

these pp. are on a disk labeled "Ninian's Voice" & "Prairie leftovers"

range, irrespective of the grass drying away in front of a person's eyes. By rights Whit ought to have been the one to go to this session on long-term drought management of grazing land, but Whit 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 Whit about how to put pounds on the skinny specimens across the swath of earth owned by Williamsons.

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.

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.

*"Such love as ours a kingdom was,  
when Edinburgh was none.  
And love such as ours a kingdom shall be,  
when Edinburgh is gone."*

After the first couple of weeks of what he called getting himself galvanized into a civilian,

He very well might be in search of a wage, she granted, or maybe he just wanted time to himself on the prairie and they'd be eating grouse again for the next week.

in front of the Lord and everyone

It stymied her, the Mose who held everything in.

The county was so Catholic, with the Belgian colony of homesteaders, the galvanized Crees, the 00 homesteaders. He hadn't thought the Klan would dare. *I should have known better.*

*and we have to hide out like the James gang to even do our lessons?* He knew he was on edge, but felt entitled.

The new crystal-set machinery of voice. He thought back to when Miss Susan slowed down the 00 record and the two of them heard into . This. Last night, when the sound strengthened,

Monty... What did they call that ship that just floated forever without getting anywhere, *the Flying Dutchman?*

Then the clincher: *"Miss Susan is on their bent little minds, too."*

"Do I have any say in this?"

That made Susan speak up. "We could all stand one of those, couldn't we?"

That was nice.

this still wasn't quite the way he had expected things to click.



was a mile more sunk than that.

Their look around drew them a looking over as well, strategically placed operatives popping into sight in second-floor windows whenever Bailey whistled them up. Bailey's men seemed to have no last names--"There's Harv. Sam's over there"--but appeared equipped in every other way.

"I can think of two people not inches from here who should have signed up with you."

"We each had our reasons."

"How much of that can be taught and learned?"

"Nobody is unbreakable. But I can give Monty some shoring up."

and peered in, from different points along the spectrum of skepticism.

she all but set the words to music

taking inventory of anything that passed for workable. The thought occurred to him that he was doubtless going to show some rust himself at first, given the days that had passed since any music was made. *Can't have any more kinks than the rest of this mess*, he tried to lay that to rest. He did have to grant that the piano, by whatever method it had been manhandled into here, added surprising serenity to the harum-scarum scene of awry seats and lath walls with bare ribs showing. Clearing his throat, he announced his presence: "Is this the Vanderbilts'?"



fluffed herself into place like a blue-ribbon hen settling

Just the two of them. How was this supposed to work?

, the big rough man he remembered letting himself be pasted in here in  
Sunday dress

He had never thought he was in much need of consoling, but this filled  
some kind of

That did not settle him down at all.

His mind toiled along with his muscles,

Herself, she was knitting up a storm, baby goods for the next McCaskill  
when Beth delivered in a matter of weeks now. A bit guiltily, he knew she missed  
Susan. And that was part of the consideration here

under the blue gape of the summer sky, that this was

one eyebrow significantly lifted      in the words of one poet or another,  
thunder ain't rain

"The male of the species had the better side of things as usual, you think?"

(She did not say: *Ivan the Terrible perhaps loved his staghounds.*)

The jolt of that steeled him as if by prescription. Something not tidy about the arithmetic of it, though. *One swallow makes a lonesome bird.* He poured himself another short one

This had been a womanless house since the minute of their mother's death. ...a musty zone of if there ever was one. He supposed this house must smack them as...

supposed it was one of those houses women took a look at and gave up on. Their father had liked it that way, so Whit liked it that way.

Tactically, it made wicked sense.

The county was so Catholic, with the Belgian colony of homesteaders, the "galvanized Christian" Crees, the 00 homesteaders. He hadn't thought the Klan would dare. *I should have known better.* Miscalculation of that sort ...

then went to ground.

*For what that's worth, so far.*

"This isn't that, it's just a bunch of knotheads..."

