A story, the ancients instruct us, is like the wind. It comes from we know not where, it brings the unexpected, and it whispers of the wilder reaches of life. All such buffets included, this is mine.

"Morgan, did you say your name is?" The depot agent, an individual so slow I thought I might have to draw a line on the floor to see him move, was gradually commencing to hunt through the baggage room for my trunk, shipped ahead. "Any relation to old J. P., Mister Moneybags himself?"

I sighed as usual over that. His remark could hardly have been farther from the mark. Nonetheless, I couldn't resist dishing back some of the same:

"Cousins, thrice removed. Can't you tell by looking?"

The railway man laughed more than was necessary. "That's about as removed as it gets, I'd say." Poking into one last cluttered corner, he shook his head. "Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Third Cousin, that trunk of yours took a mind of its own somewhere between there and here. You could put in a claim, if you want."

So much for a storybook Welcome back! to the Treasure State, as Montana liked to call itself. While waiting for some sign of life in the agent, I already had been puzzling over the supposed treasure spot in plain view out the depot window—the dominant rise of land, scarred and heaped and gray as grit, which was referred to in all that I had read as The Richest Hill on Earth, always grandly capitalized.
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“You definitely have left me in want,” I reacted to the agent’s news with honest dismay, equipped with only the battered satchel that accompanied me everywhere. “The bulk of my worldly possessions is in that trunk.”

Squinting at me, he tossed aside his agent’s cap and donned a businesslike green visor. “Possessions like that do tend to bulk up when the claim form comes out, I’d say.” He slipped the pertinent piece of paper onto the counter in front of me, and I filled it out as expected, generous to myself and not the railroad.

The most precipitous chapter of life always begins before we quite know it is underway. With only the clothes I stood in and my meager satchel, I gathered what was left of my resolve and stepped outside for my first full look at Butte.

It took second and even third looks as well, for the city before my eyes was an unlikely metropolis of nowhere: nearly a hundred thousand people atop the earth’s mineral crown, with nothing else around but the Rocky Mountains and the witnessing sky. The community’s reputation for ambition in its every cornerstone was surely there to see, its streets climbing the blemished slope until neighborhoods of workers’ cottages mingled with mines and dump heaps along the top of the namesake hill. Up there, the long-legged black steel frameworks over the mineshafts populated the skyline like a legion of half-done miniatures of Eiffel’s tower. Beneath, every manner of building from shanty to mansion, church to chicken coop, was mixed together from one topsy-turvy block to the next.

Thus, in some ways Butte appeared to be the industrial apotheosis of that Athenian model of a city built upon a hill, and in other aspects the copper mining capital of the world showed no more lasting pattern than a gypsy camp. I have to admit, I felt a catch at the heart at how different it all was from the solitary homesteads and one-room school I had known the last time I tried my luck in this direction. Everything I knew how to part with, I left behind in a prairie teacherage in that prior time. But an urge can spin the points of a compass as strongly as the
magnetism of ore, and in spite of all that happened back then, here I was in that western territory off the map of imagination once more. While I was busy gazing, a couple of bull-shouldered idlers in the shade of the depot eyed me with all too much curiosity; somehow I doubted that they were sizing me up for any family resemblance to J.P. Morgan of Wall Street. With barely a glance their way, I squared my hat and hastened past as though I had an appointment. Which could be construed as the truth of the moment. The Richest Hill on Earth and I--and if my hope was right, its riches--were about to become acquainted.

First things first, though. I set out up the tilted city streets in search of lodging. In the business district ahead, proud brick and brownstone buildings with soot in their cornices stood several stories above a forest of poles and electrical wires, another novelty I had not encountered in earlier Montana. But the world of 1919 was not that of a decade before in hardly any other way either; the Great War with its four years of trenches filled with mud and blood had seen to that.

“Red-hot news, mister? Can’t get any newer!” A boy with a newspaper bag as big as he was came darting to my side. I handed him a coin and he scampered off, leaving me with a freshly inked *Butte Daily Post*. The front page could barely hold all the calamitous items there were to post. **ATT’Y GENERAL WARNS OF DOMESTIC BOLSHEVIKS...BUTTE BREWERY SHUTTERED BY ‘DRY’ LAW...WILSON CAUTIONS AGAINST ‘WINNING THE WAR, LOSING THE PEACE’...BOSTON POLICE THREATEN TO STRIKE...** America in that agitated time; not merely a nation, but something like a continental nervous condition.

There was little time left in my day for such thoughts: I needed a place for the night. The airy accommodations I could glimpse in those lofty blocks ahead were beyond the reach of my wallet. I dreaded the sort of fleabag hotel that I would have to resort to without my trunk--even the most suspicious hostelry, in my
experience, unblinkingly provided a room if the luggage was prosperous enough.

While I was studying the lay of the city and trying to divine my best
approach, a sign in the bow window of a hillside house with a spacious yard caught
my eye.

**CUTLETS AND COVERLETS**

**OR IF YOU'RE NOT WELSH:**

**BOARD AND ROOM**

Intrigued, I headed directly to the blue-painted front door of the house.

My knock was answered by a woman a good deal younger than I expected a
boarding-house mistress to be. She was compact, in the manner of a dressmaker’s
form, shapely but with no excess. A substantial braid the color of flax tugged the
upper lines of her pleasant face toward quizzical, as though she were being reined
by some hand unseen. Whatever proportion of the world had knocked on this
door, she seemed freshly inquisitive about a caller such as myself, well-dressed but
not well-heeled. Her violet eyes met mine in mutual appraisal. “Madam,” I began
with a lift of my hat, “I feel the need—”

“I’ve heard that one before from half the men in Butte. I’m not a madam,”
she said, cool as custard, “and this is not a house of ill repute. For your
information, that’s on the next block over.” The door began to shut in my face.

“Let me start again,” I amended rapidly. “With night overtaking me in a city
where I don’t know a soul, I feel the need of warm quarters and a solid meal. Your
sign appears to offer those.”

“Ah, Griff’s latest masterpiece. It caught your eye, did it.” She backed
around to consider the freshly painted words, a bit of lilt coming into her voice.
“He’d turn this into Cardiff West if he could. Step on in, please, Mr.--?”

“Morgan. Morris Morgan.”
“Griff will approve, you sound as Welsh as a daffodil.” She extended a slender but work-firmed hand, and I noted the less than gleaming wedding band on her other one. “Grace Faraday, myself.” Appraising the newspaper under my arm and the satchel I was gripping, she paused. “Are those all of your belongings?”

“It’s a long story,” I said as if that explained everything.

The upstairs room she showed me was neat and clean, with subdued wallpaper. On the bed was a coverlet of an old style with an embroidered dragon rampant; it would be like sleeping under a flag of Camelot. I can be picky, but I liked everything I had met up with under this roof so far.

As I clicked the toggle switch to make sure the overhead electric bulb worked--another innovation unknown in my earlier Montana stay--my landlady-to-be similarly checked me over. “Drummer, are you?”

It took me a moment to recall that the term meant a traveling salesman, one who drums up business. “No, life has given me other rhythms to march to, Mrs. Faraday. My family originally was in the glove trade, until circumstances did that in. I now do books.”

“Poetry?” she asked narrowly.

“Ledgers.”

“Then you’ll appreciate my own bookkeeping, which starts with a week’s rent in advance.”

“Very wise,” I said with composure, although coming up with the sum took nearly all I had. Now I really had to hope opportunity of some sort presented itself without delay.

“Welcome to Butte, Mr. Morgan,” Grace Faraday said with a winning smile, complete with dimple, as she pocketed my cash. “Supper’s at dark this time of year.”
The table was laid for four when I came down a few minutes early to scout the premises. There was no wax fruit nor fussy display of doilies on the sideboard, a good sign. Instead, under the blaze of the modest but efficient electrical chandelier above the dining table, a wedding photograph was propped there in the spot of honor. Grace Faraday, even more fresh-faced than now, smiled out as capriciously as if the white of her bridal gown were a field of ermine, while beside her in a suit that only fit where it touched stood a foursquare fellow I took to be the much-mentioned Griff. He at least had good taste in women and mustaches, as he wore a full-lipped Rudyard Kipling version not unlike my own.

Just then my hostess popped out of the kitchen with a bowl of boiled potatoes and nodded to where I was to sit, saying “Make yourself to home, the other pair will be right along. Griff had to stoke the furnace and I told him to go wash up or eat in the street--ah, here’s the thundering herd.”

Through the doorway limped two scrawny half-bald figures that made me think I was seeing double. Both wore work overalls that showed no evidence of work, both held out knobby hands for a shake, and both were grinning at me like leprechauns or whatever the Welsh equivalent might be. The nearer one croaked out: “I’m Griff. Welcome to the best diggings in Butte.”

“Same here,” echoed the other. “I’m Hoop.”

Was it humanly possible? I wondered, doing my best not to glance in the direction of the wedding photo during the handshake exchange with the wizened Griff. What manner of marriage could deplete a man from that to this?

With a bit of a twinkle, the lady of the house rescued me from my confusion. “These specimens are Wynford Griffith and Maynard Hooper, when no one is looking. They’ve been part of the furniture here since my husband passed on and I’ve had to take in boarders.” As the duo took their places like old Vikings
at a feast, she delivered the sufficient benediction: "We all three could be worse, I suppose."

"I'll try to fit in, Mrs. Faraday."

"Start by saving words and calling me 'Grace,' even though this pair of old Galahads refuses to."

"Wouldn't be right, Mrs. Faraday," Griff or Hoop said.

"Manners is manners," said Hoop or Griff.

"I go by 'Morrie,'" I dealt myself in, and formalities fell away in favor of knives and forks. "Didn't I tell you, Hoop?" Griff said as he sawed at his meat.

"That new sign works like a charm. What part of Wales do your people hail from, Morrie?"

"Chicago."

"Before they crossed the pond," he persisted.

"Griff, I am sorry to say, the exact family origins are lost in the mists of--" I searched the gazetteer of my mind-- "Aberystwyth and Llangollen."

"The grand old names," he proclaimed, adding a spatter of wooly syllables that could only have been Welsh. "'Tis the language of heaven."

"Why nobody talks it on earth," Hoop explained.

By then I was on about my third bite of the meat and ready to ask.

"Venison?"


"Ah." I looked down at the delicate portion. "What a treat to be served cutlets, " I emphasized the plural. "Are there seconds?"

She mulled that. "Tonight there are." Off she went to the kitchen stove.

While we awaited replenishment, the history of my tablemates came out. Now retired--"at least the tired part"--the pair had been miners, to hear them tell it, practically since the dawn of Butte. Which was to say, since copper became a
gleam in the world’s eye. The Hill, as they called it, held the earth’s largest known deposit of the ore that wired everything electrical. Much of this I knew, but there was a tang to hearing them recite it with the names of mines such as the Orphan Girl and the Anselmo and the Badger. The crisscross of their conversation about life deep underground was such that I sometimes had to remind myself which was Griffith and which was Hooper. Although they looked enough alike to be brothers, I figured out that they simply worked together so long in the mineshafts that the stoop of their bodies and other inclinations had made them grow together in resemblance as some old married couples do.

“So, Morrie, you’ve latched on in life as a bookkeeper, Mrs. Faraday says,” Griff was holding forth as she appeared with the replenished meat platter, rosettes from the cookstove heat in her attractive cheeks. It was surprising how much more eye-catching she was as the Widow Faraday.

“Except when the books keep me.” Both men bobbed quizzically and Grace sent me a glance. Offhand as my comment was, it admitted to more than I probably should have. With rare exceptions, my stints of employment had been eaten away by the acid of boredom, the drip-by-drip sameness of a job causing my mind to yawn and sneak off elsewhere. One boss said I spent more time in the clouds than the Wright brothers ever dreamt of. I had found, though, that I could work with sums while the remainder of my brain went and did what it wanted. “But yes,” I came around to Griff’s remark about bookkeeping, “I have a way with numbers, and Butte by all accounts produces plentiful ones. First thing in the morning, I’ll offer my services at the office of the mining company, what is its name—Anaconda?”

Forks dropped to plates.

“You’re one of those,” Grace flamed. Yanking my rent money from her apron pocket, she hurled it to the table, very nearly into the gravy boat. “Leave this
house at once, Whoever-You-Are Morgan. I’ll not have under my roof a man who wears the copper collar."

"The--?"

Hooper and Griffith glowered at me. "Anaconda is the right name for company men," Griff growled. "They’re snakes."

"But believe me, I--"

"Lowest form of life," Hoop averred.

Enough was enough. Teetering back in my chair as far as I dared, I reached to the switch on the wall and shut off the chandelier, plunging the room into blackness and silence. After a few blank moments, I spoke into the void:

"We are all now in the dark. As I was, about this matter of the Anaconda Company. Can we now talk in a manner which will shed some light on the situation?"

I put the chandelier back on, to the other three blinking like wakened owls.

Grace stirred first. Her braid swung as she turned sharply to me. "How on earth, you, can you land into Butte as innocent as a newborn?"

"I have been elsewhere for a number of years," I said impatiently. "I knew nothing of this ogre you call Anaconda. To the contrary, I always read of 'The Richest Hill on Earth' in the kind of glowing terms the argonauts lavished on the California goldfields in 1849."

Hooper built up a sputter. "That, that's--"

"Hoop, house rules," Grace warned.

"--baloney. The company hogs it all. They've turned this town into rich, poor, and poorer."

