to--"

"I'm no kind of a Ca--"

"Worse than this is going to happen you." She fixed her eyes on him. "Depend on it."

"What do you mean--what kind of worse? More than an earthquake, worse?!"

Old Warren and his father had come into the Two Medicine country on the fading hoofprints of the buffalo and swamped the prairie with cattle; from the Double W in the next valley over from the Duff homestead to their Deuce W ranch in the Highwood Mountains on the eastmost horizon,

Comets attend the death of kings. Naturally so, the assembled delegates to the Montana Women's Suffrage convention would have had you know; the sentries of heaven no doubt want to view the abruptly mortal rulers in their filigreed caskets as much as any of us. In 1910 when Halley's fireball licked across heaven while the portly royal remains of Edward VII lay in state below in London, the young schoolteacher Susan Duff was already immersing in the everlasting scrimmage between the unders and the overs.

As these things forever are, Susan's particular journey to marching in the streets was an accumulation.

Wasn't it better to give the singing a try now than to pine over it later?  
 Besides, the prevailing wind was with him,  
 but what if.... There would be more to it than he could imagine, he always had to figure on that.

How dare they.

He was doing his best to keep busy, keep his mind off tomorrow.  
 Tomorrow he had to sing for her in earnest. Whatever was beyond earnest.

Through here Lewis and Clark had come exploring, twenty-six soldiers under their command and Clark's slave, York. Wes had checked his leather-bound Thwaites edition of their journals, and the 1805 entry could have been written this very day: *This extraordinary range of rocks we called the Gates of the Rocky mountains....there is not a spot, except one of a few yards, in which a man could stand between the water and the towering perpendicular of the mountain. The convulsion of the passage must have been terrible, since at its outlet are vast*

*columns of rock, torn from the mountain, which are strewn on both sides of the river--the trophies, as it were, of a victory.* The journal passage stirred him, but the thought sat odd: the victory of nature over nature? He let that paradox go for another: York, Angeline Rathbun, Monty, the colored troops who had marched past his own into the bloodbath at St. Mihiel, the burden of their lives lofting into this song.

With the cottonwoods that rose old and tall along English Creek, the streetside forestation produced almost a roof over the town. The businesses along Main Street looked considerably better than they otherwise would have, somehow seemed to be trying not to disgrace the trees. The neighborhoods, with all that green over them as shelter from the sun and as a breeze-catcher whenever any air was moving, were wonderful for walking.

Besides the street columns of cottonwoods, a colossal old one with a trunk as big around as the wheel of a hay rake stood in the yard beside the front gate.

..., their gravestones matched humps of marble against the broad and lofty lines of the valley.

"It'll be a humdinger if we can get it all," OO predicted. That is, if the rain didn't resume and keep the hay too wet to stack, or if hail or a windstorm didn't knock it flat.

A determined hum of "*Work, for the Night Is Coming*" to dismiss that.

He looked on out at the passing cliffs without really seeing them.

(Right. You don't even know how to open a bank account, he reminded himself. Although from what he heard, banks were the worst place to have your money.)

Let the dream scamper and he had a car of his own.

Susan rushed through the obvious as they lapped up the sight of each other.

indicated her scrub bucket with a booted foot

(itals: Angus telling Susan as schoolgirl to stand up to Daniel Rozier.

*Susan, you have brains by the bushel.*)

He was sure Ninian Duff went down to his grave still arguing with the Lord. The flood of death

Now as then, especially sharp translation was required.

"I never thought I'd say so, but I miss the din of Ninian."

"I'm no substitute

But he still had a glint to him, a keenness, the stoppings of homestead life having. Sheepman, teacher, Nethermuir greenling

If her father had been permanently mad at the Williamson clan, Angus McCaskill was not far behind in his approbation.

"Are you trying to make an old gaffer bawl, Susan? You're doing all too good a job of it."

She gave him a fond look, then her voice flexed into mischievous dramatic recital: ““

Not one to bother with irony, Susan said nothing about..., here where the loins of the country had dried up.

The first-footing at the turn of the century. A tall unspeaking man

“That’s one reason, all right, *the* reason we’ll be doing it here. Out of view.”

True, Montgomery Rathbun had something wanting to get out in his voice. But he had no pattern to guide him, no experience of...; he couldn’t have, cut off by his color as he was.

*Got to be a little more careful about getting my wish.*

and the first belated symptom of attraction, alarming them both,  
It amounted to absorbing the silence

The notoriously rowdy weather in here under the mountains was lulling her, she thought to herself, not for the first time in Scotch heaven history. Take it while you can. The clear air was a shellac on the scenery...