Tired from the morning's runthrough, but the right kind of tired with a measure of satisfaction to it

How much of this was himself, how much was the Major? How much was her, even? I think maybe we've been sleepwalking.

"You'd trust him with everything?"



"It's nothing to me."

"It sounds like it."

"Miss Susan, Godamighty. You and the Major--any of you and any else of you, I can't go near that."

"Opinions are hard to avoid."

"I dodge them every chance I can."

prickly-pear-innocently-in-bloom

"I don't know about you," his tone suggested there was a fifty-fifty chance that he did, "but I keep listening for what I don't hear. The Major and Bailey and any of the bruisers you can ever get a word out of, they all keep telling us don't worry, they're working on the damned Klan. What I'd like to hear instead of that is some of those heads rolling, out from under their hoods. , but I've about had it with holing up here like a mouse in a roundhouse.

"I maybe ought to be three years old again to get along with this place," he began. "I don't know how much more I can take of Fort Sin-and-Bone."

Behind him Dolph wagged his head an inch or two either way, over the mystery of mortality.

"Wes, you're an original. Do you know what you remind me of? A St. Bernard in a windowbox. There's just so, so *much* about you. Your money, land, this. I don't want Monty and me to get squashed."



"Susan, back there--everything I knew how to part with, I threw into loving you. I can't vouch for how it came across, only you can do that. I'd do it again."

This was the picnic tarp again. Wes and his carpets of

"All right, Perseverance. I miss how we were."

A certain slant of glance, out of those cinnamon eyes. They so clearly asked *Didn't you?* that Susan did not bother to add her voice to it.

"There, I knew if I held my face right there'd be a moon tonight. A new one at that. Surely there's music that goes with?"

"Couldn't ask for better."

, its air still and its stars becalmed,

"Tell me another."

"He danced it all, everything that was good about life and much that wasn't."

"She's set as hell on Scotland. Beth and I don't savvy it, but then...

"We'll hang onto the place until it runs us broke. Lease it out, I expect. Are you in the market?"

"Not hardly."

She watched, cataloguing the faces. The English Creek foret ranger, Meixell, came and said something to the McCaskills, then went over and stood with the other pallbearers.

His mother had sung it only as a lament, when a laundry line broke.

His voice finding stairs to new places it could go, Monty put forth the words for all he was worth.

The arcs their lives would take from here were beyond seeing. But not beyond attempting.

It would take a Dante to know, wouldn't it.

By now Monty was accustomed to backstage, although he did not like any of them. The dressing room was like a waiting room--he wanted the thing to be happening.

The glowing gate to Paradiso or Inferno.

give you time to get trigged up and geared up

The gaggle of onlookers gossiping or chatting in the wings or scattered in comfortable awe in the first few rows was considerable,



Hands clasped casually behind him...

If this was going to be fought out, she needed to be there.

*If this is what you want, tonight and him, here it is.*

in Over There work. the Remembrance from the time our families were neighbors. Her brother served with me in the war.

*That of a smitten sugar daddy, his tone*

can vouch for Miss Duff--our families were neighbors, her brother served with me in France,

He had peeked. who wouldn't.

*Wes may have to bucket water for his abominable cows when he puts them on the North Fork.*

every time he stoked into a breakfast T-bone in good conscience, he reflected that this kind of life was almost worth it for the food alone. That and the gab. The things he overheard in the course of a day practically amounted to a world tour, by way of the gumbo accents of the cottonbacks up from the South and the lullaby intonations of the Caribs and the rounded declamations from the diction wallopers who were just a step short of being street preachers, even at breakfast. *The Reverend Skypiece over there, ambassador hat on him--wouldn't know to hear him tell it that he delivers ice, would you. Or take the yam man, parks that pushcart out front, comes in and always sits next to me--close your eyes when he orders fried fish and rice and you'd swear he's somebody's sister from Spain.* He himself still was a bit shy in the ceaseless counter conversation and had figured out that was



not a bad thing to be. It could be taken as dignified, he was pleasantly surprised to find, befitting the name he was making for himself, and besides, keeping a decent silence let him digest Harlem life to the extent possible.

