on his desk, lay the smoothed-out newspaper with the emphatic photograph of the noose.

"Sandy?" I gambled, not for the first time, by taking the initiative. "I believe you wanted to see me about some minor matter?"

He grunted and advanced toward me as if he needed a closer look. The gleam in his eye seemed diamond-sharp. "You're an odd duck, Morgan," he declared, halting an uncomfortably short distance from me, "but you're cultured, I have to hand you that. You damn well mean it when you jabber about the music of men's lives, don't you."

A weird hope sprung up in me. Maybe he had discovered I was flouting his orders against "taking sides" by letting the miners congregate in the basement in search of a song and was merely going to fire me. I would take that instead of a death sentence any day.

"Anyhow," he immediately brushed aside that hope, "we can talk about that tomorrow. You're coming with me in the morning."

"Where to?" I asked over the thump of my heart.

The white whiskers aimed at me. "A place you ought to see. Section 37."

Was that a joke from Samuel Sandison? If so, it was his first. I cleared my throat, to try to speak without a quaver.

"Perhaps, Sandy, you could elaborate a bit on that destina---"

Somewhere within the whisker cloud he snorted. "What's the matter, sissy, coming down with a case of Hic sunt dracones?"

I had to bridle at that. A measure of caution about traveling in the company of someone nicknamed the Strangler did not equate me with skittish mariners of old who feared sailing off the edge of the map into the abyss that carried the warning Here be dragons, I felt.
"That’s hardly fair, I am only naturally curious as to--" 

Sandison did not pause over my hurt feelings. "Never mind." He briefly stared at me again with that strange gleam. "Don’t tell anyone we’re going, eh? Tongues are already too busy in this town." Turning back impatiently to the newspaper spread on his desk, he told me to meet him at the depot, good and sharp, for the six a.m. westbound train.

There was a midnight train. Eastbound.

*Why not be on it?* the ceiling posed the question, a certain seam in the plaster straight as a railtrack as I lay fully clothed on my bed. I was as alone as ever in this latest dilemma. At supper, Hoop and Griff had been as animated as carnival pitchmen, while Grace put actual cutlets on the table in evident celebration of the boarding house’s new lease on life. No one seemed to pay particular attention to my unmoored state of mind; when that happens, it makes you wonder about your normal mien.

The bed was crowded with debate. Sandison was a latent noose-wielding unpredictable madman. Or not. He’d had the perfectly sound business sense to hire me, didn’t he. Just to be on the safe side, though, pack the satchel for the train; saying a permanent goodbye to Butte would be only a strategic withdrawal, after all. But so was Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow.

My head now really did ache from going back and forth. I checked my pocket watch again. Midnight was not far off. Abruptly my mind made itself up, almost as if I had not participated. I scrambled off the bed.

Quietly as I could, I opened the door of my room. and tiptoed into the hall. Snores emanated from Griff’s room and Hoop’s next to his; at the end of the hall, Grace’s bedroom kept a silence. Feeling like a burglar in the darkened house, I
slipped past one door. Then another. And stealthily turned the doorknob of the end one.

I crept to the sleeping form and, hesitating just a bit, shook the bare shoulder where the nightdress had slipped down.

"Grace, I hate to interrupt your slumber. But I must talk to you."

My whisper penetrated as if I had jabbed her. Bolting upright in the bed, she clutched the coverlet around her, huskily reciting: "In the name of decency, Morrie, we really ought not--"

"This is imperative or"--I looked at the ivory slope of shoulder still showing---"I would not come uninvited. Please just listen, Grace."

Vigilantly, she did so while I told her she had to be my witness, to attest that I was alive and in one piece before boarding the train early in the morning with Samuel Sandison. "Just in case worse should come to worst."

"Worse coming to worst, is it." There was just enough light in the room that I could see she had let down her flaxen hair when she went to bed, and now she ran a hand through the long tresses. "Morrie, you are the most complicated boarder there ever was."

"I wish I could dispute that."

"Why do I have the honor of this, why not Griff and Hoop?"

"They’ve been at a union meeting and you know the condition they come home in after that."

Grace gave an extended sigh. "All right, you want a sober witness. But why go with Sandison at all?"