The muss of homestead buildings was as natural as sweat on a heatband. She did not mind. Scotch Heaven was never for the fastidious.

She knew the chapters of her life did not sit well together. The homestead, the one-room school--she had come from the equivalent of a birdnest. Then teachers' college, where she worked the curriculum to death...

The temples of music were back there, and in Europe. She had gone to Madame OO, in a room smothered in velvet. In six months she learned two things: how teaching should not be done, and that she had a silver voice in a universe where the currency was molten gold. You could make up for lack of upper register with stage bearing or phrasing. But you couldn't substitute anything for purity of voice.

And here was Monty Rathbun, set on writing himself anew...

Without even considering, she had brought the family Bible. It seemed more at home here than she did.

(Bible flyleaf: birth & death dates; when to America?)

The silence. Eloquent of the space...

had a stare that put you in your place; *bossy* wasn't quite right, but it came pretty close

Here had begun the life inside her head. The long dreaming, the floated existence which passed by on the tide of hours...She had been born in the East Neuk of Fife, and was three at the time of the America ship.

He lifted his hands in surrender.

Pay for what you take, in life.

The mountains reared to the west, a wall at the end of the high plains stretching eastward to nobody knew where. They became like a wall to the Duffs, too--like the wall of a room, a familiar solidness and design. No matter where you were in the coulee maze of the North Fork valley, scramble high enough and the mountain wall would be there, gray-blue, tilted and pillaring.

...arched like stone rainbows, and the pot of treasure at their end mostly gravel. Montana's seasons declared themselves. They regulated life. (Susan's father did not like to be regulated by much else.) A giant winter--1886, 1919--would send the livestock industry to its knees. Farming wobbled with every dry summer.

*The long dogs of the lords/That drag down deer:* the poetry of Burns was a prominent part of her education, and such lines were singing in her head more and more often as she grew up into the world beyond the South Fork school.

She shook her head at the wonder of what was around her.

his throat made a musical excursion now, its long low exploratory hum

the household out for an innocent evening of musical culture,

Keyed up as she was, she bounced on the corral plank and...

Speculation of more than one kind in his voice.

there does not seem much point in further scandal.

You might think a woman of her time, unmarried by choice, no mothering asked of her, without family responsibility since the death of her parents, found little to do with her evenings. Susan would have set you straight all the way to the moons of your toenails.

As to outside interests, she no longer would have called herself a joiner, but she kept up with organizations that were like-minded in their politics. And she still was secretary of the Montana chapter of the Flanders Field Remembrance Alliance.

Confronted with him after all this time, she was not certain how much her expression had changed, but could vouch that her breathing definitely had.

He had always been a great noticer, there was that about him.

He had always been good at shouldering blame, there was that about him.

The god of politics could not have whittled a better candidate than Wes, but made him the youngest Williamson. The one who had to be that grasping clan's soldier as well as its businessman--its breveted major in the AEF as well as its captain of enterprise. *Williamson cattle can knit socks with their horns*, her homesteader father maintained, *every creature on the Double W is that clever and that crooked*. Except Wes. The mischief life dealt him was the same hand as hers: that troublesome sense of justice.

Who rose and rose, in the politics of Montana and the Bull Moose Republicans, until a night in 1920 when a

“Wes, really--this makes me ache, and I’m not going to ache for you any more. Have your say and take yourself home, pretty please.”

Her own mind was a maddening merry-go-round, circling from her absolute conviction that she was on this jaunt sheerly to do her duty to music and yet a bit scandalized with herself at the lavish thrill of this.

To the Duffs, father and daughter, this heavy shoving pattern of livestock summed up the Williamsons. Their holdings boxed in a hundred miles of grassland, and on every inch that was their and some that wasn’t, they swamped the prairie with cattle.

The Major made him sing while they drove, the next couple of times back and forth between the ranch and Helena. Then came the night they pulled up outside the state capitol, and off the Major went to Highland Street.

All the fury that she had told herself a thousand times she had put away for good surged in her.

His eyebrows were black and thick; the one picture he had of his father, in his cavalry cap, there were those same emphatic eyebrows.

when she was reminding him that his eyes were bigger than his welcome here

the Williamson resemblance as unmistakable as a phase of the moon  
It can't be wasted, that would be a crime against music. It has to fit on stage  
somewhere.

"It didn't even take that, I realize."

"I did not set out to be the flavor on every gossip's tongue in Montana,  
Wes. You know so."

"Nor I," he said as if their affair was still a surprise to him.

as if she had sprinkled kafoozalum dust on him and petrified him.