But any of this, nourishment that it all was, only counted as appetizer to the outing he treated himself to every morning at about now

306--closest he could come to memorializing his 30.06 rifle and its snug companionship on his getaway to the Medicine Line, back there--

Layers of frustration that he could push pencil lead into until his exhausted hand fell off and the bottom of them still would be deeper than he could reach. Simply to start with, what was he supposed to do against the apparently fundamental fact of life that it took only one loony to pop out of a doorway swinging a club and leave him like this, beaten halfway to hamburger and rooked out of his singing career just when he had it made and more than likely headed back to an existence the equivalent of milking cows? She and the Major and J.J. and all the other well-intentioned of the world could tell him over and over that the Klan was a lower form of life than grew out of the cracks of rocks and that the way to overcome the dunce-cap clucks was to persevere--dodge and rise, practice and perform--up past their spasms of hate, but hadn't he tried that at Fort Assinniboine and been pounded into the pavement at Helena for it?

[The Williamsons. They'd snatch you baldheaded if you had a piece of land they wanted, yet they had provided him his shot at this. Complicated.]

And things have a way of ending on their own terms, not ours.

The land of Ninian ceding, at last, to the Williamson barony; beyond the lease figures, He would feel better after the two of them met with Susan in the morning and signatures were on dotted lines.

stood looking around at the confluence of so much. People kept filing past.

If he had to say so himself, the personage he viewed in the looking-glass seemed singled out to show the world how to sing history as well as music, this night.

. By now he hoped he had worked out how to say it. *"What happened to Montgomery Rathbun is one more form of lynching. How long is America going to let the neck of the Negro be the target of every hater? If he is never able to sing again, his silence will be a stain on this country that will not go away."*

That worst pang of all lasted about as long as it took him to think it.

So far Susan had held back, but

It's become a struggle--you know how it is, things get lost from sight. Tucked into trunks, squirreled away in drawers. Susan, I spend what seems like every minute of my life raising funds. The monument, the Armistice Day observance--they take everything we've got. The archive collecting, I'm ashamed to admit it, has had to be neglected. Other chapters weren't as quick off the mark as you were in Montana. Some people can't stay with it. I would ask you to see what you could do with that."

Some people can't stay with it. Tucked into trunks, squirreled away in drawers. --you know how it is, things get lost from sight.



Rooms like this were stacked through history, jewel cases and music boxes elaborate in their time and eventually shelved away, generation by generation. Versailles and Tsarskoe Selo and Minaus and Sydney, probably Pompeii, had had rooms such this. Dazzling chests of entertainment, boxed by the infinite night. He had been stepping into rooms like this since he was eighteen years old and the first 00 on the Gold Coast. In a later one he had met Merrinell. But never had he strolled into one where there waited, supposedly unbeknownst to him, a woman he had been vigorously in bed with all afternoon.

*What if you had all gone into pig raising, Teddy--would I be hunkered here?*

*Here's a bit of self-confession that will tug a smile onto you, I can almost guarantee. As I neared the McCaskill place, I kept having the feeling that something was missing from the head of the valley. I looked, looked some more, and finally identified the missing, so to speak. Angus's sheep. I am too much a Williamson to admit an affection for the sight of sheep, but I have to tell you that their absence was like a blank spot in a remembered picture. All of my grown life, the surest marker of these particular foothills was the rounded white canvas of the McCaskill herder's wagon, standing up out of the flat tones of grass like an igloo. No more.*

He knew he was dealing with the memory of a man who had managed to live lifetimes one on top of the other. Schoolhouse and here. Scotland in his younger time. Not to mention the unashamed harems of his head, half the poems ever written living it up in one corner, calculations of the heart always ongoing in



another. Meanwhile a wife at his side who perhaps did not quite fit into that collection of existences. That part Wes could identify with. All else here, though, eluded him. Why a man, or for that matter a woman, would stay on at a place like this after the rest had given up.