"He’s the kind who will not let loose of an idea--the man is a bulldog. If I don’t humor him on this, he’ll do away with my job at the library. Then I won’t have charge of the auditorium. Then the eisteddfod can’t be held in the--it’s, well, complicated."
All that was wordlessly weighed on the landlady scale of things. Then she reached to the bedside table, opened the drawer, and took something out. “Here.”

In the dimness of the bedroom, I peered down stupidly at the cold metallic item, with some dull opalescence to it, that she put in the palm of my hand. If I was not mistaken, it was the type of small pearlhandled pistol called a Lady’s Special.

“You’re—you’re armed,” I stammered.

“I’m a widow, sleeping alone,” she said quietly. “And Butte is a rough and tough place, as you may have noticed.” Again she passed a hand through her hair, looking at me as if memorizing me. “That little thing is called an equalizer for a reason, don’t forget, Morrie.”

I hesitated, then pocketed the gun. “I’m sure I am in better health than when I came in here, thanks to you.”

An expectant silence. She patted my hand there in the dark, in a feathery way that was either shy or sly. “I would only be telling the truth if I said you had life in you the last I saw of you, wouldn’t I.”

An honest enough affidavit, under the circumstances. I returned her caress pat for pat. If I could trust anyone in Butte, it was Grace.

If I could trust anyone in Butte.

“Sandy, how are we to do this?” Stumbling along before dawn in Sandison’s wake, I dubiously approached the depot platform. “If I am not mistaken, those are ore cars.” The line of heaped railcars stretched off as far as I could see in the dim light.

“Keep walking, don’t be a nervous nelly.” Sandison strode along recklessly enough himself that I wished the pair of depot goons would pop around a corner and be steamrollered by him. No such justice, however, at that early
hour. Only a yawning conductor, beside what I perceived to be one lone Pullman car behind the train engine, stood in our line of march.

I followed Sandison aboard, feeling tipped to one side by the unaccustomed gun in my coat pocket, even if it was the most decorous of firearms. He and I were the only passengers. As the train lurched into motion, I could contain the question no longer. "West is a long direction--where exactly do we get off?"

My traveling companion grumpily pawed at his whiskers as if herding the word out.

"Anaconda."

"The company?"

"The town."

It turned out to be both. A company town, Anaconda was as orderly and contained as Butte was sprawling and unruly. The train pulled in past boxy workers' houses lined up in neat rows, along streets laid as straight as shelves. Sandison appeared to pay no heed to the town itself, gazing away into the valley beyond. At least, I thought as I looked out the window on that side of the train, it was a bright clear day for this. I happened to look out the other side, and the sky was clothed in heavy gray.

When the two of us climbed off at the trim crenellated depot, another chess piece of municipal order, the division in the sky over Anaconda was made plain. On a slope above the murky side of town could be seen the immense smelter for copper ore such as had accompanied us from Butte, and dominant over the smelting works stood a skyscraping smokestack, thickly built but hundreds of feet tall. The scene leapt from every accusatory line ever written about dark satanic mills--the smokestack like the devil's forefinger, black fume trailing evilly as it pointed its challenge to heaven.
Dumbstruck as I was by this sight, only slowly did I register the other product of the smelter besides copper and smoke, a series of slag heaps surrounding the town like barren hills.

"That’s Anaconda for you," Sandison growled. "Let’s get a move on." So saying, he stalked off toward a livery stable across the tracks.

Now I was alarmed. A saddlehorse is not my preferred mode of transportation. Of necessity, I had spent some time horseback during my prairie teaching career, but no more than I had to. Sandison brayed to the stableman that we wanted genuine riding stock, not nags, and shortly I found myself holding the reins of a restless black horse with a bald face, named Midnight. When a rangy steel-gray steed was brought out for Sandison, he looked in disgust at the stirrups on the rented saddle and lengthened them six inches to account for his height. That done, despite his bulk he swung up onto the horse as easily as a boy and waited impatiently for me to hoist onto mine.

"Going to be a blisterer out in the valley. Here." He tossed me a canvas water bag to tie to my saddle and spurred his horse into motion, leaving Midnight and me to catch up.