Griffith furiously took his turn. "Anaconda men sit around up there in the Hennessy Building on their polished--"

"Griff, the rules," came Grace's warning again.
“--rumps figuring out new ways to rob the working man. They bust the union, and we build a new one. They bust that, and we try again. Accuse us all of being Wobblies, and sic the soldiers on us.”

I looked around the table for the definition. “Wobblies?”

“You really have been off the face of the earth, haven’t you,” Griff resumed crossly. “The Industrial Workers of the World. They’re radical, see, and when they hit town, they tried to edge out our miners’ union. The Wobs had their good points, but they riled things up to where the company squashed us all.”

One chapter spilled over another as Hoop and Grace chorused in on Griff’s telling, but Butte’s story across the past ten years was that of the Romans over the tin mines of Britannia, the colonial cartel over the diamonds of the Transvaal, the Sydney financiers over the gold of Kalgoorlie--In short, the ruling powers mining the miners, the lowly laborers in the pits of wealth. The Hill and the city, I was told, had witnessed a cat’s-cradle of conflicts among the mineworkers’ union, the Wobblies (they were called that, I learned, due to certain members’ foreign accents that turned the dabel-yu sounds of IWW into wobble-you wobble-you), and the Wall Street-run company. There had been strikes and lockouts. Riots. Dynamitings. The Anaconda Copper Mining Company bringing in goon squads. A lynching, if I understood right, of a suspected IWW labor organizer. Half a dozen times, troops had come marching in to impose order. And that was not all.

“Then there was the fire.” Grace’s voice stumbled. “In the Speculator mine two years ago.” She drew a breath. “One hundred sixty-four men were killed. My Arthur”--all the eyes in the room, including mine, darted to the wedding picture--“among them.”

Griffith and Hooper moved uneasily in their chairs. “We was on the earlier shift,” Hoop murmured, “or we’d be pushing up daisies with the rest of them.”

In the pause that followed, I sat there before the jury of their faces.
There is something in me that attracts situations, I know there is. Here I was, faced by three people I had only spent an amount of time with that could be measured in forkfuls, asked to make one of those choices in life that can dwarf any other. I had to pick a side, right now, or else hit the chandelier switch again and bolt into the night. I looked around once more at my expectant teammates. Mentally asking their pardon for what might be called situational loyalty, I made a show of making up my mind. “The Anaconda Copper Mining Company,” I declared, “shall not have my services.”

“Now you’re talking!” Griff slapped the table resoundingly and Hoop nodded. Grace favored me with a dimple of approval.

“But what am I to do?” I turned out my hands, empty as they were. “I need work with decent pay to it. My funds have been delayed in the course of my journey.” If you substituted trunk for funds, that was perfectly true. Grace’s expression changed for the worse at this news.

Griffith looked the length of the table at Hooper.

“Creeping Pete,” said Hoop. “Needs a cryer.”

“Possible,” said Griff. “Too sober?”

“Not for long.”

“Righto. Got just the thing for you, Morrie.”
“What are these lunkheads doing here, Morgan, instead of out on a picket line somewhere?”

“Sandy, I know no more about this gathering than you do.”

“Some help you are. What are we supposed to do with them all?”

“Put out more chairs? There are stacks downstairs from when the Shakespeareans—”

He cut me off with a look. “Hell, man, the Butte Public Library can’t take sides in some damn dogfight of this kind.” Then the oddest thing. There on the topmost step, Sandison turned and gazed out at that sea of workingmen’s faces, much the way a pharaoh might have looked down from a pyramid. Then he gave a laugh that made his belly heave.

Shaking his head, he climbed onto the base of one of the doorway pillars. I feared he might fall, but he clambered up as if he did this all the time. The sight of him perched there, with the white aureole of his beard and cowlick against the grave Gothic stone of the building, made the crowd fall silent; once more, I could feel that strange mixed mood of apprehension and fascination that followed Samuel Sandison like the shadow at his heels.

“It looks as if the library has some new visitors today,” his voice rang off the building across the street, “and I have one thing to say to all of you. It pertains to behavior that will not be tolerated in this public institution.” Throughout the crowd I saw faces darken, the phalanx of idled miners readying for yet another warning against ‘unlawful assembly’ even here. “You maybe do it out of habit up there on the Hill or down in the shafts,” Sandison blazed, hands on his hips, “but this is not the place for that kind of thing, understand? I am only telling you once.” He glowered down at some of the hardest men in Butte as if they were schoolboys playing hooky. “No spitting.”
“You definitely have left me in want,” I reacted to the agent’s news with honest dismay, equipped with only the battered satchel that accompanied me everywhere. “The bulk of my worldly possessions is in that trunk.”

Squinting at me, he tossed aside his agent’s cap and donned a businesslike green visor. “Possessions like that do tend to bulk up when the claim form comes out, I’d say.” He slipped the pertinent piece of paper onto the counter in front of me, and I filled it out as expected, generous to myself and not the railroad.

And so, then and there, with only the clothes I stood in and my meager satchel, I gathered what was left of my resolve and stepped outside for my first full look at Butte.

It took second and even third looks as well, for the city before my eyes was an unlikely metropolis of nowhere: nearly a hundred thousand people atop the earth’s mineral crown, with nothing else around but the Rocky Mountains and the witnessing sky. The copper capital’s reputation for ambition in its every cornerstone was surely there to see, its streets climbing the blemished slope until neighborhoods of workers’ cottages mingled with mines and dump heaps along the top of the namesake hill. Up there, the long-legged black steel frameworks over the mineshafts populated the skyline like a legion of half-done miniatures of Eiffel’s tower. Beneath, every manner of building from shanty to mansion, church to chicken coop, was mixed together from one topsy-turvy block to the next. I have to admit, I felt a catch at the heart at how different it all was from the solitary homesteads and one-room school I had known the last time I tried my luck in this direction. Everything I knew how to part with, I left behind in a prairie teacherage in that prior time. But an urge can spin the points of a compass as strongly as the magnetism of ore, and in spite of all that happened back then, here I was, in territory off the map of imagination once more.
“Nearly done. Sandy, you are to be commended for your buying eye. The books you have gathered amount to a financial fortune as well as a literary one.”

“They ought to. Fifty damn years of collecting the things.”

Sandison prowled the room some more. I was growing uneasy with the drumbeat of his heels and utterances. When something was on his mind it sooner or later was put on mine, and now here it came. “I’ve been hearing from a couple of trustees. They’ve caught wind there’s a union bunch meeting in the basement. That true, Morgan?”

“Unerringly.”

“Are you out of your head or is there some other reason?”

I thought it best not to highlight the library as a refuge from dynamite. “Renovation,” I said vaguely. “The union group needs a temporary spot.”

“Maybe so, but why here? Doesn’t that look like we’re taking sides?”

“The company lawyers and whatnot troop in here all the time to use our legal collection. Fair is fair, Sandy. I believe the middle name of this library is public?”

“Spoken like a man of principle or a deluded romantic, I wish I knew which. You’re sure the union bunch isn’t up to any foolishness?”

“No more so than the Tuesday and Thursday Jabberwockians.”

He paced a few steps more, before depositing himself conclusively in his desk chair. “All right, thanks to you we’ll keep this place as public as a dogfight. I’ll tell the trustees to go jump in the lake.”

Just then Miss Mitchell from the cataloguing section, young and rather pretty and a bit of a flirt, came in with a question. I dealt with it in no time and she pranced out.

Sandison watched the back of her until she shimmied out of sight, then turned my way so weightily the chair groaned. “Morgan, I don’t see you making
Wincing, I put away reverie and sat up. My mind took a resolute new posture as well. You don’t need to be a biblical scholar to realize there is a time to equivocate and a time to decide.

Still in my slippers, I trotted down the stairs. In the living room, Grace whisked from the sideboard where she was putting away her mending, looking flustered at my hurried arrival. Peering across the room at each other, we spoke simultaneously.

“I was wondering if you might want to—”

“If you don’t have anything better to do—”

We stumbled to a pause at the same time. She caught her breath and expelled it in saying, “You first.”

“I’d be impolite.”

“Morrie, out with it, whatever it is—we can’t beat around the bush all night.”

“All right then. I wondered if you might like to go to Miners Day. With me, that is.”

Grace covered her hand with her mouth and hiccuped a laugh. I felt ridiculous and, calling myself every kind of a fool, was ready to slink back upstairs when she put out a hand to stop me. “Great minds run in similar tracks. I was about to knock on your door and ask you.”
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"Red-hot news, mister? Can't get any newer." A boy with a newspaper bag as big as he was came darting to my side. I handed him a coin and caught up with the headlines as he scampered off. WILSON CALLS LEAGUE OF NATIONS BEST HOPE FOR LASTING PEACE...LOCAL MINISTER CAUGHT IN LOVE NEST...ATT'Y GENERAL WARNS OF DOMESTIC BOLSHEVIKS...BOSTON POLICE THREATEN TO STRIKE... Ah, America in that feverish time; not merely a nation, but something like a continental nervous condition.

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OR IF YOU'RE NOT WELSH:
BOARD AND ROOM

Smiling to myself, I headed directly to the blue-painted front door of the house.

My knock was answered by a woman a good deal younger than I expected a boarding-house mistress to be. She was compact, in the manner of a dressmaker's form, shapely but with no excess. A substantial braid the color of flax tugged the upper lines of her face toward quizzical, as though she were being reined by some hand unseen. Whatever proportion of the world had knocked on this door, she seemed freshly inquisitive about a caller such as myself, well-dressed but not well-heeled. Her violet eyes met mine in mutual appraisal. "Madam," I began with a lift of my hat, "I feel the need--"

"I've heard that one before from half the men in Butte. I'm not a madam," she said, cool as custard, "and this is not a house of ill repute. For your information, that's on the next block." The door began to close.

"Let me start over," I amended rapidly. "With night overtaking me in a city where I don't know a soul, I feel the need of warm quarters and a solid meal. Your sign appears to offer those."

"Ah, Griff's latest masterpiece. It caught your eye, did it." She turned to consider the freshly painted words, a bit of lilt coming into her voice. "He'd turn this into Cardiff West if he could. Step on in, please, Mr.--?"

"Morgan. Morris Morgan."

"Griff will approve, you sound as Welsh as a daffodil." She extended a slender but work-firmed hand, and I noted the less than gleaming wedding band on her other one. "Grace Farraday, myself." Appraising the newspaper under my
arm and the satchel I was gripping, she paused. "Are those all of your belongings?"

"It's a long story," I said as if that explained everything.

The upstairs room she showed me was neat and clean, with subdued wallpaper. On the bed was a coverlet of an old style with an embroidered dragon rampant; it would be like sleeping under a flag of Camelot. I can be picky, but I liked everything I had met up with under this roof so far.

As I clicked the toggle switch to make sure the overhead electric bulb worked--another innovation unknown in my earlier Montana stay--my landlady-to-be similarly checked me over. "Drummer, are you?"

It took me a moment to recall that the term meant a traveling salesman, one who drums up business. "No, life has given me other rhythms to march to, Mrs. Farraday. My family originally was in the glove trade, until circumstances did that in. I now do books."

"Poetry?" she asked narrowly.

"Ledgers."

"Then you'll appreciate my own bookkeeping, which starts with a week's rent in advance."

"Very wise," I said with composure, although coming up with the sum took nearly all I had. Now I really had to hope opportunity of some sort presented itself without delay.

"Welcome to Butte, Mr. Morgan," Grace Farraday said with a winning smile, complete with dimple, as she pocketed my cash. "Supper's at dark this time of year."

The table was laid for four when I came down a few minutes early to scout the premises. There was no wax fruit nor fussy display of doilies on the sideboard,
a good sign. Instead, under the blaze of the modest but efficient electrical chandelier above the dining table, a wedding photograph was propped there in the spot of honor. Grace Farraday, even more fresh-faced than now, smiled out as capriciously as if the white of her bridal gown were a field of ermine, while beside her in a suit that only fit where it touched stood a foursquare fellow I took to be the much-mentioned Griff. He at least had good taste in women and mustaches, as he wore a full-lipped Rudyard Kipling version not unlike my own.

Just then my hostess popped out of the kitchen with a bowl of boiled potatoes and nodded to where I was to sit, saying “Make yourself to home, the other pair will be right along. Griff had to stoke the furnace and I told him to go wash up or eat in the street--ah, here’s the thundering herd.”

Through the doorway limped two scrawny half-bald figures that made me think I was seeing double. Both wore work overalls that showed no evidence of work, both held out gnarled hands for a shake, and both were grinning at me like leprechauns or whatever the Welsh equivalent might be. The nearer one croaked out: “I’m Griff. Welcome to the best diggings in Butte.”

“Same here,” echoed the other. “I’m Hoop.”

Was it humanly possible? I wondered, doing my best not to glance in the direction of the wedding photo during the handshake exchange with the wizened Griff. What manner of marriage could deplete a man from that to this?

With a bit of a twinkle, Grace Farraday rescued me from my confusion. “These specimens are Wynford Griffith and Maynard Hooper, when no one is looking. They’ve been part of the furniture here since my husband passed on and I’ve had to take in boarders.” As the duo took their places like old Vikings at a feast, she delivered as a dry benediction: “We all three could be worse, I suppose.”

“I’ll try to fit in, Mrs. Farraday.”

“Start by calling me ‘Grace’ and passing those spuds around, please.”
"I go by 'Morrie,'" I reciprocated, and formalities fell away in favor of knives and forks. "Didn't I tell you, Hoop?" Griff said as he sawed at his meat. "That new sign works like a charm. What part of Wales do your people hail from, Morrie?"

"Chicago."

"Before they crossed the pond," he persisted.