*Valleys are folds in the earth's apron, I might have been moved to say in that ungiven speech, which must be why we hug to them in the manner of a seeking child.*

, in this loop back through time,

He took a sighting, then steered the team and wagon up onto the long angle of the west shoulder of Breed Butte. As he had been pretty sure, the full valley of Noon Creek could be seen from there, the Double W and the haystacks that stood in giant droplet pattern along the creek and the specks of grazing cattle, all the way north toward the Blackfoot Reservation. The wood gate, portal to the empire he and Whit had been shaped, as thoroughly and carefully tooled as sceptres, to inherit and to operate. To shoulder.

Time cuts its own circle on itself, and the past hooks on this moment. that sudden season of last boyhood. Royal cubs with the run of the ranch, he and Whit saw life from low to the ground or on top of odd vantages. Hunting jackrabbits. Searching for tepee rings and arrowheads. Alarms and astonishments came often at that age. Small wonder that the residue is a magical cache of memory.

The bedroom finally was silent except for some hard breathing.

Wes stirred first, his knee dictating yet another change of position. Susan kissed her fingertips and then lavished them on his lips, as if sealing the further favors to be offered there. By now they were drenched in each other. He had arrived on the noon train, and by the time New York was going back to work from lunch, he and she were devouring each other. He would not have said it caught him by surprise, her fervor--no holds barred, wall-to-wall, that all sounded too crude but the strenuousness was there; most of his waking moments all summer he had wished for this just this sort of scrimmage of desire. Severe love-making made up for... Yet it didn't. Sunlight poured in the mansard window, tendrils of vine shadowing onto the wall. It was like the memory of their 1919 time together caught in the hot light of an explosion.

"You had better be right about your landlady off visiting her sister, or we'll be thrown out in the street."

"Let's hope not--you know what they say about that, it might frighten the horses."

"I feel used like a maiden."

"Tsk. You don't know the half of it yet."

*The vow of peace, backed by our better instincts, can walk this scarred but promising old earth."*

I don't like it, yet I do. Let's just say it's not anything I'm overly comfortable with.

He had deposited both of them into this room--a delegation of two,*the Metternich of Montana, almost as if I knew what I was doing*---and whether it was reward for good works or not,



Interposed music between the air they breathed.

[**to come:** Wes's interior reaction to how powerfully Monty sings:. Lyre, bugle, drum are in that voice. Bagpipes.]

Cecil knew when to back off, and now was not a bad time.

"Monty, I have a house there, a business. An existence. I'm set in my ways."

"Not everywhere." She gestured vaguely, knowing how helpless it seemed. That hope was like a tarp tent, stiff and heavy and empty.

He only laughed, short as a bark.

"And you don't want that. Any more than I do."

"I'm used to--well, not this. But with Wes..."

"Haven't wanted to admit it, even to myself. But I show all the signs."  
Of falling for you. Already fell, I should say.

"I sure haven't wanted to face this."

"The whole clatter of them."



Warren Williamson, tucked away on a committee to sway the legislature,  
which would have been his style

Not so's you could notice."

That feels right to me, the way hardly anything else that happens to me  
does. Even when I'm not...,

"If only it were," she said at last.

steelsharp median

When she did so, the evening Monty sang at Suzetta Brewster's sister's  
posh Long Island place, Wes shook his head in wonder at her.

"Let me just keep track, Susan. I put up the money for the Observance, I  
haul in my wife and my wife's friends, I deliver the welcome--do you want me to  
work up a trapeze act, too?"

The four-year precipice of the trenches, it had taken to reach the Armistice;  
the Observance would come and go

Monty watched the clock.