"My railroad. The price of beef. And you're always there, just out of  
reach."

"When I was...in reach

The time would soon enough come, beyond that day at the stockyards,  
when Wes had to be the Williamson clan's soldier as well as its businessman--its  
brevetted major in the AEF as well as its captain of enterprise. His half-brother  
Whit, with a cattle empire to run, had it easier. All Susan was seeing that day,  
really, were the Williamsons going about their business of owning everything they  
could get their hands on.

"And my good name, what's left of it? You're certain you're doing it a  
favor by walking in here in the middle of the night."

He knew he was going to have to go on missing most of that.

more and more often as she grew up into the world beyond the South Fork school.

had the good grace to appear uncomfortable with that name in this room

*“Shut-the-hell-up,”* Dolph hissed.

she said, as if belief was in short supply with her

Wouldn't you know, this was the last rider in this go-round. Then he could go behind the chutes and hoist a Kessler from the tub of ice. A single beer was just about right, around now: a little liquid courage but not enough to swack you up. This was the dozenth rodeo, the Williamson string of bucking stock. Whit Williamson liked to prowl around the chutes, getting a kick out of being a rodeo producer.

“Good, then, if it's the ‘shining mountains.’ I was afraid the spring breeze was getting you down.”

“Wes, I have undergone a good deal more Montana weather than you have.”

, that bottomless pool of candor

“I'm pretty sure I'm about to find out.”

Riding back to the Double W that day, the pair of men were lost in their thoughts.

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

Long had these half a dozen couples lived by weekly visitation of the Holy Spirit, starting

these Sundays, but they kept to their strenuous religion here in the Montana foothills. Third- and fourth-generation sawyers, Jones and the other men were proud to call themselves timber beasts. The passel of them had packed up and come west together as tie-cutters for the Great Northern railroad some years since, and now were whacking fenceposts for the right-of-way.

“I don’t mean to hold you back from that.”

Now it was Monty’s turn to look Angus over.

the way most things are

this had been one hell of a wearing day without

“She’s a little rough on a person, sometimes.”

“Making you put some sweat into the work, in other words.”

“Mister, she may think so, but that doesn’t make it any easier to put up with.”

“I hope not, or the world would be cluttered with singers.”

“What in God’s name do all of you want from me?”

“I don’t want to see Susan disappointed. If I’m anywhere near right, this might be around the time when the going gets tough.”

“This valley rang with her.” Angus looked off to Breed Butte, where Susan sang at his wedding.

“There’s still something in the way of that.”

What is it they say--’Free advice is worth the price.’”

They couldn’t ever savvy it, her and the Major. Helena was town, with a capital T.

Her dress swishing,

With the toe of her shoe she nudged his feet out of their pigeon-toed stance.

He stood in a kind of shambles, and Susan began the long mental list of items to be worked on.

Adair said nothing during this teacherly exchange.

“Neighbors can do it. Miss Susan can get somebody every time, I bet you anything. Besides, it’d give me kind of an audience to get used to.”

Yesterday with her had been his limit, just about.

What was it she had said the other day when he grew frustrated over not hitting a certain note?

grin was thin enough to pass through a soup strainer.

but for the life of him Monty couldn't figure out how he was going to benefit from that.

He did and he didn't.

Was kept his expression neutral, waiting.

But they hadn't taken the blood and breath out of him.

he saw the depot agent swoop the little step into place under the doorway of the private coach and

If he did say so himself, the god of politics could not have whittled a better candidate. He could carry the prairie counties with a flick of his dove-gray Stetson. His Catholicism and his legislative battles with the Anaconda Company and his stand against the Klan would make him the darling of the voting miners in Butte. The trump card of all, his fame from the war as the major who would not yield Gesnes to the Boche. the easiest campaign he'd ever faced.

In the turn of a hand, a governorship was lost. But they hadn't taken the faith out of him, nor the swath of earth owned by Williamsons.

Four years ago he had been on top, the keys to the highest office in Helena waiting there as a reward once the lopsided contest in the primary was mercifully over and the feeble incumbent had been dealt with in the general election.

It had long been his habit to try to stand back in his mind and see both sides of his life. The East was a sparring match. As a Catholic interloper at Harvard, as an actual holder of livestock amid the commodities traders, as a National Guard mustang among the West Pointers, he had learned to hit back fast, draw blood and let them think it over. The second time around, back here, they were more careful of him..

Wes was not above shaping a line ahead of time.