"Griff, I am sorry to say, the exact family origins are lost in the mists of--" I searched the gazetteer of my mind--"Aberystwyth and Llangollen."

"The grand old names," he proclaimed, adding a spatter of wooly syllables that could only have been Welsh. "'Tis the language of heaven."

"Why nobody talks it on earth," Hoop explained.

By then I was on about my third bite of the meat and ready to ask.

"Venison?"


"Ah." I looked down at the delicate portion. "What a treat to be served cutlets, " I emphasized the plural. "Are there seconds?"

She mulled that. "Tonight there are." Off she went to the kitchen stove.

While Grace was absent, the history of my tablemates came out. Now retired--"at least the tired part"--the pair had been miners, to hear them tell it, practically since the dawn of Butte. Which was to say, since copper became a gleam in the world's eye. The Hill, as they called it, held the earth's largest known deposit of the ore that wired everything electrical. Much of this I knew, but there was a tang to hearing them recite it with the names of mines such as the Orphan Girl and the Anselmo and the Badger. The crisscross of their conversation about life deep underground was such that I sometimes had to remind myself which was Griffith and which was Hooper. While they looked enough alike to be brothers, I figured out that they simply worked together so long in the mineshafts that the
stoop of their bodies and other inclinations had made them grow together in resemblance as some old married couples do.

"So, Morrie, you've latched on in life as a bookkeeper, Grace says," Griff was holding forth as she appeared with the replenished meat platter, rosettes from the cookstove heat in her attractive cheeks. It was surprising how much more eye-catching she was as the Widow Farraday.

"Except when the books keep me." Both men bobbed quizzically and Grace sent me a glance. Offhand as my comment was, it admitted to more than I probably should have. With rare exceptions, my stints of employment had been eaten away by the acid of boredom, the drip-by-drip sameness of a job causing my mind to yawn and sneak off elsewhere. One boss said I spent more time in the clouds than the Wright brothers. I had found, though, that I could work with sums while the remainder of my brain went and did what it wanted. "But yes," I came around to Griff's remark about bookkeeping, "I have a way with numbers, and Butte by all accounts produces plentiful ones. First thing in the morning, I'll offer my services at the office of the mining company, what is its name--Anaconda?"

Forks dropped to plates.

"You're one of those," Grace flamed. She pulled my rent money from her apron pocket and hurled it to the table, very nearly into the gravy boat. "Leave this house at once, Whoever-You-Are Morgan. I'll not have under my roof a man who wears the copper collar."

"The--?"

Hooper and Griffith glowered at me. "Anaconda is the right name for company men," Griff growled. "They're snakes."

"But believe me, I--"

"Lowest form of life," Hoop averred.
Enough was enough. Teetering back in my chair as far as I dared, I reached to the switch on the wall and shut off the chandelier, plunging the room into blackness and silence. After a few blank moments, I spoke into the void:

"We are all now in the dark. As I was, about this matter of the Anaconda Company. Can we now talk in a manner which will shed some light on the situation?"

I put the chandelier back on, to the other three blinking like wakened owls.

Grace stirred first. Her braid swung as she turned sharply to me. "How on earth, Morrie, can you land into Butte as innocent as a newborn?"

"I have been elsewhere for a number of years," I said patiently. "I knew nothing of this ogre you call Anaconda. To the contrary, I always heard 'the Richest Hill on Earth' spoken of as the argonauts must have talked of the California goldfields in 1849."

Hooper built up a sputter. "That, that's--"

"Hoop, house rules," Grace warned.

"--baloney. The company hogs it all. They've turned this town into rich, poor, and poorer."

Griff furiously took his turn. "Anaconda men sit around up there in the Hennessy Building on their polished--"

"Griff, the rules," came Grace's warning again.

"--rumps figuring out new ways to rob the working man. They bust the union, and we build a new one. They bust that, and we try again. Accuse us all of being Wobblies, and sic the National Guard on us."

I looked around the table for the definition. "Wobblies?"

"You really have been off the face of the earth, haven't you," Griff resumed crossly. "The Industrial Workers of the World. They're radical, see, and when
they hit town, they tried to edge out our miners’ federation. The Wobs had their
good points, but they riled things up to where the company squashed us all.”

One chapter spilled over another as Hoop and Grace chorused in on Griff’s
telling, but Butte’s story across the past ten years was that of the Romans over the
tin mines of Britannia, the colonial cartel over the diamonds of the Transvaal, the
Sydney financiers over the gold of Kalgoorlie... In short, the ruling powers mining
the miners, the lowly laborers in the pits of wealth. The Hill and the city, I was
told, had witnessed a cat’s-cradle of conflicts among the federation of miners, the
Wobblies (they were called that, I learned, due to certain members’ foreign accents
that turned the dubel-yu sounds of IWW into wobble-you wobble-you), and the
Wall Street-run company. There had been strikes and lockouts. Riots.
Dynamitings. The Anaconda Copper Mining Company bringing in goon squads.
A lynching, if I understood right. Half a dozen times, troops had come marching in
to impose order. And that was not all.

“Then there was the fire.” Grace’s voice stumbled. “In the Speculator mine
two years ago.” She drew a breath. “One hundred sixty-four men were killed. My
Arthur”—all the eyes in the room, including mine, darted to the wedding picture—
“among them.”

Griffith and Hooper moved uneasily in their chairs. “We was on the earlier
shift,” Griff murmured, “or we’d be pushing up daisies with the rest of them.”

“Any mine, anywhere, the bulkheads are supposed to have escapeways,”
Hoop provided in almost as low a voice. “The Speculator’s were solid concrete.”

In the pause that followed, I sat there before the jury of their faces.

There is something in me that attracts situations, I know there is. Here I
was, faced by three people I had only spent an amount of time with that could be
measured in forkfuls, asked to make one of those choices in life that can dwarf any
other. I had to pick a side, right now, or else hit the chandelier switch again and
the two of them truly came into their element. To me, the Hill seemed otherworldly, half mammoth factory, half fathomless wasteland; to my companions, it was home. Their bent backs straightened, and their gait became more spry. The ear-stinging screech of pulleys as ore cars were pulled up from the depths of earth and elevator cages were let down seemed to reach them as the most melodious of sounds. In accompaniment, Hoop turned suddenly voluble. “We drilled in every corner of this hill, didn’t we, Griff. In the Neversweat and the Glengarry and the Parrot and the Nipper and most of these other mines you see. One of us on the steel and the other on the hammer. We were a flash team, if I do say so myself. We’d make the hole in the rock in nothing flat, then set the dynamite and blooey! Break loose a wall of ore that’d keep a mucking crew busy half a day.” In all likelihood it was the effect of Hoop’s words, but I thought I felt a tremor in the ground of the copper butte as he spoke. He had paused, gazing around at the modern-day mining apparatus. “Now they drill with air.” I took that to mean high-powered compressed air drills, the throb of giant compressors a steady beat within all the other industrial medley around the mineshafts. Griff, conspicuously silent, had been watching the small ore cars trundle out of the lift at the Neversweat, a colossus of a mine with seven smokestacks rising from its buildings like a row of stark totems. “Got to hand it to Anaconda,” he said grudgingly, “the buggers know how to get the ore out. The gallows frames are humming today.”

His pronunciation of it, as I was to find common in Butte, was gallus, like the old word for suspenders. Accordingly it took me a moment to realize the term meant suspension of quite another sort. “That’s rather a grim name for headframes, isn’t it?”

“Miner humor,” said Hoop, and to this day I cannot decide whether he deliberately meant minor as well.
My tour, to hear my guides tell it, now was about to really begin. For there, amid the gray polar wastes of that Richest Hill, were scattered the pockets of populace that I had glimpsed from the train station.

“Here’s where the work of the world comes from,” Griff pronounced, and Hoop nodded. Between them, they pointed out each neighborhood. Finntown, straggling below a mine called the Neversweat. The Italians, it was stressed to me, occupied Meaderville, not be confused with Centerville where the Cornish congregated. Griff proudly singled out the smallish Welsh area of St. David’s, christened for its church, near our boarding house; beyond that, the Serbians had their own several blocks, elsewhere the Scandinavians had theirs, and below at the edge of downtown lay Chinatown, self-explanatory. My head was beginning to spin, and we had not even come to the sprawl of streets dead ahead, the Irish avalanche of small frame houses and overloaded clotheslines that constituted Dublin Gulch and beyond.

Wisely, Hoop hailed a mailman, and in a brogue that justified his assignment to the route, the postal carrier told me with great elaboration how to find the house of that night’s wake.

That job done, Griff proclaimed: “You’re all set, Morrie. The only thing to watch out for tonight is--”

Commotion blasted the last of his words away, so sudden and sharp my eardrums winced. The Hill had turned into a calliope, whistles shrieking at every mineshaft. “Change of shifts!” one or the other of my companions yipped as if school had let out.

Those next minutes will never leave me. Down from the mine mouths into the sloping streets cascaded hundreds of workworn men, turning into thousands as we stood watching. Here, on foot, the neighborhoods sluiced together as the miners trudged past, accented English of several kinds mingling with tongues my
ear could not readily identify, until each contingent came to its own set of home streets. It was as if Europe had been lifted by, say, the boot heel of Italy and shaken, every toiler from the hard rock depths tumbling out here. Old habits had followed them across the ocean, husky Finns clustered with other Finns, the Cornishmen not mingling with the Italians, on across the map. You never know what the mind will do, and I found myself in an unexpected reverie, thinking back to the recess battles of my Marias Coulee one-room school, the boys taking out the animosities of nationalities--Swedes versus Slavs--on each other with flailing fists and bloody noses. The cure there had been separate recesses. What on earth could ever hold the nations of Butte together?

By now Griff and Hoop were wistfully calling out to fellow Welshmen going by. "Keep fighting for that lost dollar, boys! We're with you all the way, Jared!" This last, I could tell, was addressed to a lean strong-featured individual at the front of the group, not nearly as far along in years as most of the other miners but plainly a leader. Striding along with a measured tread I identified as military, the younger man grinned through his grime and sent my companions a half wave, half salute.

The last of the miners filed past, the next shift went deep underground into the catacombs of copper ore, and we three turned back down the Hill toward the brick canyons of streets below. More than ever I felt like a foreign traveler in the Constantinople of the Rockies. One particular question of the many crowding my mind made its way out first.

"Hoop, Griff, help me to understand something. Why does Peterson, as Scandinavian as they come, pattern his business so strongly here to Dublin Gulch? Hiring me to stand in for him at wakes, for instance."

"Norwegians don't die enough," Griff imparted. "The Irish, they're another matter."
Not so much as a *hmm* met that; Peterson apparently took it as a matter of principle that anyone representing the funeral home should be at least as well-dressed as the corpse. He scrawled something on a pad and handed it to me. “Take this over to Gruber the tailor. He’ll fix you up.”

Tucking the note in my pocket, I turned to go, the vision of a new suit warming me inwardly. “Mr. Morgan,” the sepulchral tone stopped me in the doorway. “You have been to Irish wakes before, haven’t you?”

I was intimately acquainted with mourning; how many variations could there be? “Uncountable times.”

“You start tonight.”

The bantam figures of Hooper and Griffith, each talking into one of my ears, took me around town later that day. Downtown Butte, set into the lower slope of the Hill like the till in a cash register, drew pithy comments from my pair of tour guides. Passing the *Daily Post* building where the faint whiff of newspaper ink hung in the air, Hoop spat and said, “Anaconda owns that rag.”

When I remarked on the architectural preference of brick over stone in so many of the tall office buildings, I was informed the Anaconda Company owned the brickworks. Not to mention—although Hoop and Griff assuredly did—the lumber yard, profiting off the woodframe neighborhoods where the mineworkers lived. Then our stroll brought us to the Hennessy Building, dressier than its neighbors in its terra cotta trim and window mullions—if buildings could be said to be attired as we are, the Hennessy wore cufflinks and a tie pin.

But the pertinent article was escaping my attention, Griff and Hoop had me know, as one or the other profanely attested that here was where the copper collar was fashioned: the headquarters of the Anaconda Company.
“You’re gainfully employed. That’s not bad.” Standing on a chair, Grace took time from featherdusting the chandelier to nod at me in general approval.

“Even if it is when things go ‘boo’ in the night.”

“I am not naturally nocturnal,” I admitted, “but that’s when wakes seem to take place.”

“Just come in quiet, that’s the rule of the house.” She turned back to brushing at the chandelier with a practiced light touch, its crystals tinkling softly. Turbaned with a towel as she attacked these higher parts of the house, she looked exotic there on her perch, except for the familiarity of the violet gaze whenever she glanced around at me. I watched, unexpectedly held, while she went at the chore. I had intended to go to my room and read, but the moment absolutely would not let loose of me. Ten years whisked away with the strokes of the duster, and through no will of my own I was thrust back into the presence of another no-nonsense woman where dust and much else was concerned, that one whistling unforgettably as she put a prairie teacherage in spotless order for me. Who would have thought housekeeping could be a keepsake of the heart? “You’ll get to know the Hill,” Grace’s words reached me as if across more distance than was between us, “like it or not.”

Rousing myself, I began to say I could blame her star boarders Hoop and Griff if the job didn’t fit, when the floor shook under me, the chandelier crystals rattling as if trying to fly off.

“Jump!” I cried in alarm, my arms out to catch her.

Grace held to where she was, only giving me a bemused flash of smile.

“My, how gallant. It’s not an earthquake, if that’s what you’re thinking. Just some more dynamite.”