He stood still as could be. They hadn't wanted to put him in, this early.  
But this was the point of day when funerals were held in the Two Medicine  
country, late enough after morning chores to dress up and make the trip to town,  
time left for work in the afternoon. He squared himself up, attentive now on the

figure almost shoulder to shoulder with him. Somebody else made a pointing motion, which after the workings-over Susan had given him in the auditorium he did not have to think twice to recognize as a cue.

"Now for your listening pleasure again here on station CINE, our latest troubador of the Medicine Line, Montgomery Rathbun." The announcer cocked his eyes around to him but kept his mouth aimed at the almighty microphone on its spear of stand between them. "For those of you not fortunate enough to have been introduced to him through his music last evening, Mister Rathbun's background is an unusual strand in our prairie background. Your father was a member of the American colored cavalry--the 'buffalo soldiers,' as they were called, I believe?"

"He was," Monty said easily into his hemisphere of the mike. The first time, he had worried he would need this written out, along with the music, but talking on the radio was proving to be a snap; an invisible audience was just right. "Sergeant in the Tenth Cavalry, right down at Fort Assinniboine. He was in charge of troopers, my mother was in charge of laundry, and I seem to be the result."

"And a lucky outcome it was for music-lovers," the announcer orated from inches away. "For those of you who do not know the Fort Assinniboine story and the part it played in our Medicine Line past"--here he resorted to a script of what these radio people called canned history, for what Monty knew would be the next two minutes.

Making sure of his music sheets, in that noiseless way they'd shown him so the rustle of paper wouldn't make ten thousand listeners think their radio sets were on fire, Monty drew everything of the past half week into him for the effort to come. That feverish conference with her as soon as they were by themselves in the auditorium, in absolute agreement they had to get the Major and Bailey into gear somehow. He had left her in loud conversation with herself and the Victrola version of a night's singing, thrown her a wave from the balcony, and gone down



the chute. Led the saddlehorse out of the fort with the blanket over it. Reins in one hand, the 30.06 in his other; take some of the bastards with him, he would, if he met up with any Klan hoodoos out there in the dark. The long ride north, to here, all night and the next day and on into that night; it had been like riding in the roundup again, except he couldn't remember ever being so saddle-weary during even the longest loops out after cattle. By the time he was across the border--the section-line roads he had been following ran out at Canada, the only way he could tell--and sorted out the town of Medicine Hat to find the radio station, he was feeling hard-used. A hot meal and a scrub-up at the hotel, then presenting himself in full singing rig to the station manager just the way she had said to do. The man had been intrigued enough to try him out on a few songs in the back room, and then excited enough to sign him on, a full week to start.

All that was lacking was her. He wished like everything she was over there governing the keys for this. Wherever the station had dragged up this accompanist, the woman plowed around on the piano like she was doing Sunday school. But he would make up for it. *Oho! The first perfect singer there ever was?* As perfect as he could make it, this time. The announcer was finishing his scripted patter. "And now, out of that historical heritage, here is Montgomery Rathbun to sing one of the most beautiful of traditional spirituals." Monty took the cue, and out into the air, out over the Medicine Line and the weedy parade ground of the old fort and the time-browned washhouse of the Double W and the silent homesteads of Scotch Heaven, his voice began to travel.

*"There's a man going around taking names.*

*He has taken my mother's name...*

Susan held her head high, waiting there at the brow of ground in front of them all. What bits and pieces we are made of, Adair was causing her to know

anew. *"You sang in his schoolyard, you sang at our wedding,"* she had said as tranced as if telling a fortune. *"Susan, you can't stop short now. And it's my one time to do a bit of rhyme for Angus."* The two of them and the stiffly-dressed crowd were watching somberly now as Varick sprinkled a handful earth slow as salt into the grave. When he stepped back, Susan and Adair blended their voices, one pure and one striving.

*"World enough, world enough  
Did I search till there was thee.  
And at last, oh at last,  
The orbit of your charms  
Is world enough for me."*

His voice finding stairs to new places it could go, Monty put forth the words as he never had before.