In his private coach, Wes took in the prairie prospect. Bald-faced cattle on the dun hills, the WW brand seared on their left hips. He frowned at the number of cows and calves in this section, irrespective of the grass drying away in front of a person's eyes. The train steadied as it reached the bluff on the far side of the trestle TM&T: "The Empty," he knew people called it. He didn't mind. He owned this twenty-mile shortline so that the Anaconda Copper Mining Company could not. The coal in these prairie hills wasn't much, but it didn't take much to attract the Company. Whit definitely took after their father, who had come into the Two Medicine country on the fading hoofprints of the buffalo and swamped the prairie with cattle. The problem was, He had come to believe there was a limit to how much land a man could swallow without turning himself into an island. He always put aside his business papers as soon as his coach was shunted off the mainline at the town of Conrad. From there to the distant skyline of the Rockies

He went to the front of the car. On the wall the slots with his railroad passes, courtesy of his fellow owners. Elegantly printed. The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe; the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul; the Soo Line. John Ringling's White Sulphur Springs & Yellowstone Park. In the rack a sheaf of passes for this line of his own

Dominion...

Wes had studied war. The Spanish-American cause had interrupted him at Harvard, or rather, he used it as a chance to interrupt life on the Gold Coast and test himself.

He himself had rapacity schooled out of him. Pounds-on-the-hoof were what counted, rather than how many bony specimens could be crammed onto the range.

Ninian Duff. Dead but still formidable.

as if it was all the encouragement in the world.

Wes tried to recall anything he knew about Swedish history.

*No more so than a tune from a violin is a set of strings that once inhabited the inside of a cat.*

"Then let's try this. As if you were taking snuff."

"I don't know, Miss Susan--I've chewed plug in my time, but that snuff always did make me sneeze."

“*Imagine* you are taking snuff, and also imagine you are *not* going to sneeze, all right?” There were times when she couldn’t tell if Monty was playing cowhand or losing the line of thought. “Here, watch me. Put the tip of your tongue against the back of your teeth. No, lihke kthis. See how mine touched the teeth and my mouth widened? Make yours do that and then sniff the snuff.”

Or was the moving hand that of Wes. It was not at all clear to her yet, how far Monty’s urges reached and how far they were being pushed by Wes’s own. This stint of lessons would find that out.

With critical eye and held breath, she came back to the sheets of paper there in the wash of light and read them over. There was movement of sound and aspiration on the page, and one definition of that was music.

This was an opening bid if there ever was one.

To look at, Adair was... Those eyepits with their freckle markers under each. Adair was in there somewhere. observed in her durable Nethermuir accent, like the nap of very old and odd-colored velvet, that had not changed

That unique sheen of her talk,

Adair stirred. What Adair misses are the children.

“There’s not one child from the North Fork at Angus’s school any more. ‘The loins of the country are drying up,’ he says. You know how he is.”

Susan flushed with the knowledge that she did know, perhaps better than this woman Angus McCaskill had been married to for thirty years. Married on the

bounce. Susan herself had sung at that wedding, at the Barclay place--Adair's people--on Breed Butte, and even to a knockkneed schoolgirl it had been obvious how Angus's eyes went past his bride of duty to Anna Ramsay.

How, behind any one person, the others lingered. The past calved them, as surely as icebergs emanated from the glaciers of Greenland that she and Wes had seen on their illicit voyage. Some certain skein of event changed what would come, what would be fixed into memory. The Anguses, the Adairs, of the flivver trip.

*Carrying it around...Bring the thing with me from New York one of these times. Say to her, "Here. This is the tangle our lives are. Undo it if you can."*

"Ride in with us, if you'd care to."

"Thank you, but no. I have another pupil now, you know."

Look, deer. I've never gotten over all the venison I grew up on."

"This is where we brought Roosevelt after elk, that time."

"You."

"What? We did, that's all." Over from his Dakota ranching venture for a meeting of the Montana Cattleman's Association--the killing blizzards of '86 were yet to come, cattle empires knew no boundaries on the northern plains--the man who would be famously called Teddy Pair of boys watching from the upstairs bedroom window as Roosevelt gave a half-skip to get into step with their father as they strode across the yard of the Double W. Then the hunting entourage, the boys allowed along. Wes gave his chenin blanc a swirl and Whit and I were still cubs.

*The long dogs of the lords/That drag down stags:*

"I imagine."

at the barbed-wire gate into the national forest, he got off and on the wagon with helping hand from Susan.

"You haven't told me the occasion is."

"Second childhood. Mine, I mean. You're holding up surprisingly well."

"Lay it on," she said with a chuckle.

By all signs there was no hope of putting him at ease, so Susan put him to work.

"Now then. We'll start easy."

"I'm for that."

As if anything that truly counted had a given time to it.