Feeling foolish, I toed the floorboards, which seemed to have settled back into place. “What, they’re mining here? Right under us?”
“Under all of Butte. There are miles and miles of tunnels—Arthur used to say it’s like Swiss cheese down there.” Her gaze at me had something like a jeweler’s-eye appraisal to it now. “Morrie? Do you have a minute?”

“Easily.”

She allowed me to help her down from the chair. But as soon as we were settled at the kitchen table, where serious talk is most comfortable, Grace Farraday, landlady, took charge. “There’s something you had better know, if you’re going to be rooming here for a while.” Contemplating me across the oilcloth from her, she tapped a finger on her cheek as if consulting the dimple. “Besides, you seem the sort who finds out anyway.” She nodded to indicate the spacious yard that wrapped around the house, then again to include the room we sat in. “The mining company wants to get its hands on all this. Buy the boarding house, that is to say, and tear it down. They send someone around every so often, and I throw hot water at them.”

I nearly fell out of my chair. “This house is sitting on a copper fortune?”

“Don’t we all wish.” She clasped her hands in a moment of mock prayer, then crumpled that. “No, it’s quite the opposite,” she went on soberly. “Anaconda wants to turn this into a glory hole.”

I didn’t even have to plead ignorance. Grace took one look at me and laid the matter out:

“A pit, really, but dug from below. If the ore vein they’re drilling on happens to head for the surface, they follow it on up. When the ore plays out, it’s cheaper for the company to bust through the ground and fence it off than to maintain an empty shaft.” She made a wry face. “Glory holes aren’t just any old where or we’d fall to China every time we go across town. The luck of the draw decides when and where Anaconda wants one, the company shysters try to tell me. That’s the kind of luck I can do without.” The towel turban had been slipping
toward her worked-up brow throughout this, and now she ripped it off as if it were one more nuisance. "The next time one of those copper collar monkeys comes calling--"

"Grace, let me try to catch up here. Doesn't the mining company offer you a good price? Good heavens, you have what they want, this property. A classic case of supply and demand if I ever heard one, and--"

"That's not Anaconda's way," she set me straight. "They'll only pay the going price for a none too new boarding house and that's next to nothing in these times. No, they'd rather set off their dynamite every so often to get on my nerves and make me sell. They don't know my nerves," she said proudly.

My own still were on edge from the quivering floor of a few minutes before. "I am not an expert on cave-ins, but just for the sake of speculation: what if they keep dynamiting and digging until a giant hole in the ground becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and this house falls in?"

Rather grandly, I thought, Grace shook that off. "The company bigwigs downtown won't let that happen. They don't want a lawsuit even Anaconda could lose, do they."

"Let us hope not. I don't want to sleep in the bottom of a glory hole."

"This place will be as dusty as one if I don't get back to housecleaning," she closed off my concern. Only to give me another gauging look before she got up from the table. "I've spilled more to you than I intended to, Morrie. Why do you have that effect? Please, though, don't pass along any of this to Hoop and Griff, all right? I don't want them fretting about whether they're going to have a roof over their old fool heads the rest of their days." Seeing my question coming, she met it with a toss of her braid. "They don't seem to pay the dynamiting any mind, they've been around so much of it. The time or two they were on hand when I ran
off an Anaconda shyster, I told them it was just some moron looking for Venus Alley.” I figured that out for myself; the next block over.

“Promise?” she pressed me on sparing Griff and Hoop the glory hole worry.

“I shall be a sphinx,” I assented.

“I knew you were capable,” she said.
My curiosity was tickled. "The copper collar, though--why does just that phrase keep coming to your lips and Grace's?"

Hoop looked at Griff. "Might as well let it rip," he said.

"Think so?" said Griff. "Right here?"

"Where better?"

"Righto. Here goes."

There on the sidewalk, Griff squared himself up, took a stance amid the passersby like Caruso among the opera extras, and began to sing in a croaky baritone to the tune of "The Old Oaken Bucket."

My old copper collar,
It makes my heart so proud.
When I wear the copper collar,
I fit right with the crowd.

No wedding band
Was ever so grand,
So it is always there to see,
The old copper collar,
That Anaconda fastened on me.

Griff finished on a sardonically sweet note that was very nearly a warble.

Up in the top floor of the Hennessy Building, someone in a celluloid collar frowned down and the window was shut with a bang.

"The Butte spiritual," Hoop defined Griff's performance for me, and onward we went.

It was when the two of them tramped me up the streets to the other butte, the rising ground where those long-legged headframes spraddled atop the dozens of minshafts and piles of tailings spilled down the hillside like gopher diggings, that
"You're the cryer," simpered the woman, her own eyes red from weeping, who opened the door to me that evening. "I can tell by the cut of your clothes." Truly, I did feel quite distinguished in the olive-brown herringbone worsted suit, vest included, that the tailor had produced. The boardinghouse trio had assured me I looked freshly spit-shined.

"Ma'am," I began, having learned my lesson in Butte manners of address that first time with Grace, "at this sad time, I wish to convey the deepest sympathy for the loss of your husband, on behalf of the--"

"Ma!" she brayed over her shoulder. "It's the funeral home fellow; dressed to the gills, come to pay his respects." She all but swept me into the house and steered me toward a tiny elderly woman, attired in the dignity of black and settled in a wicker armchair beside the open casket. "It's my rogue of a father, Lord save his soul, at rest there in the coffin," my escort instructed into my ear as she led me over. "Ma has been expecting you ever so much."

Approaching the wizened woman perched there on the wicker, I carefully held my hat over the vicinity of my heart and started my recital over. I had made sure with Peterson: I was not expected to actually cry, but a mournful mien, complete with murmurs and respectful remarks toward the deceased, was the order of the night.

"--and you may be assured I speak for Mr. Peterson in offering fullest condolences, Mrs. Dempsey," I concluded the set piece I had memorized.

The widow gazed up at me in her crinkled way, nodded an inch, and broke into a crescendo of sobs.

"There, there, Ma," the daughter consoled but made no other move, "you just cry it out, that's the girl." To me, frozen there as if I had set off a burglar alarm, she hissed: "You'll want to circulate yourself, people will be coming for the next some while."
Shaken by the storm of wailing behind me, I headed for the refuge of the long table where angelfood cakes and and sliced bread and bologna and a plethora of pickles and preserves and a carnival-glass bowl of tame punch sat. There, I figured, the crowd as it gathered would find its way to me. The thought was the deed. In no time a strapping black-haired man of middle years detached himself from a hushed group that I took to be other Dempsey daughters and their uncomfortable husbands. He came at me like a wind around a corner. “Pat Quinlan,” he provided, ready with a handshake. “That’s what I like to see, someone with the good sense to wrap himself around the food.”

In turn, I told him who I was as he fastened a keen gaze on me. He had the thrust of head I’d noticed in the miners at the change of shift, as if stooping under a mine timber. Facially, he showed the olive skin and conquistador cheekbones that affirmed the tale of Spanish Armada survivors washing up onto the coast of Ireland and contributing to the population.

“Morgan is your handle, is it,” he seemed to taste my name. “Creeping Pete is maybe getting the knack. Last time he sent a scissorbill called George King. How much more English does it get, I ask you?”

“If he had dispatched King George to the occasion, perhaps.”

“Sharp as a tack, are we. I like that.” With a glint of his own, Quinlan asked: “What brings you to Butte?”

“Reputation,” I began to invoke the Richest Hill on Earth, but he cut in with an all too knowing grin: “Yours or Butte’s? Ah, well, this isn’t the time or place to go into that, is it.” The widow’s wail had settled into a kind of teary drone that still had me flinching, but Quinlan showed no sign it registered on him. Rocking restlessly on his heels, he critically observed the slow traffic of grievers across the room, the men bending a quick knee at the low coffin bench for a muttered Our Father, the women kneeling in earnest to recite Hail Mary over and
over. I felt like a heathen, or at least distinctly unIrish, but my companion at the table clapped me conspiratorially on the shoulder. "Standing around without something that fits the hand, what kind of a wake is this?" Quinlan plucked two glasses from the table. "Here, hold these while I do the needful." Reaching into a pocket, he brought out a whiskey bottle and began to pour, back and forth, with a heavy hand.

Hastily I asked, "Didn't I read that Montana voted itself dry?"

"'Dry' doesn't mean ' parched to imbecility,' you could look it up."

"Mr. Quinlan--"

"Quin," he insisted, still pouring.

"Quin, then. I do not normally partake."

"Nobody else does it normal at a wake either."

He corked the bottle and it vanished to its nesting place. "Upsy daisy." Quinlan drank as generously as he poured, while I took a small mouthful that left a sting all the way down. When my eyes cleared, I inquired into the source of the supposedly forbidden liquor. "Bootleg rye." He gestured northerly. "What else is Canada for?"

"You were a close friend of the deceased, Quin?" I asked, to give the whiskey time to settle.

"Scarcely knew him. But a miner stands by another miner, to the last six feet of earth." A moment of brooding came into his dark eyes. Catching me watching this, he resorted to the knowing grin again. "Drink up, Morgan my man," he set the example. "One swallow is a lonesome bird." As if remembering his manners, he hoisted his glass in salute toward the casket and its occupant. "Tim there knew what thirst is, he was healthy enough in that respect."

"He wore a mighty name," I mentioned, alluding to Jack Dempsey, the heavyweight boxing champion.
"The name was the all. See for yourself--Tim was a shrimp. Look at him there, add in the bouquets and he's still a lightweight."

"Featherweight, I'd say, the 120-pound class," I said, drawing a look from Quinlan. Just then another man with the tilt of a miner came up to us. Like Quinlan, he was in what must have been his church clothes, a tight-fitting suit no doubt worn for both marrying and burying. "Mike McGlashan, meet Morgan, the new cryer," Quinlan did the honors. "Join us in commemorating poor old Tim."

"Never, Quin." McGlashan wagged his head piously. "I'm on the wagon."

Quinlan's expression said he had heard that one before. He produced the bottle again, uncorking it like a magician. "Run that past your sniffer and tell me if it's not the scent of heaven."

"Save me from myself, then," McGlashan sighed, covering his eyes and holding out a glass.

During this, the fiery rye splashed into my own glass, and on into me, as Quin and McGlashan gabbed and drank. The conversation and the alcohol flowed along until another of those cloudy moments descended on Quin. Gesturing toward the Dublin Gulch neighbors trooping from one black-draped member of the Dempsey female clan to the next with long faces brought out for the occasion, he said in a commanding manner: "This is way too sad, you could cut the air in here like crepe." He reached in another pocket and came out with a small red book. It was about the size of a breviary, but if my eyes and the rye weren't misleading me, musical bars filled its pages. Yet it had none of the binding of a hymnal and I wondered aloud, "What is that?"

"What's it look like, boyo. It's the Little Red Songbook."
McGlashan snickered. "Evans will think you’re a Wob at heart.” By then I could glimpse on the crimson cover a drawing of a black cat puffed up with fury and the words INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD. The boarding house rondelay about Buttes’s factions of miners returned to me, and I appraised Quin with fresh interest.

"It wouldn’t hurt Jared to look over his shoulder now and then,” he turned aside McGlashan’s remark and kept on thumbing through the little book, “but he’s stubborn even for a Taffy.” I had thought I was the only trace of Welsh amid the wall-to-wall Irish, but now I spotted across the room the soldierly figure whom Hooper and Griffith had called out to on the Hill. “Besides, he’s just here with the union tribute.” As I watched, the youthful but authoritative miner approached the widow, hat off, and bestowed on her an envelope which from the bulge of it contained a goodly amount of cash. “Are you going to stand there slandering me,” Quin was chiding McGlashan now, “or sing? Tim always liked a tune. Ah, here’s a nice one,” he asserted, crimping open the crimson book to it. “Get Pooch Lampkin over here, he has a voice on him. And Mick Collins, while you’re at it.”

I ducked away while the musical troops were organizing themselves, not sure my initial night as cryer should be spent in song. Peering over Quinlan’s shoulder at the small songbook, the impromptu ensemble squared up and let loose:

Oh Lord of all, of fowl and fish,
Of feast of life, of ev’ry dish;
Observe me on my bended legs,
I’m asking You for ham and eggs.

“They’re at it again!” a woman shrieked. “Quick, the true music of the faith!” Hastily the opposition vocal force formed up, a number of women in their darkest funereal best and a few older men pinched at the elbow by their wives and
conscripted into the choir. Rigid as if they had been called to their feet in church, the bunch of them chorused out:

    O'er the sod of God,
    O'er the bogs of peat,
    Everlasting choirs
    Raise a concert sweet!

Undeterred, Quinlan and McGlashan and colleagues soared into their next verse.

    And if thou hast custard pies
    I'd like, dear Lord, the largest size.

Across the room the choir of the righteous responded in a roar:

    Heathendom shall go down,
    Though it be everywhere!
    God the Father's kingdom
    Fills heaven and earth and air!

Sweetly as boys, the Quinlan quartet warbled a last verse:

    Oh, hear my cry, almighty Host,
    I quite forgot the quail on toast.
    Let your kindly heart be stirred
    And stuff some oysters in that bird.

"Shame!" cried a particularly broad woman in black, charging across the room. "My poor uncle, Heaven forgive him, gone on beyond there in the plush box and you singing one of those red songs. Pat Quinlan, you banshee. May God make your tongue fall out." Over by the door, I saw the young union man smile to himself at it all, put his hat on, and slip away from the proceedings.

Quinlan chortled. "Betty, you'd sell tickets to that, wouldn't you. Come have a glass with us, girl."
"I'll girl you, Quin." Nonetheless a glass appeared in her hand. "A taste, if you insist."