We managed to do so at the edge of town, past one last ugly dark slag heap where children ran up and down. With the cries of their playing fading behind us, the horseback pair of us cantered into another existence entirely, a sudden savannah-like landscape that seemed to exhale in relief at leaving the pall of Anaconda behind.

The valley extending before us was a classic oval of geography, broad and perfect as a French painting. Rimmed by mountains substantial enough to shoulder snow year-round, the valley floor was uninterrupted except for a few distant settlements strung out near a willowed river like memory beads on a thong. Gazing wide-eyed at the breadth of landscape--truly, here a person was a fleck on
the sea of ground— I said something about this startling amount of open country so
near the industrial confines of Butte and Anaconda.

Unexpectedly Sandison reined to a halt, and I pulled up beside him. He
massively shifted in his saddle to turn in my direction. "Take a good look,
Morgan. I owned it all."

At first I thought he meant the plot of land we were riding across. Then
realized he meant the entire valley.

I cannot forget that moment. Picture it if you will. A woolsack of a man,
surely two hundred and fifty pounds, nearly twice of me, sitting on his horse
looking down on me like a wild-bearded mad king.

Suddenly he raised a meaty hand and swiped it toward me, his action so
swift I had no time to grab for the pistol.

Paralyzed, I felt the swish of air as the thick palm passed my face, and
descended to mash a horsefly on the neck of my mount.

Flicking away the fly carcass, he rumbled: "Don't just sit there with your
face hanging out, we've got a ways to go."

He put his horse into a trot, and mine followed suit. I rode tightly holding
the reins and my Stetson. In Montana, it is a good idea to keep your hat on your
head so the wind doesn't blow your hair off. Besides, it gave me something to
concentrate on, other than the thought that I might have shot a man for swatting a
fly. But Sandison's behavior still unnerved me. Keen as a tracker, he stood in his
stirrups every so often to peer ahead at the print of ruts we were following; it might
once have been a road, but looked long unused.

Leading to where? There were wide open spaces around us to all the
horizons, but no arithmetic of logic that I could find in the destination Sandison had
set for us. I knew from my time among the homesteads of Marias Coulee that land
is surveyed into townships of thirty-six sections, each section a square mile. The
numbering starts over at each township. Where then—and for that matter, what?—was Section 37? Was I going to survive to find out?

After an eternity of joggling along, we came to a plot of land boxed by a barbwire fence. We—rather, I—opened the treacherously barbed gate, and the horses stepped through, skittish enough about it that they had to be reined hard.

It could be said they were showing horse sense. The ground changed here. The soil, to call it that, had an unhealthy grayish hue, like the pallor of a very sick person. The sudden change was puzzling to me. I did not know thing one about the raising of cattle, but what was beneath our horses’ hooves would not pasture any creature, I was quite sure.

My riding companion now simply sat in his saddle, lost in contemplation of the expanse of valley. I resorted to my water bag. The day was warming to an extreme, and I could see sweat running down Sandison’s cheeks into his beard, although he paid it no heed.

“Back then,” he all at once spoke in the voice of a man possessed, “this was a paradise of grass. And I bought up homestead claims and mining claims and every other kind of land until every square foot of it was Triple S range. I tell you, there never was a better ranch nor a prettier one.” His words cast a spell. What a picture it made in the mind, the green valley filled with red cattle with that sinuous brand on their hips.

The bearded head swung in my direction. His voice dropped ominously.

“Then it got to be the old story. The snake into Eden.” The meaty hand swept around again and, past my ineffectual flinch toward the Lady’s Special, pointed over my shoulder.

“That thing.”

He had taken dead aim at the smelter stack. Even at this distance, the giant chimney dwarfed all of nature around it, clouding that half of the horizon like a
permanent storm. Staring at that ashen plume along with Sandison, I felt something more oppressive creep over me than the heat of the day.

With a great grunt he climbed down from his horse, stooped low and scooped a handful of dirt. Holding the dull-colored stuff up to me, he uttered:

"Here. Have some arsenic."

Choosing to consider that rhetorical, I cleared my throat and managed to respond.

"Sandy, am I to understand we are camped on a patch of poison?"