This, with Monty--it isn't simply to...involve the two of us again, is it? Tell me if it is."

He wanted to reach for her. Which had not worked for the past four years, had it. "I wouldn't say so."

Susan could be seen weighing his words. The weak places in this elaborate man were where she had loved him. She told herself again once was enough.

That was another story, Wes reflected. Ninian's land, when he had elbowed his way past the Double W into that corner of the Two Medicine country and drew in other Scotch families as if baptizing them in the religion of

homesteading. That had come to its own kind of whirlwind, of war and flu.  
Susan's land now, and the McCaskills'.

Same result: the notes did not hold.

*Why must I wander...*

*This ol' pig-iron world."*

*"Spent many a night*

*Counting out stars...*

*Silver nails...*

*Where Heaven got hammered up.*

The words to it were:

*Owing no allegiance, we are born free,*

*To God and Old Glory we bend our knee,*

*Sublime lineage written in history stands,*

*Weird, mysterious Ku Klux Klan.*

But it will take work."

"Is that all?"

He stopped, seeing the resolve in her face.

He watched as she went in search of paper, and was surprised to see her come back with sheets lined for music. Was she always ready for whatever came along? She took down the words he had just sung and a couple of other recitations before curiosity got the best of her.

she could not wait to pounce

I folded my arms.

he prodded, lightly enough.

He knew what she meant, damn it. It galled him, the deadweight sitting on a song he wanted to come out of him

I don't quite know what to make of this, but somehow we got off onto family today. It was mainly Monty's instigation, and I suppose it threw me for a loop that he is as curious about my family stock as I at times am about his.

We had reached the day's stage of tea and honey--I administer it

"Miss Susan, excuse my asking, but you're on your own, are you? Far as family goes, I mean?"

"A raft of shirt-tail relatives over in the Missouri bottoms, but I've never even laid eyes on them. Why?"

He was slow to answer. But then it all came:

"This singing, it seems to be solo in more ways than one. More we're at this, the more I feel kind of--singled out. Wondered if you ever got a little spooked that way."

I did not prate to him that solitude is the school of genius, quote to him "Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife," nor any of that.

They weren't done yet, this was only halfway.

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

Spring was the disappointing time. Other seasons would let you down in their own way: summer might be too rainy for good haying, autumn too brief or too cold, winter might be one blizzard after another. But spring had its special disappointments. With the cold clog of winter supposedly broken, you looked forward to warm weather and dry earth. Instead, there might be weeks of mud, every step outdoors taken in overshoes heavy with mud. Spring weather would be just warm enough to make you shed a winter coat, just cool enough to chill you into taking a cold. And a spring without rain or a late, wet snow meant the grass and hay would not be good when summer ever came. The melting snow...slush... The deep banks up the coulees could be watched shrinking, crusting into dirty iciness before finally vanishing.

“Monty? Are you a praying man?”

“Some.” He looked cautiously over his shoulder to the backseat.

“It’s not in secret. We’re simply being...discreet.”

These people had big educations and experience of the world. Why were they bothering with the likes of him?

Bailey glanced up from what he was writing, then half-rose in apprehension as he recognized his visitor. Wes gestured him back down. “As you know, I’ve had a taste of how well you do your work. I want you to insert someone into the Klan.”

“Don’t preen yet,” she warned him.

Wes was at work, speaking into the phone.

Trained for this, he was going to hate to let it go.

“Pour you a spot, can I?”

“A wee one,” Angus said, “and not so wee at that.” He looked atrociously tired, Wes saw.

“This with Monty is the only thing your clan has ever done that I can stomach, and look how it’s bollixed everyone concerned. It makes a person think.”

“You want me to say I’m getting more than I bargained for?”

Hawk weather, that had been, another oversize Two Medicine summer, when he had ridden this country up, down, and sideways in search of homestead land for himself and Rob. And found here, this valley, tenanted at the time by Ninian and gentle Donald Erskine.

He was supposedly a figure of learning. What were you left with? You teach generations of children, instill in them every facet of life you can think of, show them what stories are made of, drill the dancesteps of the language into them until they helplessly recite in their sleep, and even so, against all expectations of civilized outcome, people ride off the face of the earth without a trace.

Perhaps it wasn’t even a crime. Or perhaps it amounted to crime upon crime, one canceling the other out? He could not know without having been there. Yet he could see, in outline. what must have happened.

But the investigatory nature of Samuel had not carried the day, had it.