"Meet Morgan, the cryer," Quinlan thought to officiate. "He's new to Butte."

"Another pilgrim to the Richest Hill on Earth, have we here?" Betty turned her ample face to me. "Join the long line, Mr. Morgan." Luckily the bottle made its rounds just then, and while I hid into a gulp from my glass, I noticed that around the room the tone of the wake had lightened into loud conversation and laughter. "You're all so musically inclined," Betty was doing her part, "what do you get when you drop a piano down a mineshaft?" Quinlan and McGlashan and the others who had spent years underground cocked their heads in anticipation. She delivered the punchline with relish. "A flat miner. I'd hope it was you, Quin."

Resounding hoots greeted that, and were washed down in tribute. Centered as I was in the commotion, I apprehensively looked over toward the casket, the item of business I supposedly was here to attend to. The widow seemed to be crying to herself in contentment.

I jumped slightly as Betty fingered the fabric of my lapel. "My, quite the glad rags Creeping Pete's put you in." With a critical squint she studied the rest of me. "You look awful learned to be among miners."

"One can never get enough of the school of life," I said with slightly slurred dignity. Tonight was certainly proving that. I had found out that Butte did not sprout shrinking violets.

As if I needed any more proof, Betty batted me companionably on one shoulder and Quinlan on the other. "A man who knows his blarney," Quin commended. "I like that." He aimed his glass at me. "Morgan, a man as cultured as you can't help but have a tune stick to him along the way. Favor us with
something, why don’t you.” The entire crowd around the table loudly seconded
that.

“I regret to say, from what I’ve heard here tonight I’m not equal to the
task."

Betty turned indignant. “You don’t mean to tell us Creeping Pete’s sent a
man who can’t sing a lick?”

“Really, I--

“EVERYBODY!” Quinlan let out a shout. “The cryer’s going to do us a
number! Step on out, Morgan, and show us your tonsils.”

I had no choice and someone gave me a push toward the center of the
room besides. The houseful of people suddenly loomed around me like a crowd
at a bullring. Even the widow was wiping her eyes and watching me. My glass
half full in one hand, I braced back with the other for some support and found I
had put it on the foot of the casket. Inches away, the highly polished toes of the
shoes of poor departed Dempsey pointed in the air. Swallowing deeply, I stayed
propped there against the coffin wood as if this was the natural spot for the
representative of the Peterson Modern Mortuary and Funeral Home and tried to
think of any appropriate snatch of music. What issued forth was as much a
surprise to me as to the audience.

I cannot sing the old songs now.

It is not that I deem them low.

‘Tis that I can’t remember how

They go.

In the silence that met that, I bowed and retreated all the way behind the
casket. After long seconds, someone tittered and that loosed a chuckle in someone
else, and then the whole crowd gave a collective belly laugh and people pressed in
on me, a dozen at once making conversation and clapping me on the back and testifying what an enjoyable wake this was.

It was during this that I realized I was drunk as a gnat in a vat.

The rest of the evening became one long blur of relatives of the man who lay in state beside me and miners telling stories out of an endless supply and black-clad women wanting to know if they couldn’t fetch me just a bite more of angel cake, while I concentrated on not tipping over into the casket.

At last everyone wore down, and after a groggy round of farewells and a final whap on the back from Quin, I stepped out into the street and began to make my unsteady way out of Dublin Gulch. The chill air of the Butte night collided with the alcohol in me. The stars were out but, I scolded them, too far to be any help to me. Such splotches of illumination as existed shone from mines along the Hill that were being worked around the clock, and nearer to downtown I met up with occasional streetlights, so that my route as I wove my way home toward the boarding house went back and forth between lit and dim. It fit my condition.

Then, though, came the strangest sensation. Out of that dapple of light and dark, the shadows began to follow me. They took shapes as warped as in a bad dream, sometimes huge and foglike, sometimes small and flitting. Like a chilly breath on the back of the neck, I could feel the darkness changing forms behind me. Some small sane part of my mind kept telling me these specters were the distilled and bottled sort, but the corner of my eye was convinced otherwise. A time or two when I suddenly looked back, the shadows nearly became human, then faded into the other patterns of the night. If anyone was there, they were as uncatchable as cats.

Telling myself woozily this was what came of an evening spent in the company of a casket and its contents, I clattered in to the boarding house and bed.
The morning after, Grace left on the stove a pot of coffee of a stoutness that would have brought the Light Brigade back to life.

Numb everywhere above my shoulders, I sat at the kitchen table and worked cup after cup into myself. I had missed breakfast. The household was well into its day, Hooper in the garden hoeing weeds at a stately pace and Griffith passing by in the hall on his way to some chore with a monkey wrench in hand. Catching sight of me, Griff backtracked and poked his head into the room.

“How’s the crying game going?”

“I can still smell it on my breath.”

“Didn’t I tell you so?”

“Unfortunately, not quite.” I wished for that moment back, when he was warning me of the one thing to be watched out for at a Dublin Gulch wake and all the whistles went off.

Griff waved away silly concern as he limped off. “You’ll get used to the elbow-bending. It beats toadying for Anaconda.”

I still was debating that with myself when Grace bustled in with her day’s food shopping.

“Morning, Morrie,” she said pleasantly, “what’s left of it.”

“Short days and long nights are the career of a cryer, I foresee. The coffee was an act of mercy; thank you. Can I help you with those provisions?”

“You had better sit quiet and let your eyeballs heal, I’d say.” She began putting groceries away. “I’ve had the good luck never to go to a wake, what was it like?”

I recounted to her what I could remember of the muddled evening. Mostly, the clink of glasses and the clash of singing voices came to mind. At the mention of Quinlan, she bobbed her head in approval. “Quin was a friend of my Arthur, although they didn’t see eye to eye on union matters.”
“Then there was a Dempsey niece, a rather stout woman named Betty—”

“Betty the bootlegger,” Grace had no trouble with the identification. “She knows the right people along the border. Prohibition is the making of her.”

I sat wordless, more than ever a novice in the ways of Butte, dumbly considering a mourning occasion fueled with moonlight liquor that redounded to the profit of someone in the family. The C.R. Peterson Modern Mortuary and Funeral Home maybe was in the wrong end of things.

“Morrie?” Grace closed the cupboard and joined me at the table, settling lightly. “I’ve had a fair number of boarders, besides the palace guard”—Griff could be heard banging in the basement—“but none of them blew in from nowhere quite like you. What was your last place of address, if I may ask?”

“Oh, that. Down Under, as they say.”

“Under what?”

“I refer, Grace, to Australia.”

“I was teasing. I’m not surprised you have an ocean or so behind you. You have that look.”

“It’s the mustache.”

“My Arthur always said his was the bit of brush hiding the picnic,” she reported drily. “Women don’t have that disguise.”

“Spoken like a high priestess of the plain truth, Rose— I’m sorry; Grace.”

Before my embarrassment could pool on the table, Grace gave my slip of the tongue the gentlest of treatment. “Whoever she was, was she as pretty as her name?”

“At least.”

“Maybe it was worth some Down Under, then,” she left me with, rising and reaching for her apron. “It’s nearly noon, I have a meal to fix or the three of you will have to go in the yard and graze.”
My workdays—nights, rather—took a topsy-turvy pattern. I would nap in the afternoon, storing up energy as a pugilist must for a bout, stoke up some more at suppertime with Hoop and Griff and Grace, then past sundown ascend the Hill, suit and vest and hat and shoes freshly brushed, to that evening’s wake. I admit, I felt oddly like one of those mechanical statuettes of Death that clank out of a guildhall clock tower at the appointed hour and chase the merrymakers around the cupola. Yet, wearing as the wake routine was, I had to concede Dublin Gulch whatever manner of mourning it chose. The Hindus set their departed afloat on the Ganges on a raft of fire. The Sioux placed their deceased warriors in bower in trees. On it goes, around the world, the ceremony of farewell. If the Butte Irish, faced with so many early graves from the toils of mining in the depths of the earth, chose to dilute grief with imbibing, it was an understandable mix.

“That oak job—how much does the Creeper get for that?”

“Quin, my sympathy.” I tucked in his pocket the funeral home’s price list the size of a playing card. “I hadn’t realized you are in need of a casket.”

“Of course I’m not. I just want to know how much that Scandahoovian soaks a person for one that will grow acorns.”

“They say you gave them a poem at Dan Kelly’s wake.”

“Did I? Would you like one said—‘To the Road’s End,’ perhaps?—on this sad occasion, Mrs. Rafferty?”

“It’d be a relief from the pernicious singing.”
“My golly, you’re in demand.” Peterson rubbed his hands over the ledger. “O’Day, McManus-- the wakes are lined up waiting--Popovich, Higgins...”

“Popovich?”

“He married into the Carnahans, they’re doing him the favor.”

Those initial weeks, the job of cryer was an introduction to Butte, definitely, although hardly the one I had sought. Life at the mortuary remained, well, creepy. First of all, there was always someone dead on the premises, in one room or another. And the wage, while steady, was obviously not one of the Hill’s paths to riches. What disquieted me more than either of those, however, was that question of shadows. Was it a trick of the darkness and the bootleg rye? The occasional night when I managed to slip away from the conviviality of the wake long enough to dump my drink in the kitchen slop bucket, the shadows on the way home perhaps behaved less like lurking black furies; but they never quite vanished. Watching over my shoulder as I zigzagged to the boarding house, I had to wonder whether an old loss was catching up with me. Every footfall, it sometimes seemed, brought back the thought of my brother and the cold lake waters that took him.

Not all haunting is mere superstition. I’d noticed a certain look in Grace’s eyes whenever Griffith and Hooper got going on Anaconda and the Speculator fire and its perished miners; at such moments Arthur Farraday left his matrimonial picture frame and came to her side, I would have wagered.

One of those suppertimes, as Griff and Hoop hobbled off to their own pursuits, I spoke up as she somberly cleared away the dishes.

“May I be of help?”
She took so long to answer, I wondered if she considered the question hypothetical. But then she looked over with a bit of glint and said, "You can dry, if you don't have dropsy."

Following her into the kitchen, I took up a dish towel. "As Marco Polo said, I know my way around china. I did dishes at the Palmer House between school terms."

Grace filled the dishpan, leaving the rinsing and drying to me. It had been a long while since I settled in side by side with a woman to such a chore. With her black hair bunned and her sleeves rolled up, she was an aproned vision of efficiency at her task, but the dimple did sly work of its own as she glanced at me and inquired: "Off on a toot again tonight, are you?"

"Grace, it is my job. I seem to recall you being all for it."

"Anyone who runs a boarding house needs to be in favor of anything a lodger does to come up with the rent." That little glance sideways again. "Within reason."

I smoothed my mustache while I thought that over. "Actually, life as cryer has its drawbacks. A main one is that I wake up each morning feeling as if my brain were being pickled, gray cell by gray cell."

She prompted: "And while you still have a few to spare?"

"Tomorrow I shall find the public library and consult Polk."

Grace paused in her sudsy grapple with the meat platter, puzzled. "Poke who?"

"The Polk city directory." I smiled. "The treasure map to where ledgers are kept."
Grace filled the dishpan, leaving the rinsing and drying to me. It had been a long while since I settled in side by side with a woman to such a chore. With her black hair bunned and her sleeves rolled up, she was an aproned vision of efficiency at her task, but the dimple did sly work of its own as she glanced at me and inquired: “Off on a toot again tonight, are you?”

“Grace, it is my job. I seem to recall you being all for it.”

“Anyone who runs a boarding house needs to be in favor of anything a lodger does to come up with the rent.” That little glance sideways again. “Within reason.”

I smoothed my mustache while I thought that over. I had to admit, presenting myself at a wake every night made me feel uncomfortably like one of those mechanical statuettes of Death that clank out of a guildhall clock tower at the appointed hour and chase the merrymakers around the cupola. Grace had a point about the reasonableness of that as a lasting occupation. “Life as cryer does have its drawbacks,” I conceded to her. “A main one is that I wake up each morning feeling as if my brain were being pickled, gray cell by gray cell.”

She prompted: “And while you still have a few to spare?”

“Tomorrow,” I said decisively, “I shall find the public library and consult Polk.”

Grace paused in her sudsy grapple with the meat platter, puzzled. “Poke who?”

“The Polk city directory.” I smiled. “The treasure map to where ledgers are kept.”
There is an old story that any Londoners with a madman in the family would drop him off at the library of the British Museum for the day. I was given a searching look as if I might be the Butte version when I presented myself at the desk of the public library that next morning and requested both the *R.L. Polk & Co. City Directory* and Julius Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* in the original Latin.

The stout woman I took to be the head librarian—she had eyeglasses enchained around her neck commandingly enough for it—scrutinized me some moments more, then marched off into the maze of shelves while I found a seat at a broad oaken table. Everything was substantial, the brass-banistered stairway up to the mezzanine of books in tall rows, the green-shaded electrical lights hanging down from the high ceiling like watchfobs of the gods. I have always felt at home among books. It seemed like old friends dropping by when the woman from the desk plopped my requested two in front of me.

Aware that I should get down to business, I instead drew the *Gallic Wars* to me first, unable to resist. I had ordered it up by habit, as a test. To me, a repository of books is not a library without that volume in the mother of languages, but merely a storehouse for worn copies of Ryder Haggard’s jungle thrillers and the syrupy novels of Mrs. Mary V. Terhune. No, Caesar’s prose that reads like
poetry—*Omnia Gallia est divisa in tres partes* --is essential in a collection of knowledge, a siren call from Roman words to ours. Handling the book fondly as I was, I became aware of its own touch: tanned leather, not the more common calfskin cover put on for show. I examined the binding: sewn rather than glued. What I was holding was an exceptionally fine copy, so much better than my own that had gone astray with my missing sea trunk that I momentarily found myself jealous of the Butte Public Library.