"That’s what it comes down to," he said, letting the unhealthy soil sift from his fist. Each word bitter, he recited to me that the furnaces of the smelting process released arsenic and sulphur, and the Anaconda stack piped those into the air like a ceaseless spout. Wiping his hand on his pantleg, he went on: "It kills cattle like picking them off with a rifle. The first year after the smokestack came in, we lost a thousand head. Hell, it wasn’t ranching any more. All we were doing was burning carcasses." He shook his head violently at the memory. "We sued the mining company every way there is. The Anaconda bunch had the big money for Eastern lawyers, so they beat us. But that was later." His voice sharpened again. He gestured as if in dismissal toward the smokestack and its almighty smudge. "That isn’t what you’re here to see. Let’s get to it." With cowboy agility, he again swung onto his horse and headed us toward a grove of trees along a slip of a stream not far ahead. Damp as I was with sweat from the unrelenting sun--and just as relentless, Sandison--I welcomed the notion of shade.

The trees, though, revealed themselves to be leafless as we approached. What had been a thicket was now a stand of lifeless trunks and limbs, graying above the soil that had sickened them. In the midst of the witchy trees stood eight or ten huge old cottonwoods, dying more slowly than the rest.
Sandison dismounted and walked his horse over to the nearest great wrinkled trunk. I gingerly did likewise. Under a big overhanging limb, he turned to me with that unsettling royal glint in his eyes again.

"Welcome to the grove of justice, Morgan."

At first I did not take his meaning.

"It was before copper was on everyone's mind," he began. "This valley was just sitting here, best place on the face of the earth to raise cattle. My backers put up most of the money and I built the herd, cows from here to breakfast. Until one branding time when the count was way off. There weren't dead cows laying around from winterkill or some disease, so you didn't need to be a genius to figure out the malady was rustlers." The fixed intensity of that blue gaze was hypnotic as he told it all. "The money men threw a fit, said if it happened again they'd sell the place out from under me. They were town men, they didn't have a fig of notion about how you have to let the good years carry you through the bad ones in the livestock business. I had to do something to keep the herd count up or lose the ranch." Trickles of sweat from under his hat into his beard retraced that predicament of long ago. "My riders told me they'd seen some of the squatters up in those hills"--he indicated across the valley to coulees that must have held shanties at that time--"acting funny around our stock. And there were always drifters riding through, you could bet they'd about as soon rustle your cattle as look at them. Try tell that to a sheriff who'd rather sit with his boots up on his desk than chase after rustlers with a couple of days' headstart, though." His gaze at me never wavered. "Now you know what my answer to that was, don't you?"

I was afraid I did. The Montana necktie had a reputation to the far ends of the world, ever since frontier times when vigilantes in the untamed gold camps took the law, along with a noose, into their own hands.
“My riders knew how to handle a rope in more ways than one,” he was saying in that voice terrible to hear. “Anybody they caught in the vicinity of a cow or calf with a Triple S brand on it had some hard answering to do.” The man who had been lord of this valley turned ponderously, broad back to me now, toward the line of sturdy cottonwoods. “We hung them like butchered meat. Right here.” Facing around to me again, he lifted those thick hands. “Many a time I tied the noose myself.”

The old saying could not have been more right: my blood ran cold.

Had I gambled wrong, in coming with him to this desolate patch of earth? Was I about to be murdered, for knowing too much? The pistol stayed glued to me where it rode in my pocket; I realized, for once and all, that I could not bring myself to use it. Sandison’s stare had my fate in it, but I could not read those icy eyes. I tried to speak and couldn’t.

He stared at me that way long moments more, then his words came slowly.

“What gets into a man, Morgan, to set himself up as an executioner? I made those dimwitted rustlers pay far too high a price.” He shook his head. “Cows are just cows.” Turning from me, he gazed at the gray old trees as if looking a long way back. His shoulders slumped. As I watched, the Earl of Hell was deposed, by himself.

After some moments, I found words.

“Section 37 is off the face of the earth.”

“That’s where I sent them, on a length of rope,” Sandison was speaking huskily. “Now you know why I brought you here, don’t you?”