It put him in mind of the time the youngest of the Peterson girls had happily brought her kaleidoscope to school to show it off, and when he popped in for a drink from the waterbucket from supervising recess, there sat Samuel Duff

profoundly taking it apart. "*Jesus dancing Christ, lad!*" All teacherly restraint had flown from him as he descended on the intent boy. "*Ingrid Peterson's whopping brothers will pound the both of us to paste!*" Curiosity nowhere near slaked, Samuel plucked out another shard of color and held it up to the light where it threw a ribbon of rainbow onto the wall. "*But I'll put it back together, Mr. McCaskill, and then we'll know how it works.*" Which was the case. The colors of this, a ray here, a startling tint there, Angus had turned over and over, and he lacked Samuel Duff's confident calm now that he believed he saw their pattern.

The war had obliterated Samuel, and hung rank and honors on Wesley Williamson.

What in the name of Confuse-Us was Wesley Williamson about, in orchestrating all this? He had been cracking his brain at that. It took him back almost to the start, 1890 when he and Rob Barclay had lit in here like the farthest-blown thistledown from Scotland. Hawk weather, that had been, another oversize Two Medicine summer, when he had ridden this country up, down, and sideways in search of homestead land for himself and Rob. And found here, this valley, tenanted at the time by Ninian and gentle Donald Erskine.

But pleading teacherly ignorance took you surprisingly far in this world. An ever so casual talk with Toussaint, circling in and in...The Double W sat like a saddle on the middle of the Two Medicine country. Toussaint it was who knew the whys and wherefores of the northern end, the Reservation side. A shenanigan there, a consequence somewhere else. But he did not know the echo of every syllable in the annals of Scotch Heaven, as Angus did. He was still unsettled at how close to home this hit. Six months earlier in its happening, and he would have been in on it.

He could have worked with his shirt off, if he didn't have skin that could not take the touch of the sun. Sweat rolled off him. *The Lord's lubricant*, Ninian Duff would have told him ten times out of nine, in these circumstances.

All right, then, if the job took main strength and ignorance, that's what he would give it. Telling himself to simmer down, he attacked the first posthole., and directly applied the crowbar. His lean body, bowing a bit at the shoulders now, drew back with the lift of the crowbar and angled *Whunk*.

Not so dry as the summer of '19, but right up there in 00 with 1915. He smiled wryly at himself, comparing seasons as if they were a cellar of cheeses. weather like the oldest cheesemaster on earth remembering spectacular reeks and chalk tastes that only a connoisseur could treasure.

Thirty-six years of this or something very much like it, though, that was the indubitable arithmetic. And of course, times four seasons a year. A dozen of dozens, that was a good many. Maybe he was entitled some connoisseuring of...old Thoreau, was it, inspector-general of snowstorms?

inerasable as a thunderhead

The road was thinnest from the McCaskill homestead to here, and as soon as it widened a bit she upped the Model T's speed a careful notch.

Her Viennese teacher, a fraud in every other way that counted, at least had been right about preparation: "*Before ve improvise, ve must rehearse.*"

She had unreservedly said back, "*They'll wear their hearts in their ears, I promise you.*"

His spirits were high as that moon,

Somehow she was quite sure it had to do with the Helena trip. he seemed a little dazzled with the songs...

The kitchen had not been abused beyond the upended table. She moved toward the door to the next room, equally sure there was no one in the house

No three words were ever more intense

She wondered how wakeful he was, here on this ranch where he, like Susan's father and others of the North Fork, had vowed never to set foot unless it was to kick a clod into the grave of the last Williamson.

The Williamsons, she fathomed all to well. Better than Angus ever seemed to. In one of the outlasting matches over the rangelands along the mountains, Angus had come home from a day of dogging the daylights out Double W cows and declared that in the circles of Hell that Dante had told us about, the Williamsons' was going to need to be custom-made.

From the very start, on that most distant day when she and Angus were wed, Adair had not known what to say when all at once a great unforgettable goose of a schoolgirl with the majestic neck she had not yet grown into and those sinewy Duff shoulders stood up tall and in the finest voice gave the one gift that, even then, Adair knew would last:

*Adair Barclay, she was there,  
Gathering a lad with red hair...  
Angus McCaskill, he was there,  
Paired with a lass named Adair...  
Feel love's music everywhere,  
Fill your heart, fill the air,  
Dancing at the rascal fair.*

Susan had never left their lives even after she was gone from the North Fork. In the scrapbook kept by Angus, of the subsequent weddings and other proud doings of his pupils, Susan had page upon page of performances and numerous mentions as a leading light in the crusade for the vote.