Just then a drove of schoolchildren came pattering through, herded toward the downstairs by their shushing teacher, evidently to a story hour. Second-graders, I judged, that unhushable age when whispering is as natural as breathing. I felt a pang as the class passed through like a murmur in church. The distance of ten years evaporated, and I swear, for some moments I was back at the Marias Coulee one-room school, my stairstep eight grades there in front of me as intricate and intriguing as a daily circus. And after school, the mental workout of Latin lessons with the keenest pupil a teacher ever had, Paul Milliron. Sitting there watching the Butte teacher shoo her boys and girls along as they descended the library stairs a whisper at a time, I envied her the job but knew it was too late in the school year for me to even think of such an application. Besides, my credentials were not exactly the standard ones.

Sighing, I patted Caesar and closed him away. Opening the city directory, I began to work my way through the idiom of Polk. There they were as ever, the abbreviated citizens found throughout America, *brklyr, carp, messr, repr* et cetera. The skills of bricklayers, carpenters, messengers and repairers were not my own. Nor on subsequent pages could I see myself employed in feather dying, felt mattress manufacture, or fish salting. Dutifully I paged on through searching for where ledgers lived. Butte, I discerned, had a modest number of banks for a city of its size; a plenitude of funeral homes; an uninspiring variety of mercantile
enterprises; and one Gibraltar of assets, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company. I can’t deny, it was tantalizing, that financial colossus which surely needed bkpr---bookkeepers--of a certain talent to sluice the riches of the Hill into Anaconda coffers.

Temptation had to vie with distraction, however. Something about the *Gallic Wars* at my elbow kept diverting me. Even when they are closed, some books do not shut up. Why was this beautifully sewn leather edition, a collector’s item if I had ever seen one, spending its existence on a public shelf in a none too fastidious mining town? Once more I peered at those tiers on the mezzanine, and if I was not severely mistaken, many other volumes sat there beckoning in bindings of royal reds and greens and blues and buffs. Curiosity got the better of me. Up the stairwell I went.

And found myself in a booklover’s seventh heaven.

As though some printerly version of Midas had browsed through the shelves, priceless editions of Flaubert and Keats and Tolstoy and Goethe and Melville and Longfellow and countless other luminaries mingled on the shelves with more standard library holdings. I could not resist running my fingers along the handsomely bound spines and tooled letters of the titles. What on earth was the matron at the desk thinking, in scattering these treasures out in the open? Yet the more I looked, the more I met up with the complete works of authors, surely deliberately collected and displayed. Mystified, I was stroking the rare vellum of a Jane Austen title when an all too loud voice made me jump.

“You look like a bookworm on a spree.”

I am of medium height, but when I turned around, I was seeing straight into a white cloud of beard. Considerably above that, a snowy cowlick brushed against furrows of the forehead. In a suit that had gone out of fashion when the last
century did, the man frowning down at me had considerable girth at the waist and
narrowed at the chest and shoulders; like the terrain around us, he sloped.

Caught by surprise, I had no idea what to make of this apparition
confronting me amid the books. That beard was as full as that of Santa Claus, but
there was no twinkle of Christmas nor any other spirit of giving in those glacial
blue eyes.

Keeping my own voice low, I responded: “Butte is rich in its library
holdings, as I assume we both have discovered?”

“Too bad the town doesn’t have the brains to go with the books,” he
drawled at full volume. “Quite a reader, are you? Who do you like?”

 Appropriately or not, my gaze caught on a lovely marbled copy of Great
Expectations. “Dickens,” I began a whispered confession that could have gone on
through legions of names. “There’s a person who could think up characters.”

My partner in conversation grunted and reached farther along in the shelves
of fiction. “I’ll stick with Stevenson, myself. That Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,
there’s the two sides of life.” When he took down the book, the backs of his hands
were ridges of bone and vein. Abruptly he swung around, towering over me again,
and demanded loudly: “You like Kipling or don’t you?”

Oh, was I tempted to recite: “What reader’s relief is in store/When the
Rudyards cease from kipling/And the Haggards ride no more.” Instead I put a
thumb up and then down, meanwhile murmuring, “His stories are splendid sleight-
of-hand, the poetry is all thumbs.”

“Not short of opinion, are you.” He fixed a look on me as if he had
shrewdly caught me at something. “Saw you down there pawing at Caesar.
English isn’t good enough for you?”

“Lux ex libris,” I tried to put this absolute stranger in his place, “whatever
the language on the page.”
“If light comes from books,” he drawled back, “how come Woodrow Wilson isn’t brighter than he is?”

That stopped me. Was I really expected to debate the intellect of the President of the United States within hearing of everyone in the building?

Just then a couple of elderly ladies entered the reading room below, still chattering softly from the street. Frowning so hard the beard seemed to bristle, my companion leaned over the mezzanine railing. “Quiet!” he roared. You could shut down Hell with a voice like that.

That legendary pairing, madman and library, seemed to be coming true as I watched. All heads now were turned up toward us, the woman at the desk whipping her eyeglasses on and glowering in our direction. I envisioned arrest for disturbing the literary peace, even if I was barely an accomplice. “Perhaps,” I whispered urgently, “we should adjourn to a less public spot, lest the librarian take steps—”

“Ignoramus, I am the librarian.” Straightening himself to new white height of cowlick, he scanned down at me, frowning fiercely all the while. “Do you genuinely not know who the hell you’re talking to?”

“I remember no introduction,” I said coolly.

He waved that off. “Samuel Sandison. Come on into my office before you cause any more ruckus, I want to talk to you.”

I hesitated before following, but the ravishing books were too much of a lure. Edging through the doorway of his overflowing office at the back of the mezzanine, I made sure that the nameplate on the desk matched what he had told me. Sandison sandwiched himself behind the desk and wordlessly pointed me to a book-stacked chair. I cleared away the pile and gingerly sat. “Mr. Sandison, the books you have here—” I hardly had the words. “They’re beautiful.”

“They ought to be,” he rumbled. “A good many of them are mine.”
“Yours?”

“Hell yes. From the ranch.”

“Ah. The ranch. You were a livestock entrepreneur, I take it? Sheep?”

“Cattle.” He delivered me a look that made me want to duck. Well, how was I to know? From the train, Montana expanses appeared to me to be as populous with fleeces as the heavens are with clouds.

Sandison leaned across the mess of his desk as though I might be hard of hearing as well as dim of intellect. “You mean you really never have heard of the Triple S ranch?”

“I confess I have not, but I have been in town only a short time.”

“It’s gone now,” he growled. “That’s why I’m here. It was the biggest spread in the state, everybody and his brother knew the SSS brand.”

“Mmm. By ‘brand,’ do you mean the practice of searing a mark onto the animal?”

“That’s what branding is. It’s the Latin and Greek of the prairie.”

That startled me. “Intriguing. And so SSS would translate to--?”

He laughed harshly. “Saddle up, sit tight, and shut up, my riders called it. Most of them stuck with me anyway.” An odd glint came to him. “I had an army of them, you know.”

“I regret to say, I am not seer enough myself to know the intricacies of reading burnt cowhide.” It fell flat with him. “But I am eager to grasp the principle behind alphabetizing one’s cows--”

“It’s not alphabetical, fool. Brandabetical.”

“--excellent word! The brandabetical concept, then. Do you start with the full lingual entity, in this case ‘saddle up, sit tight, and shut up,’ and condense from there?”
“Hell no,” he let out and immediately after that, “but you’re right in a way. SSS stood for Seymour-Stanwood-Sandison. I had to have partners in the ranch operation. Money men.” Those last two words he practically spat. Eyeing me as though I were guilty by association, he drawled: “I saw you with your nose stuck in Polk. I suppose you’re another refined hobo who heard about the Hill and came here to make a killing.”

“A living, I had in mind.”

“Ha. You packing around any education worth the description?”

“The Oxford variety.”

He looked at me skeptically.

“I bootstrapped my way through.”

“Another shoeleather philosopher,” he grumbled. “The Wobblies were full of them, they must empty out the bughouse into Butte every so often.”

“I see my little joke did not catch on. Actually, I did work my way through an institution of higher learning--the University of Chicago.”

He tugged at his beard. “That hightoned place next to where the World’s Fair was in ’93?”

“That is the only University of Chicago there is, I believe.”

“In other words,” he said as if it might be my epitaph, “all you know anything about comes from books.”

I bridled. “That is hardly a fair assessment of--”

“Never mind. You’re hired.”

“You are mistaken, I haven’t even made up my mind where to-- Here?”

“Here is where the books are, ninny.”

“Sam Sandison? He’s meaner than the devil’s half-brother. If you’re gonna be around him, you better watch your sweet--”
"The rules, Griff."

"--step, is all I was gonna say, Grace." Griffith speared a potato and passed the dish onward to me, along with a gimlet gaze. "You must have hit him when he was hard up for help, Morrie. He don't hire just anybody."

"I was as taken by surprise as all of you appear to be." Announcement of my sudden employment at the library had set my suppermates back in their chairs, for some reason that I could not decipher. "What can you tell me of my new lord and master? None of you were so bashful about the business practices of the Anaconda Company." I beckoned the gravy boat from my potato compatriot. "For a start, Griff, what exactly is the meaning of 'meaner than the devil's half-brother' in regard to Samuel Sandison?"

"He's one of the old bucks of the country, tougher than"--cutting strenuously at the piece of meat on his plate, Griff glanced in Grace's direction and hedged off--"rawhide. Had a ranch they say you couldn't see to the end of. I don't just know where. You, Hoop?"

Hooper waved vaguely west. "Someplace out there in scattareation."

"Employing, he told me, a veritable army of cowboys--but I would imagine any livestock enterprise of that size needed a rugged crew and a firm hand?"

"You're lucky he's only bossing books around any more," was all the answer from Griff. Vigorously chewing, he turned toward the head of the table. "Heck of a meal, Grace."

I sampled the stringy meat and sent an inquiring look. "Not chicken."

Grace shook her head.

"Rabbit, then."

"You do know your way around food, Morrie," she remarked. It occurred to me how much I was going to miss the tablefuls at wakes.
“As I have been trying to say, Mr. Peterson, I am sorry--”

“But you’re the most popular cryer I’ve had in ages.” He himself appeared ready to weep.

“--to have to give notice, but another opportunity has presented itself.”

He cast a mournful look at the ledger. “One of our busiest times since St. Patrick’s Day.”

“I am sure an equally qualified cryer will be called forth by the need.”

“There’ll always be an opening here for you,” he said feelingly, the lids of the caskets standing at attention behind him.

That was the end of being chased every night by shadows. Yet something lurked from that experience, that sensation of being trailed through life by things less than visible. I tried telling myself Butte after dark simply was feverishly restless, what with the thirst of thousands of miners built up in the hot underground tunnels being assuaged in speakeasies now that saloons were prohibited, and desire of another kind busily paying its dues in the red-light section known as Venus Alley--practically nightly, Grace turned away at her door some lit-up Lothario seeking a house of the other sort. One could easily come down with the feeling in that city of thin air and deep disquiets, I decided, that even shadows had the fidgets. It is surprising how persuasive you can be when talking into your own ear.

My new career required resetting the clock by twelve hours, Samuel Sandison having instructed me to present myself at the library the next morning at nine sharp. When I approached the rather fanciful Gothic building on the central street called Broadway--modesty seemed to have no place in Butte--I saw a cluster of people outside the front door and was heartened by this sight of an eager citizenry lined up to get at the library’s holdings.
In their midst, however, loomed Sandison, and bringing up the rear was unmistakably the reading-room matron, looking sour. The group proved to be the entire library staff, all the way to janitor. Sandison was counting heads before letting anyone through the arched doorway—the same mode of management, I was to learn, he had used on his cowboys each morning at the horse corral.

He took notice of my presence with a vague gesture. “This is Morgan, everybody. He’ll be puttering around the place from now on.”

I filed in with the rest of the staff, happily conscious of the castelike grandeur, the Tuscan red wainscoting, the dark oaken beams set against the ceiling panels of white and gold, the all-seeing portrait of Shakespeare above the reading room doorway. And beyond, the regal reds and greens and gilds of those alluring books of Sandison’s collection.

But no sooner were we in the building than he cut me out of the herd, and just as adroitly, the matron of the reading room. “Miss Runyon will show you the ropes,” Sandison provided with another of those gestures that might mean anything. “Come on up when she’s had her fill of you,” he dismissed us and mounted the stairs to his office.

Miss Runyon and I considered each other.

“What foolishness has he put you in charge of?” she demanded, as though she had caught me trespassing.

“That seems to be yet to be determined.”

“That man.” Her voice had a startling deep timbre, as if the words resounded in her second chin. “He runs this place to suit himself. The trustees would never have named him librarian but for those precious books of his.” Clapping her chained eyeglasses onto her formidable nose, she directed: “Come along, you had better know the catalogue system.”
Miss Runyon kept me in tow as we circumnavigated the reading room, her
realm and her orb, her temple and her fortress, she let me know in every manner
possible. I took note of the goodly assortment of dictionaries and cyclopedias, and
the selection of *au courant* magazines and the newspapers racked on spine sticks,
all of it recited to me as if I were a blind man in a museum. One oddity, though, she
paid no attention to; conspicuously paid it no heed, if I was not mistaken. It was a
display case, glassed over, taking up one corner of the room. My mild inquiry
about it brought:

“Pfft, that. The boys’ dollhouse.”