I thought so, but said nothing, watching the same shrewd expression come over him as when he found a bargain in a rare books catalogue. “You’re a learned man,” he said in that husky tone, “you know a little something about how to read a life. But there’s always more. I know what they say about me behind my back,
Night was coming on, with the streetlights of downtown Butte starting to glow golden and the mines of The Hill already lit like the mineral earth’s own constellation, when Sandison and I left the train.

He had said perilously little during our journey back from Section 37. As ever, the beard masked more than just his jawline. Accordingly, there on the depot platform he turned to me and deposed the day in the shortest manner possible: “That takes care of that.” His boot heels resounded on the planks as he traipsed off, leaving me with the parting sentiment: “Don’t be late for work in the morning, it’s a bad habit.”

I stood there for an extended moment inhaling the chill air, just for the act of breathing free.

“Hsst! Over here, you!”

My nerves shot back up to high alarm, the threat of goons never absent. Fumbling for the pistol in my side pocket, I stopped when I got a full look at the figure speeding toward me from the depot waiting room. “Grace!”
In a sensible woolly wrap against the early October night, she still shivered as she drew up to me and stared after the monumental form of Sandison, receding into the dusk. “If you hadn’t been on this train, I’d have gone to the police yelling bloody murder. Where on earth did that creature haul you off to?”

“It is not exactly on the map.”

Setting off together up the sloping street, I recounted the day to her as best I could, on edge as I was, and she listened the same way as we navigated the nosy neighborhood and reached the boarding house. The shared time of the previous night was still with us, but so was too much else and we were uncertain and awkward with each other. It didn’t help matters that Venus Alley, a mere block away, was filling the night with lusty laughter and more.

Paused at the door of our lodging, I glanced aside at Grace and could only come up with: “Thank you for watching out for me.”

“You seem to need it,” she replied with a small smile, shyly pocketing the pearlhandled gun I had handed back to her. “Besides, I hate to lose a boarder.”

“You’ll have this one again in the morning.” I gestured in the general direction of the library. “For now, though, I’m too wound up to go to bed—there’s something waiting for me I must tend to.”

“Good night then, Morrie. Don’t let the bad dreams bite,” she said soberly.

I switched on the mezzanine lights. The Reading Room below was as dark and hushed as the audience portion of a theater. Up on stage, so to speak, the books waited in titled ranks, and in their reassuring company I moved idly along the laden shelves, running the tips of my fingers over the exquisite spines, taking down an old loved volume every so often and opening it to the stored glory of words. Around me was the wealth of minds down through all of recorded time.
The dramatic capacities of Shakespeare, as all-seeing in his foolscap scripts as in
the sagacious portrait above the doorway to reading. The gallant confabulations
of Cervantes, showing us the universal meaning of quixotic. The Russian army
of impossible geniuses, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov. Mark Twain,
as fresh on the page as a comet inscribing the dark. Robert Louis Stevenson,
master of tales goldenly told. (The twofold nature of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
seemed a lot more convincing after being around Samuel Sandison.) And my
ever-familiar exemplar of classic Latin and daring generalship, Caesar, in tanned
leather and impeccable threading. These and the hundreds upon hundreds of
others Rabrab and I had evaluated, insofar as mortals can, into the inventory.
Valued treasures, in more ways than one.

In such company, you wonder about your own tale in the long book of life.
What would they have made of me, these grandmasters of storytelling? Arriving
out of nowhere to the richest of hills with the intention of filling my pockets from it,
and all this time later, finding that the only thing that had paid off was the railroad,
for my own trunk. Thrown together for a second time in life with an appealing
widow, and for a second time gaining no ground there, either. Casting my lot with
an unpredictable bibliophile who also turned out to be Montana’s leading vigilante.
No matter how I looked at it, my story lacked conclusion.

Suddenly I knew what to do. Can inspiration come off on the fingers? I
rubbed my hands together appreciatively, there among the literary classics. It was
as if the risk-taking lifetimes of composition, the reckless romances with
language, the tricky business of plots stealing onto pages, all the wiles of Samuel
Sandison’s glorious books answered to my touch. There was no mistaking their
message: sometimes you must set sail on the winds of chance.

Stroking a last row of embossed titles as I went, I turned off the
mezzanine lights and made my way out of the darkened library. What I was about
to attempt was a gamble, but that was nothing new in human experience, was it. The first thing it required was a messenger who was not Russian Famine. I headed directly to the cigar store where Skinner hung out.