Tonight Susan had escaped a whipping or worse, and poor wishbone Monty was made to know he faced who-knew-what. Adair listened intently now as she heard one or the other of the Williamsons making the rounds of the guards they had set against the Klan clucks. She tensed now as Susan gave a bit of a dreamer's groan; she willed her to sleep on, gain rest while she could in the toss and turn of life.

All through the time she was absent from the North Fork, Susan lived on with them, Adair long since had come to accept.

Adair was as sure as anything that Angus bunking out there with poor wishbone Monty ; the Major and Whit Williamson simply made sure no harm had been done to their persons, then plunged back out to set more guards against any return of the Klan clucks--and so here

Not since she and her two sisters were spooned together on the feather tick back in Nethermuir had she shared a bedstead with someone of her own gender, and there was no more to commend it now than then.

It was astounding. In all the years of life on the North Fork, Adair had moored herself to whatever she could find to grasp. The decks of cards she wore the spots off of in her era of solitaire; crocheting, knitting, canning. Varick, when he at last was granted to them, the one child they could ever have. And Angus, always knowing he was her one chance and she was his second choice.

Grudging hospitality administered by Whit Williamson--the Major simply made sure no harm had been done to their persons, then plunged back out to set more guards against any return of the Klan clucks--and so here

These people had big educations and experience of the world. Why were they bothering with the likes of him?

They were a raccoon-eyed household in the morning, all of them haggard except for Susan and she was edgy enough to strike blue sparks.

her head gave a fierce indication toward the adjoining room

with inconsequential clouds in the way of the sun but no promise of rain

*Does she think I'm not trying to?*

I don't imagine you knew that."

*Ever, she says. How did that get into the picture.*

if you're going to be the singer you can be, you have to make yourself climb over them."

"Think they won't be waiting for me?"

"I wanted you to know that story. No one else does, not even--well, no one."

He had to be more certain of this than anything ever before.

"You're sure you want to keep on with it. With me."

"Shush again. I was never more sure of anything."

"How we supposed to do that? Where, even?"

scanned the office as if making up for lost time, aware that she was perhaps the first person from Scotch Heaven ever to be here,

Argument was the language she seemed to know best. Monty made himself give it all he had.

started to prowl in search of how this could be put into words

He'll be up here in a minute. I can be the one to put it to him, see where he wants to clear out to."

He tried a smile that didn't quite catch hold.  
swallowing a couple of times

How a person could hold up under constant heat, though: Adair lay there considering the person she had known but not known since

They dined...She wore the aqua green dress she had been saving for Paris, and was perturbed at herself. All that she had been through with the suffrage movement instructed her that she should not care a speck how she looked to a man, and now look at her.

"Noblesse oblige?"

That stung, and he made himself not show it. "We've a long way to go to be nobility. We're cattle hounds. Dollar chasers."

"Madame," the waiter called her, and a hint of a smile twitched on Wes when she did not snappily correct him. After the waiter turned away, she suddenly

laughed. At the split in the back of the waiter's jacket. At herself. At the idea of a Duff eating French food. At Wes... At the route from the homestead from here.

"Your heroic side. Tell me what it's like to be famously brave."

"Accidental, mostly."

"Oh, fiddlesticks. Don't talk down."

"I am talking perfectly level." The battlefield commission in Cuba...

"And Samuel? What do you think there?"

"Your brother was no doubt a better soldier than was good for him." He was in possession of the legislative report that clerical error also turned out to be in the picture; the men of Montana were drafted far more heavily than the state's population justified. Montana had been raked by the war.

"I had a pupil who died of the war, too."

"In what action?"

"Alcatraz."

Wes lifted his head to look at her.

"Major, I've changed my mind. I want to see the battlefield."

They walked the battlefield. Of the war that did not end all wars but definitely did take the tongues of a generation.

Samuel was plowed under here because he was Adam's ilk. Her gender had spared her.

For some reason, it seemed vital to have Samuel around. What the devil was it?

"What's this about?"

“The sniper over there, Major. He couldn’t hit a bull in the ass with a shovel.”

“How do we know that for a fact?”

“Time or two a day the men ran a Punch and Judy by him, sir.” They showed Wes the pair of helmets strapped onto the ends of bedrolls.

“We’ll try Mister Sniper again in an hour--I want to see for myself. No teasing him, any of you, and no firing back.”

The bee buzz went past the helmets. “We figure he has buck fever,” Sergeant Crimmins said. “The shots come awful quick.”

Wes tried to put himself in the place of the German officer. The patrols that didn’t go out of their way to fight. Wes could imagine that his counterpart didn’t welcome the salvos any more than the Americans did: shells that fell short, shells that were overshot... A nervous young soldier? An old soldier told to pester der Montanischers but not make them mad? A malcontent? It bought time, and Wes would take that deal.