*"There's a man  
going  
around  
taking  
names.  
He has taken my father's name..."*

Across the miles, the other two in this trio of tribute lifted their song of Scottish counterpoint as if it could reach over horizons.

*"Long enough, long enough  
Were my heart and I at sea.  
Now at last, oh at last,  
The circle of your arms*



*Is world enough for me."*

On oldest maps, a cloud maestro blows tribute to those who sail the edges  
of the world. Monty similarly gathered breath and all else into the last of song:

*"There's a man*

*going around*

*taking names.*

*He has taken my dear friend's name,*

*Angus McCaskill was his name.*

*And Death is the name of that man."*

*Feed on loco weed and blue lupine*

*when you ride the Medicine Line.*

## Troubador

1924

"Can I help you?"

"I believe you are putting musical presentations on the radio?"

He looked from Susan's face of composure to Monty in his Sunday best to Mr. Gustafson's scraggly blonde mustache to Mrs. Gustafson's moonface. "Ah, are you people some kind of quartet?"

"Quite the contrary. Mr. Rathbun here," Susan propelled him to the fore with light but determined fingers on his elbow, "is the performer. The rest of us are Wesley Williamson's staff."

The man brightened. "Major Williamson's interested in radio? Suppose he'd want to buy this station?"

"One never knows," Susan said craftily. "But he dispatched us here because he believes Mr. Rathbun possesses exceptional talent as a singer."

Monty watched in mute admiration. Susan was for the radio idea, as much as she could be for any idea that wasn't her own.

The station man eyed Monty's tailoring. "He's certainly got the duds for it. What kind of singing is this?"

"Spirituals," Susan said.

"Colored Highline troubador," Monty said simultaneously. "Born right down the road here, at the old fort."

"You don't say."

"You'll be riding in the roundup this fall, then?"

"Don't know how I could miss it," Monty said so craftily he drew a look from Susan.



"Wes, you better get in here."

He stepped in, just in time to hear:

*...old pig-iron world*

*won't you bend to my knee?*

"Goddamn miracle." Whit nodded sharply toward the radio. It was not clear whether he meant the apparatus itself, bringing song through the air, or that the voice singing was Monty's.

"He's doing splendidly," Wes chose to remark on.

"Famous on the Highline," Whit chortled. "Well, that's something."

"Monty's sung his way out of their reach. That leaves us."

"We bring you this broadcast from Fort Assinniboine, which in its day was one of the last great outposts of the U.S. cavalry. Built in ...

They huddled below the parapet. "People gonna hear anything but the wind howling through the microphone?"

"Your nerves are talking," Susan said.

"I want to do it good--I mean, well."

"Of course you will."

"This is a new one on me, but that's about the size of it," Monty responded, so exhilarated he felt only half there in conversation but knowledgeably apprehensive enough to try to keep his end up even with this sour looker. 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. With mixed feelings Monty took in what was going to be the backdrop for his tryout. *Owes me a little something, around here.* To him this was still the Helena country, although Helena itself had spurned the 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. He 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 the Two Medicine country he was lifelong used to, with its dune shapes of the Sweetgrass Hills way over east there as if they were pretty mirages that just never faded and the big reefs of the Rockies up everywhere into the sky to the west. This river was something, though, rolling its way mile after mile through rock-solid canyon. The hum came without his even inviting it.

*Oh, Shenandoah, I long to see you*

*Away, you rolling river.*

The memory voice came along with it. "*Can you sing that one by yourself, Monty? Momma's Momma 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, although this canyon held in the wide.

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

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

The Duesenberg had ninety. "Just wondering. I been around engines quite a little bit myself." Deciding this was one of those times when there was something to be said for silence, Monty clammed up and warmed his hands again 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 Whit'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 haying crews. Done their job, too, these hands; 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.

Still needing to assure himself this was really happening to him, he sneaked another look around the boat. 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?