Discordant as it was by nature, the song session the next night came as something of a relief after Section 37. At least, up there on stage I did not have to fear for my neck when one rough-hewn miner or another climbed up with me and sang off-key, although my ears were another matter.

The songwriting efforts unveiled at this tryout were all over the map, in more ways than one. The only thing the musical penchants of the neighborhoods of The Hill had in common was strenuous exercise of the vocal cords. As diplomatically as I could, I touched up rhyme and word rhythm here and there, and the concertina tuned things up a little, but in the end the attempted songs were pretty much the same rough creatures as at the start of the evening.

Well, no one in his right mind could expect to turn the basement auditorium of the Butte Public Library into Tin Pan Alley, I had to tell myself afterward. But Jared and Rab and I were a somber trio when we adjourned to the Purity.

"What do you think, Professor," Jared asked directly over pie and coffee, "is the work song we want hiding in any of those?"

"You heard the same performances I did," I sidestepped. "The groups still have almost a week to work on things, perhaps something"—I almost said miraculous—"unforgettable will find its way in." We both looked to Rab for a boost in our spirits.

"I'll stick with my sixth-graders," she passed judgment ruthlessly now that she was back to teaching. "They only get into fistfights at recess." At the
height of the song session Jared had needed to jump in and separate a Finn and an Italian who came to blows over a question of tempo.

He conceded that was a case of somewhat too much enthusiasm, but maintained strong feelings of that sort could be a good sign. "The men are fired up against Anaconda, and the right song will catch that," he insisted, as if insistence would do the job. I could see what was coming next as he looked over at me: in his checklist way he would want to know how I was going to handle the big night when two hundred people had to materialize in the library basement without anyone noticing. Omitting to say it was the brainstorm of Griff and Hoop, I brightly volunteered that our salvation was an eisteddfod.

Jared turned his unscathed ear toward me as if that would help with the word. "Run that by me again?"

I did so in as much detail as I could think up. The dubious expression on Jared kept growing until Rab, at her conspiratorial best, poked him insistently. "Mr. Morgan has the knack of doing what can't be done," she said, canny as an abbess. "You either have to let him or think up something better, sweetheart."

That decided him. "Well, hell, if none of us can savvy it, maybe the cops and goons can't either." As we rose to go, though, he gave me the Butte salute, a whap on the shoulder, and warned, "Just remember, Professor, plenty of people are going to want your hide if this doesn't work out right."

Out into the night he and Rab went, with me brooding behind, when the bowtied grandee at the cash register called after me: "Hey, you with the pie in you, don't run off!"

Just the ending the evening needed, I thought to myself balefully, Jared sticking me with the bill.

That proved not to be the case, however. Hopping down from his stool and coming up close to me, the Purity proprietor dropped his usual repartee.
“Haven’t I seen you with that messenger kid who goes around like his pants are on fire? What is he, your nephew?”

“Second cousin,” I answered negotiably; Russian Famine barely had a shirt-tail, let alone a shirt-tail relative, but imaginary kinship might be better than none. “Why?”

“I need someone to run errands and so on,” he said as if that ought to be perfectly obvious. “Tell the kid he’s got a job after school if he wants it. I’ll give him a fair wage.”

“He needs more than that,” I interjected. “His is the, uhm, lean side of the family line. He very nearly lives hand to mouth.”

The cafeteria owner swayed back from me, frowning. “What are you, his union?” Observing the rules of the game, he hemmed and hawed for a minute before grandly offering: “Oh, all right, I’ll throw in his meals, how’s that?”

“Allow me.” I squared his bowtie for him; tonight’s was royal purple.

“All he can eat, I trust that means?”

“Sure. How much can that be, a runt like him?”

In the book of life we are chapters in one another’s stories, and with Russian Famine given a place at the feast, so to speak, I felt like an author drawing a scene to a successful close. That was only the first episode to be resolved, however, while more than I wanted to count waited in line.