“Have the men lay off him.”

A single shot rang out.

“You’re in for it now, Sammy.”

“Whooley, listen to them over there--’Mein Gott, Mein Gott!’”

“Too good a shot, old kid!”

Crimmins was coming down the trench crouched over. Wes reached the men first. “What’s happened?”

“It’s Bucky, sir. Sam Duff bagged him. He dropped out of that tree like a ton of bricks.”

Wes looked at the big-boned young soldier. “Duff, come with me.”

He led the way into the HQ dugout, Samuel ducking his head to follow through the doorway.

*We're a long way from the Two Medicine country. We're a long way from anything simple.*

"Private Duff, I thought I gave orders to hold fire, where that miserable sniper was concerned."

"I...I didn't get the word, sir. I just this morning got back from the field hospital. Sir, I thought we were to knock off the enemy at any chance."

Wes rubbed his knuckles. Nuance didn't apply to a Samuel Duff.

"Too busy to marry. Does that make sense at all? I didn't think so."

"Let's stay a little."

What could she tell herself? That an assignment didn't count if it occurred on foreign soil?

The noses met, she remembered. She knew she had no business falling in love with Wes. But restraint went out the mullioned window.

"Spur of the moment sounds like a horse we ought to bet on."

"There's no brass plaque," Wes said reprovingly. "Don't they know who they're dealing with, here?"

The islands were a spatter of rock, and their populations were a spatter, too. She mulled the route, that took people such as the Duffs to another land. Such as the Williamsons, too.

“We don’t make much of it,” Wes reflected. “We’ve been in America since the earth cooled. Doubtless it was one of us who elbowed the dinosaurs into LaBrea.”

Susan recalled Angus McCaskill’s saying that the Williamson family escutcheon read: *Formerly robbers, now thieves.*

“How much longer can you fib by cable?”

Wes said nothing, then touched her cheek. They still were getting used to touching each other. “Until Tuesday. I have to be aboard the 00 or they’ll be sending a search party for me.” Wes looked out over the islands. “Ef I c’d inconvenience ye further wi’ my lusty presence, Miss Duff,” he said in absolutely the worst Scottish imitation she had ever heard, “whurrr w’d ye like to spend the week’s end?”

“Edinburgh. Provided we can do so in sound English.”

In a black taxi with *Mackay* lettered on its door in gold, they were trundled up the hill to Arthur’s Seat. Standing on the promontory, Wes theorized that Scottish weather being what it was, Arthur may have frozen off that part of his anatomy there.

“Maybe this is the clearing-up shower.”

High clouds over the city. The Castle various in its stone textures--all dark, but subtly different, like some natural palimpsest of the centuries. Susan felt as if she had stepped into someone else’s life.

“Where are we staying?”

Wes pulled her into the doorway of the building just outside the Castle gate. “Here.”

They bumped and laughed their way up the stairs, to the top-floor flat.

“What, they wouldn’t let the Castle itself?”

“You know how the English are.”

“It’s an enchantment, Wes. We had better treat it as such.” She went to him and they started with kissing.

In the hotel in Dean Terrace, the Waters of Leith purling past.

In one of those whirlpools of politics that fascinated and rankled Susan, the hope for the vote lay in the homestead counties, the land where she had grown up. Jeannette Rankin...The enemy of my enemy is my ally, ran the rule of Montana politics--Susan was always bemused by its resemblance to children choosing up sides at recess...But Wesley Williamson came with convictions.

One of them, his Roman Catholicism, was to cost him Susan.

Not for nothing was Susan minted from Scots; the first nickel she had ever earned, she knew the whereabouts of.

She had been amused that day. Then came the time of hating him. And then they were lovers

noticed the number of Montanans being interred. Bold or ill-fated, in the Gallic exhaustion after the Great War it came to seem the same.

Never had the pair of them had an actual conversation, and weren’t about to now.

trying not to mind those who openly appraised the too-tall American woman, simply steeling herself and playing the role dealt to her.

The two of them were hammer and tongs the next day in the committee session on the memorial's design. She was all too aware that an anonymous contribution from him had gone far, here.

Wes's tone conveyed that he was trying to keep his hackles down.

Then suddenly, her thoughts still on Samuel and the devouring battlefield she had not had the heart to tour,

Samuel was plowed under here because he was Adam's ilk. Her gender had spared her.

She kept herself occupied by tucking into memory

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 replied to Monty. In turn there was something he could stand to know. "Remember it when, do you?"

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. Whit was piling cattle onto this