Naturally that increased my curiosity and I went over to it, Miss Runyon
clopping after me. Encased there, with plentiful nose smudges and handprints on
the glass testifying to the popularity of its viewing, sat an entire miniature mine. It
looked so amazingly complete I half expected it to bring up teaspoonfuls of earth
from under the library. The headframe--gallows frame, I corrected myself--the
machine house, elevator shafts, tunnels, tiny tracks and ore cars, the entirety was a
Lilliputian working model. Sniffily Miss Runyon told me the diorama had been
built for a court case over a mining claim and afterward donated to the library.
“He--” her eyes swept upward toward Sandison’s office “--insists it sit here in the
way. It’s a nuisance to keep clean.”

“Wonders often are,” I murmured, still taken with the remarkable model of
what made Butte the place it was.

“Now then,” Miss Runyon said briskly, “is that enough of an initiation into
librarianship for you?”

“The most thorough, Miss Runyon, since my introduction to the Reading
Room of the British Museum.”

I seemed to have invoked the Vatican to a Mother Superior. “You, you
have actually been--?”
“Under that great domed ceiling, with its delicate blue and accents of gold, with every word ever written in English at one’s beck and call,” I dreamily sketched aloud, “yes, I confess I have. And would you believe, Miss Runyon, the very day I walked in, my reader’s ticket in my hand, the seat of power was vacant.”

“The seat of—?”

“Seat number three, right there in the first great semicircle of desks.” I leaned confidingly close to her. “Where Karl Marx sat, those years when he was writing Das Kapital. I will tell you, Miss Runyon, sitting in that seat, I could feel the collective knowledge, like music under the skin, of all libraries from Alexandria onward.”

With a last blink at me, Miss Runyon retreated to her desk and duty.

When I went up to Sandison’s office, I found him standing at its cathedral-like window, trying to peek out at the weather through an eyelet of whorled clear glass. “Damned stained glass,” he grumbled, “what do the nitwits think a window is for?” He rotated around to me. “She show you every mousehole, did she?”

“Quite an educational tour. What I am wondering, Mr. Sandison—”

“Hold it right there.” He held up a rough hand as he moved to his oversize desk chair and deposited himself in it heavily. “When somebody calls me that, I feel like I’m around a banker or lawyer or some other pickpocket.”

To escape that category, I asked: “Then what form of address am I to use?”

He looked across his desk at me conspiratorially. “I’ll tell you what; call me Sandy. On the ranch, only my foreman got to do that. It’ll drive that old bat Runyon loco.”

“Sandy, then,” I tried it on for size, none too comfortably. “What I need to know is the scope of my job.”
"I suppose." Rubbing his beard, he gazed around the cluttered room as if some task for me might be hiding behind one of the piles of books. "Morgan"—there was a dip of doubt in his tone as he spoke it—"how are you at juggling?"

"Three balls in the air at once is a skill that persists from boyhood," I answered cautiously, "but when it comes to ninepins—"

"No, no—the calendar, oaf, the calendar." Irritably he pawed around in the pieces of paper that carpeted his desk and finally came up with that item. "People always want to use this damn place, they need a room to hold this, meeting or that, you'd think a library was a big beehive. Myself, I don't see why they can't just check out a couple of books and go home and read. But no, they bunch up and want to cram in here and talk the ears off one another half the night." He squinted as if drawing a bead on the offenders penciled in on various dates. "The Shakespeare Society. The Theosophists. The West Side Arts and Crafts Club. The Ladies' and Gentlemen's Poetry and Social Circle. The League of Nations Advocates. The Jabberwockians. The Gilbert and Sullivan Libretto Study Group. And that's hardly the half of them, wanting some damn night of their own to come in here and take up space. They've all got to be juggled."

"I think I can tend to that, Mr.--"

He shot me a warning glance.

"--Sandy."

There may have been a sly smile within the beard. The librarian of Butte, for all that entailed, settled more deeply into his chair. "I figured if you're a man who knows his books, you can deal with the literary types who come out when the moon is full." He passed the much scrawled upon calendar to me. "They're all yours now, Morgan," said Samuel Sandison with that intonation I came to know so well.
Looking back, that exchange that first day set a telling pattern. You would think, with two persons in one cloistered office, for he had me clear a work space for myself in a corner, that he might sooner or later call me Morrie. Yet that familiar form of address never passed his lips. Each time and every time, he would either preface or conclude what passed for conversation between us with a drawled Morgan? even when it wasn’t a question. As if it were my first name.

As if he knew.

Morgan Llewellyn. That is my rightful name. Yes, that famous breed of Llewellyn. I know I carry only a minor share of its reknown in the world, but reflected glory is still glory of a sort. It was my brother Casper who reigned as lightweight boxing champion of the world, “Capper” Llewellyn in the inch-high headlines every time he won by another knockout. And I was his “genius” of a manager.

Even yet he causes me to lie awake, when the mind tussles with itself before sleep comes, thinking of how life paired us so peculiarly. Casper was magical, if confidence and prowess count as magic. Even as a boy, he had the cocky outlook that nothing was out of the reach of a good left hook, and my role as older brother often amounted to fishing him out of trouble. Which perhaps made it inevitable, when he was matriculating as a boxer in Chicago’s West Side fight clubs and I was graduating from the university, that he insisted I become his manager. He did not possess my brains and I did not have his brawn, he pointed out all too accurately, so we had better join onto one another as if we were Siamese, in his words. Casper could be exasperating, but in the ring he was a thing of beauty, a Parthenon statue of a perfect athlete sprung to life, and I have to say, I felt somewhat wizardly in fashioning his boxing career for him. Carefully I chose opponents who would build his record, alternating his bouts between the easy fighters called cousins and
the tougher ones we stopped Casper’s skills on. It became only a matter of time until the name Casper Llewellyn would be on the card of a title fight.

Now the other tussle in the mind’s nightly shadows. Rose, delightful maddening Rose.

Along the way he and she met, a wink served its purpose, and they fell for each other like the proverbial ton of bricks. Brother-in-law was added to my responsibilities. At first I was wary of Rose as an adventuress—why don’t I just say it: a gold-digger—but soon enough saw that she and my brother were a genuine matching of hearts. Pert and attractive, whimsical and ever whistling, she was a sunny addition to the Llewellyn name. Luck seemed to have found us all, as Casper’s purses for winning grew and grew, and when he became the lightweight champion, we felt we had truly hit the jackpot. The three of us grew accustomed to high living. A bit too high. Rose never saw a satin dress and a saucy hat to go with it that did not appeal to her, while I myself like a decent wardrobe and the other finer things of life. And Casper threw money around as if it was going out of style. It was one of those situations you know you ought not to get into, but do: the pugilistic science, the fight game, the glove trade, boxing in all its guises was uncommonly good to us, yet income did not keep up with outgo. It was Casper’s idea to throw the fight with the challenger, Ned Wolger. Rose and I might not have listened to him but for the odds on his side—he was a three-to-one favorite to wallop Wolger. That walloping could simply be postponed, as he put it, until the inevitable rematch. In the meantime, all we had to do was put our money on Wolger, spreading those bets around out of town to not attract suspicion. Rose and I saw to that, and in the last round of the title match Casper, shall we say, resigned from the fight. And we collected hand over fist. Too much so. The Chicago gambling mob turned murderous about the amount it had lost on an apparent sure thing.
That part haunts me to this minute: Lake Michigan, blue as sword steel beside the city, and the gamblers seizing Casper and making an example of him, in the infamous fate called a walk off the dock.

Before they could lay hands on us, Rose and I fled together. Not with the money, alas, which was consigned forever to a biscuit tin wherever Casper had stashed it—he never did trust banks. Left on our own, with the gambling mob ever on our mind if not on our trail, she and I took shelter in Minneapolis where she had been in household service. Minneapolis was still too close to Chicago for comfort. Then a propitious ad we had placed in Montana newspapers brought Rose a job as housekeeper for a widower and his three sons, and like so many seekers of a new life, we boarded a train for the homestead country of the west. Events took their own willful course after that. We posed as brother and sister, but in the aloneness of prairie lodgings we became man and woman in the flesh, so to speak.

Only for a season, it turned out. I lost her, fair and square, to the widower, Oliver Milliron, a good man and friend. His eldest son, Paul, was astute in other matters besides Latin and it was he who drew from me the pledge to mean it when I gave away Rose at the wedding and to never return to Marias Coulee, and the vicinity of temptation, thereafter. It has not been easily kept. No day since have I not thought of Rose.

“Morrie? Morrie, anyone home between your ears? I asked, how was your day at the library?”

“Sorry, Grace. My thoughts were elsewhere.”

“Miles away, I’d say. White meat or dark?” She was busily carving off slice after slice of turkey, a surprise feast to the other three of us at the supper table.

“I hope it’s not as hard on the nerves as standing over somebody dead every night. Wakes would give me the willies.”
“Oddly enough, the library is somewhat more solemn, in a way. Grace, what is the occasion, with this festive bird?”

“The price is down, always to be celebrated.” Still dishing out slabs of turkey, she asked: “Morrie? Just what is it you do all day there, besides keep the books company?”

An apt question, not easily answered. Day by day, besides my juggling act with the meetings schedule, it had been gruffly suggested to me that I undertake an inventory of the prized books on the mezzanine, find someone to fix the drinking fountain, deal with Miss Runyon’s complaints about squeaky wheels on book carts passing through her sanctum, respond to a stack of letters from people with the kinds of questions only a library can answer--in short, I was tasked with anything Sandison did not want to do, which was very nearly everything.

“This, that, and the other,” I replied to Grace honestly enough. “If the library can be thought of as the kitchen of knowledge, I seem to be the short-order cook.”

Griff and Hoop were saying nothing. Grace gave them an exasperated look and sat down at her place. Almost immediately, Griff gasped and straightened up sharply. I had the impression Grace’s foot may have given his shin a tap. More than a tap. “I was about to say,” he rushed the words. “You getting along hunky-dory with Sandison?”

“We are on--” first-name basis did not quite cover the situation “--what might be called familiar terms. I call him ‘Sandy.’”

“Heard him called a lot, but never that.”

This seemed to bring a sense of relief around the table. Hoop came to life. “Might have plenty of library customers pretty soon, Morrie, mornings anyway. There’s strike talk. We was at the union meeting last night--”
“I could tell,” Grace inserted. “I heard you come in.” As I unavoidably had, too.

Griff stiffened again, apparently of his own accord this time.

“Refreshments are in order after a business session,” he maintained, prim as if the pair of them hadn’t reeled in around midnight, bumping the furniture and misjudging the stairs.

“Anyhow,” Hoop sped past the spree after the meeting, “the union might go out if the snakes won’t give on the lost dollar.” I knew from their earlier recital of labor’s struggles that the Anaconda Company some time back had lowered miners’ wages by a dollar a day, a sharp cut, and the union leadership at the time had called a strike that shortly failed at the point of bayonet.

“And bring in the soldiers,” Grace underscored that, “like the last several times?”

“Those buggers in uniform got on everybody’s nerves a little too much the last time,” Griff said, wielding a fork as if fending off such invaders. “The other unions didn’t like the way we was treated, they might be next. Evans and his council have made the rounds, they’re not as hot in the head as the last fellows were, and they’ve got all the others ready to side with us. Even the streetcar drivers. Shut down the whole town this time, we could, if the strike gets called.”

Grace, I noticed, looked apprehensive. Trying to keep up with the nuances of Butte, I asked: “And that if is--?”

“The Wobblies,” said Hoop, “who else?”

“They’d just love to see a strike, troops and all,” Griff laid it out for me. “The more blood in the streets, the better they figure it is for them. The Wobs would turn this into Russia if they could.” All at once the crimson cover of the jolly Little Red Songbook made more sense to me.
“They aren’t the only ones who can play it cute, though,” Griff still was wound up, his fork punctuating his words. “Thanks to them, Evans has got Anaconda looking at its hole card in the negotiations about getting the dollar back. It’d rather deal with him than the IWW any day.”

“The meek shall inherit if they are clever enough about it,” I mused aloud.

“That sounds like something that shook out of a library book.”

“I was merely complimenting the union’s strategy at the table, Griff, I am not taking sides on the issue of a strike.”

Grace was. She reached to the turkey platter and plucked up the wishbone. “See this, you pair of busybodies?” Snap, and she brandished the wish-fulfilling piece of the bone at the supposedly retired miners. “There now, I’ve asked that you not get your old fool heads broken on a picket line.”

“Aw, Grace, it maybe won’t come to that,” Griff sounded as if he was trying to convince himself along with her.

Something Hoop had said stuck with me, and I turned to him. “If the men do go on strike, why would any of them frequent the library just mornings?”

“Speakeasies don’t open until noon.”

The next day began with an unorthodox item of library business and Sandison, more often than not a combustible combination.

“Sandy? If I could have a minute of your time?” Grumpily he left off reading the first of the four newspapers he went through every morning and creaked around in his desk chair to face me. “Spit it out, Morgan.”

“It involves the group that meets every third Thursday, the Gilbert and Sullivan librettists. They have requested a music stand.”

“What for? Don’t they have hands? Holding a piece of sheet music in front of their noses shouldn’t strain them too much.”
"As I understand it, some member each time takes the group though the intricacies of the lyrics of a different operetta. 'Strike the concertina's melancholy string! Blow the spirit-stirring harp like anything! Let the piano's martial blast rouse the echoes of the past!' That sort of thing."

"How's a music stand going to improve nonsense like that?"