The boatman had followed his glance around the vessel. "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 on. *But the man has a point. 'Normal' wouldn't cut it for a shindig like this.* Notions jittered in him today like fancywear on a clothesline. It was boggling: a different life to fit over the one he already had on? Was there enough of him to wear all that? Let his imagination tailor it and there was. That write-up he had seen on Roland Hayes in a Sunday paper the Major had passed along a while back made it sound as if Hayes was up there with the best of them. Singing in ritzy concert halls, consorting with royalty, probably making a bundle. And in a place as big as the U.S. of A., wouldn't it stand to reason there might be room enough for two colored singers? From that piece of thinking it was only a hop and a skip--all right, a hell of a running jump but at least this might give him somewhere to spring from--to a destination like New York. His previous experience there, that time Mister Whit took the rodeo back East, had pretty much been a fizzle. America had just gone into the war in Europe, you could hardly sneak a go-round of bull riding in before another War Bonds speaker took over the arena, and the bulls were peeved with it all when they did pile out of the chutes. Three days' worth of the roughest clowning he'd ever had to do, was about all he had been able to make New York amount to then. The worst of it was, and it still burned at him, he went through that whole time back there about a day late in catching on to things. Take that first night, when the rest of the rodeo hands put up in the usual kind of flophouse but he of course had to go find one up on the edge of Harlem. Walked in, asked for a room, the mulatto desk clerk shoved the hotel register at him and asked right



back, "*You want it furnished?*" He had blinked at the man in astonishment. "*Hell yes, what do you think?*" he said and slapped his money down. Went on up to the room and threw his bag on the bed, glum that people back here evidently could tell by looking at him that he was from someplace like Montana. Try to fob off a room with no furniture on a poor hardworking rodeo hand, huh. He was surprised by the quick knock on the door, and more so by the woman furnished there when he opened it.

Well, whatever could be put down under his name in the book of life by now, at least he wasn't that green any more. If he could get trained up for it, as somebody like Hayes must have had to do too, maybe he could show New York something this time around. He caught himself letting his hopes run too high; there was also every chance his big notion of becoming a singer amounted to a pipe dream that was going to be over the instant he didn't make his mouth work right for that lofty-looking woman up there in the bow.

## Under Steam

1925

Wes looked around at them all. "There'll be a sleeper on the siding at Conrad. Private quarters for all."

A load of worry the size of a haystack lifted from Monty. No cattle car this time. Pullman...

"Blackie!"

*The bastards*, Monty thought to himself tiredly. *Have to start in with that, even when we're out here like this.*

The engineer wasn't even looking his way, yelling instead to the fireman. "Damn it, Blackie, we've got to get more steam up."

"I only have two hands, and that's a shovelfull."

"I thought we were going to have eight cars of cattle."

"Threw in a few extra."

Wes scrutinized the couple of hundred head of cattle yet in the loading pen, then his brother.

"We're running a little short of hay on the lower place, all right?" Whit said as if it was costing him teeth. "Figured we're better off shipping them than letting them turn into hides. "

"You think Pinckney has stock cars under his hat, do you, Whit?" Wes went off to confer with the stationmaster.



“Poor cows.”

Wes looked miffed. “Poor all of us, if we can’t get rolling.”

Monty studied out the window.

“What now?”

“We don’t have enough power to pull through the cut. Besides that, we’re going to have to flange the track. It don’t take much snow covering the track for this outfit to go on the ground.”

The prospect of derailment got Wes’s attention. “Good Christ. This weather isn’t letting up.”

“Sorry, sir, but the weather isn’t my department.”

“Get at it, then.”

They waded into the snow with grain shovels, each scooping a valley over one rail. “Don’t have to clear the iron,” 00 shouted, “just down close enough that the wheel flanges can reach it.” The snow flew.

The human hide knows a spring blizzard is unfair. A matter of hours, or a dump of snow that went on for days.

“Blackie and I talked it over. We’re not riding it across. Nobody better be on it.”

Wes looked at the trestle and the boisterous creek below. “All right, Dan. Let’s send the train on its own.”