"The presenter, he or she, needs to be free to gesture, I'm told, or some of the spirit of Gilbert and Sullivan is lost." The set of his beard told me I had not yet made my case. One more try. "I think, Sandy, it is like depriving a preacher of a pulpit."

"Oh, hell, go on over to Simonetti's music store and buy the thing." He jerked open his bottom drawer, dug into the small strongbox that held petty cash, and handed me some money. I waited for him to jot down the sum or have me sign for it or however he handled a disbursement, but he simply waved me out of his sight and went back to fulminating through the newspapers.

Out on the street, I practically could have danced my way, the jaunty rhythms of "H.M.S. Pinafore" running through my head--Gilbert and Sullivan do that to you. The weather was as perfect as could be, sunshine slanting between the tall buildings, checkerboarding the busy street, passersby in their downtown clothes brightening or dimming according to warmth or shade. The street tableau of shoppers and strollers seemed removed from talk of a strike and strike-breaking troops, but the Hill and its clashes were never far off. The day was so fine I tried to put that thought away and simply enjoy being out on my errand, a brief recess from my growing list of library duties.

Emerging from the music store with the gawky stand under my arm I felt like an itinerant operetta chorister, but Butte apparently saw stranger sights every day and no one paid me much attention. I was passing a haberdashery when my own eye was caught by the window display. An Arrow collar mannequin was
admiring itself in a mirror; I could do without the collar, but draped on the
mannequin torso was an exemplary suit--blue serge, librarianly. I stopped to
admire the cut and material, smiling to myself as I thought of something Casper
would always say when about to commit an extravagance: "How's a guy ever
going to be rich if he doesn't practice at it?" Riches were still eluding me--I needed
to do something about that at some point--but my library wages were adding up a
bit and that suit definitely beckoned, come payday.

Turning to go, I glimpsed past the mannequin into the mirror and froze in my
tracks. In the reflection I could see across the street, half a block down, to
where two bulky figures were assiduously studying the plate glass display of a pet
store. They were not the type to be in the market for parakeets.

Window men.

I would know the species anywhere, but in Chicago they had been rife
enough to be a civic nuisance. Private detectives spying on lovers not married to
one another. Pinkerton operatives lurking on some mission. Plainclothes
policemen trying to keep an eye on the mob, or mobsters trying to get something on
the police. Sometimes it seemed every Chicagoan was trailed by another, half a
block behind. And whenever the one in front paused to tie a shoelace or buy a
newspaper, the one trailing had to evince sudden interest in the nearest store
window. The duo in the mirror--why should I rate two?--still were rapt over pets.

As I committed their sizable outlines to memory, another mental image was
jostled: these two together were a near fit to the worst of those shadows that had
followed me from wakes. But that was too much imagination. Wasn't it?

Casually as I could manage, I walked back to the library with the music
stand feeling like a lightning rod under my arm and a storm on the horizon. When I
reached the big front door, I opened it slowly so that I could see behind me in the
glass. The window men were gone, naturally.
That evening after supper, I knocked on Griffith’s door.

The shuffle of carpet slippers, then the door flung open and Griff stood there in his long underwear and workpants, like a watchman roused by an out-of-place noise in the night. “What’s up, Morrie?” Down at his side, in his right hand, something sharp glinted. “Need a new notch in your belt?”

For the second time that day, my feet felt planted in quicksand. “I didn’t mean to intrude, I’ll come back another—”

“Naw, step on in.” The pointed instrument cut a circle in the air as he indicated to a table and chair crammed into the far corner of the room. “Fixing Grace’s purse strap for her.” Ushering me in, he went on over and put down the awl he was holding, atop the leatherwork. “Guest gets the chair.” He perched on the edge of his bed, toes of his slippers barely reaching the floor. “What’s on your mind? You look spooked.”

“This will sound silly, but I think I’m being followed around town.”

Griff squinted at me, his wrinkles wrinkling even more. “Let’s get Hoop in on this.” He banged the heel of his fist on the wall, and shortly Hooper came in, bringing his own chair.

I described to them that morning’s experience, and the unlikeness that the two idlers were pet fanciers. “Keep this to yourselves, please. I don’t wish to worry Grace about this.”

“Or have her kick you out of here on your can,” Hoop said.

“Well put.”

Griff hopped off the bed, went to the window and pulled down the blind. “Tell me this,” he intoned, turning to me. “When you lit down from the train, was there a couple of bruisers hanging around?”

“Big and bigger,” Hoop specified.
"Beefier than ordinary, yes, now that you say so, there was such a pair at the depot."

"That's them," Griff said. "Anaconda's goons. The one big enough to eat soup off the top of your head is Typhoon Tolliver."

I felt as if the seat of my chair just had pinched me.

Hoop was saying, "Gentleman Jim Jeffries flattened him--"

"--in the third round of the title bout, right hook to the jaw," I finished for him. "What on earth is he doing in Butte?"

"Beating people up," Griff had no trouble answering that. "The Anaconda Company doesn't play pattycake."

"But--" Some questions scare off words. Why was I a candidate for a beating from an ex-heavyweight pug?

Hooper was ticking off on his fingers. "That bunch in the Hennessy building sics the goons on any union organizers who come in from the outside."

He and Griff looked at me critically.

I shook my head.

"Like anybody working for the Wobblies," Griff prompted.

I shook my head harder.

"And they don't like government agents looking over their shoulder at how they run things," Hoop went on down the list. "Although," he paused to consult with Griff, "they might think twice before beating the stuffing out of a government snitch?"

"Would depend on what he snitched," Griff judged.

Another shake of my head, as much to clear it as anything else. "I am none of those, believe me. I simply came here to get ri-- to find decent work."

Both old men watched me mutely. "The goons, as you call them, are wasting their time on me. It has to be a case of mistaken identity."
One or the other of my listeners, like ancients who had heard it all before, spoke up. "You better hope."

The next day was Sunday, day of rest for the library, but not for the boarding house. Scarcely was I seated for breakfast, wondering where the others were, when Grace forged out of the kitchen all but wrapped in a tie-around apron over a nice dark dress. Along with my plate of bacon and eggs, she delivered with a flourish:

"I wondered if you might like to go to church."

"Church." I hadn't meant for it to come out quite like that, but it sounded as though I was trying to identify the concept.

Hooper came through the doorway, also dressed in surprising Sunday best and smelling of musky cologne. "What this is, Griff's filling in with the choir. They're hard up."

"Ah. And bringing his own audience, in so far as it can be conscripted."

"He'll be in much better voice if he sees us all there, he happened to mention," Grace coaxed.

"He can stand all that kind of help he can get," Hoop chipped in.

I put up my hands. "I know when I'm outnumbered." Obligation takes strange shapes. Back in Casper's earliest bouts, I had mastered the tactic myself of papering the house, as it was called, by giving away tickets by the handful if necessary to fill the seats of the arena. If Griffith dreamed of a sellout crowd for his star turn with the choir, I understood intrinsically.

The snug red-brick church with its peaked hat of cupola looked as if it had been smuggled in from a vale in Wales, and no sooner had Grace and I and Hooper slid into seats at the back of the congregation than the wizened minister, peering over half-moon eyeglasses like a veteran counter of crowds, nodded to
himself and launched into prayer. In Welsh. Evidently Grace had not anticipated
this any more than I had, both of us trying to keep a straight face at not
understanding a word of what plainly was going to be an hour of many hundreds
of words. Actually, some time into the minister’s spate my ear figured out the
repeated invoking of “Iesu Grist,” and I sat there caught up in the wayward notion
of Christ as grist, the mills of faith grinding fine the belief in a clear-eyed savior at
that moment across half the world. Sunday certainties, which left only the rest of
the week.

The praying rolled on like thunder until the minister reached a final
crescendo of syllables that sounded like “tragwyddoldeb!”

“Eternity!” Hoop translated to the other two of us in a hoarse whisper, and
that was definitively that.

“Welcome, all thee, the accustomed and the new faces.” The surprise lilt
of English from the minister sent Grace and I melting toward each other in relief.
Not much taller than his pulpit, the elderly man of faith again peered around the
church as if counting the house, this time shook his head instead of nodding, and
declared: “A sufficiency will be heard from me soon enough. Let us get on with
the singing.” With that, the all-male choir filed up, all in severe black suits and
blinding starched white shirts, two dozen strong, Griff at one end, proud as a
parrot. Church or not, he sought out the three of us with a broad wink,
welcoming us to the occasion he plainly saw as the Welsh Miners’ Choir of Butte,
starring Wynford Griffith.

The choir director, burliest of the bunch, stepped from the ranks, gave a
steady bass hum, which was picked up by the others in a communal drone that
seemed to vibrate the building. Then, as if in one glorious voice the size of an
ocean’s surf, they swept into hymn after hymn. I sat there enchanted, Grace
swaying gently next to me. Music makes me almost willing to believe in heaven.
Then, though, came a chorus I could have done without.

Were I to cherish earthly riches,
they are swift and fleet of wing;
a heart pure and virtuous,
riches and eternal gain will bring.

There is that about the Welsh, they can sing their way under your skin, to the bones of your being. I needed no reminding that riches, in what pursuit I had given them, proved to be elusively swift and winged. Yet why did a Richest Hill on Earth and its supposed opportunities exist, if not to be tapped? Was I really supposed to count my gains in life only afterward in the time of tragwyddoldeb? Eternity did not seem much of a payoff if you had to scrimp to get there.

My bit of brooding broke off when the old minister, frail as a leaf after the gusts of the choir, ascended to the pulpit once more.

"'Tis no sense to maulder about, when but one thing is on all minds." He gazed severely over the settled moons of his glasses. "There is talk of a strike in the mines, is there not." The rustle of the congregation answered that.

"I have had my say any number of times before," the ministerial voice sounded tired, "on the stopping of work and the negotiating of wages. The two seem as bound together in this town as the two sides of a coin." Aha! Not even the man of the cloth could set aside the propensity for earthly gain. Perhaps I was imagining, but his own choir seemed to be looking at him as though he had just caught up with a main fact of life. "The shepherd does not leave his flock, even when it may have a bit of wool over its eyes," he went on drily. "If the mines do shut down, the church shall again have a strike committee. We'll again gather food and clothing for the families left bereft. Depend on that." He paused, drawing on the silence. "A word of caution, however. If you men do go out"—he looked out over the stooped miners' shoulders that filled half the church—"or you
women march in their support"--a similar gaze to the upturned faces of the wives--
"as you have been known to do, walk the line of the law very carefully. The
times are not good. The sedition laws that came with the war are not fine-grained
as to whether a person is the Kaiser in disguise or a Bolshevik with a bomb under
his coattail or an honest miner seeking honest pay. Some of you had a taste of
that last time, when I had to go down to the jail and bail you out for the hitherto
unknown crime of 'unlawful assembly.'" Reaching in over his glasses, he
pinched the bridge of his nose as if to shut off that memory. "The church coffer is
no longer sufficient for bail," the words came slowly now, "nor can we keep
contributing to legal defense funds. This time around, it will all be up to your
union. You can help its cause and your own by being mindful of that pernicious
'unlawful assembly' statute. In other words," his voice rose, "don't be daft about
it. Otherwise, Butte's finest, to call them that"--it was well known that Butte
policemen were Irish and not the Dublin Gulch ore-shoveling type--"will pick you
off like ripe apples. It's a matter of common sense, I am somewhat sorry to say,
to steer clear of that particular law until wiser heads can change it. For now,
render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's."

I squirmed at that. I perfectly well knew it to be a biblical parable, but it
was not Caesar up there in the Hennessy building, pulling strings attached to the
police department.

The minister took off his spectacles, folded them, and seemed to shake his
head at himself. "Let us return to the singing."

As we walked out after the service, Grace pursed a look at me as if to see
what I thought. "My Arthur used to say there are those who make a scarecrow of
the law." I thought it best not to say Arthur had read some Shakespeare along the
way. Directly ahead of us, Hoop and Griff were stumping along, sleeve cuffs
flying as they dissected the sermon. Watching them, Grace said soberly: “The union is going to have its hands full, isn’t it.”

There was no knowing how these things come about, but somehow that Sunday spate of Welsh sermonizing and song rinsed away the window men. The way was clear, to and from the library, the next day and the next and those after that, and while I habitually peeked over my shoulder for figures lurking half a block behind, they were notable only for their absence. It was as I indeed hoped, I could tell myself, the goons or their bosses saw me for what I was, a glorified library clerk sauntering meek and mild to church, and were wasting no further time on me.

Which was a lucky thing, because I was falling in love with the Butte Public Library. Walking up to it each fresh morning, its Gothic turret like the drawbridge tower into the castle, I warmed to the treasures within those stout walls. Sandison standing there at the top of the steps counting us off as if checking his herd came to seem patriarchal rather than highhanded. The staff softened toward me—always with the exception of Miss Runyon—as I picked up stray tasks that they wanted to dodge. The nooks and crannies and grandiosities of the old building intrigued me, like an ancient mansion labyrinth leading back to Gutenberg’s printing press and the start of everything, and always, always, there were the lovely classic books tucked away here and there for stolen snatches of reading. Work of this sort fit me from head to toe, it seemed. I didn’t even mind sharing office space with Sandison, as his chain-lightning moods kept a person alert. The old saying had his name on it: he may have been a headache, but never was a bore.

“Goldsmith,” he characteristically would snap over his shoulder from where he was enthroned in his desk chair, and I had mere seconds to figure out whether he meant for me to trot across town to the dealer in fine metals or commence a conversation about the poet of England’s peasantry.