A crisp expectancy was in the air of Butte those next days and nights. The season turned as if October was a signpost for the weather: the first snow, dazzling and spotless, appeared in the mountain heights above Columbia Gardens, while downtown blocks at mid-day echoed with the loudspeaker version of anklet baseball—("Flash! The Red Stockings win again, they lead the White Sox in the Series three games to two!")—and in the dusk, fresh war cries whooped from The
Hill as boys played football on barren patches between mine heaps. The change in climate could be measured any number of ways. More than once I noticed women and daughters trooping past the boarding house with gunny sacks, and I asked Grace about it. “Coal,” she said simply. The thought of it pulled the skin tight around her eyes. “They go down to the tracks and pick up what’s spilled from the trains. I did it myself when I was a girl and a strike was coming. Anything to get ready for the worst.”

I knew the feeling. As a precautionary measure, I resumed my habit of keeping watch into the shadows for the darker presence of goons; Eel Eyes and Typhoon now had no reason to pack me off to Chicago, but if it ever entered their thick heads that I had turned the library into a choirloft of the miners’ union, they were bound to be renewed trouble. Nor were they the only concern. In the back of my mind the Welsh minister kept preaching his “unlawful assembly” sermon (“Butte’s finest, to call them that, will pick you off like ripe apples.”). And there was always Sandison. The man had wrung out his soul for me to see, there beneath the hanging tree, but he still was impossible to predict. Which was I going to encounter at the crucial time, the merely gruff city librarian or the Earl of Hell?

When I at last told him, as I had to, that the Lyre Club would be honoring an old bardic tradition by holding an eisteddfodd and braced for a volley from him about the library turning into a madhouse, he merely grunted and said, “What’s your next field of knowledge, Morgan, druidic chants?”

All the while, Hoop and Griff assured me at every meal that there was nothing to worry about.

Ready or not, the night of nights arrived to us.
“Remember, Professor, when you step out there, this isn’t some lilies-of-the-valley crowd. These men have been through everything Anaconda could do to them and they’re about to be on strike for hell knows how long. They’re not here to fool around. Don’t get carried away, just run the songs through and have them vote, savvy?”

“I am not aware that I ever get carried--”

“Oh, don’t forget the hat, Mr. Morgan. I stirred the slips of paper around, so when they draw it’ll be perfectly fair. Just don’t drop it or spill it or--”

“Actually, Rab, I have handled a hat before, thank you very--”

“Another thing, don’t let Quinlan hog the stage when he gets up to sing whatever his bunch has come up with. This is serious business, not some Irish wake, got that?”

“Jared, I promise I shall muzzle Quin if necessary. Now do you suppose the two of you could possibly give me a minute to get myself ready for this?”

Not that there was any proven way of doing that, given what awaited me out beyond the stage curtain. The buzzing auditorium was filled with men hardened by the copper in their blood and beside them, doubtful wives brought along for protective coloration. A couple at a time, they had filtered past Hoop and Griff and other Welsh-speaking venerables out there in front of the library acting as doormen beneath the drooping banner that read, like a much magnified eyechart, EISTEDDFOD! Passersby and other curious types asking about it were answered with such a spate of baffling syllables that they went away as if fleeing from banshees. Thus, only the mine families whom Jared counted on to be the heart of the union during the strike made up this gathering. Unanimity stopped at that, however. The neighborhoods were mapped in this restless audience as they were on The Hill: the Finns in sturdy rows, the Irish in a looser louder group centered on Quinlan, the Cornish in chapel-like conclave, the Serbs and Italians
across an aisle from each other as though the Adriatic lapped between them. Perched on tables at the back of the hall, Griff and Hoop and the Welsh cronies were like a rebel tribe grinning madly at the edge of the plantation.

My mind raced, but in a circle. As thronged as the place was, I kept feeling the absence of Grace. When I had gingerly asked if she might be on hand to lend moral support to the three of us from the boarding house, she just looked at me as if I had taken leave of common sense. “Morrie, I very nearly broke out in hives when you went off with Sandison, and I can’t risk it again. Besides, somebody should be on the outside if the lot of you get locked up or worse.”

Wise woman. I took one last peek past the curtain and drew the deepest breath I could. It was time to face the music, in every sense of that saying.

Stepping out to the front of the stage with a music stand in one hand and the hat held upside-down in the other, I cleared my throat and spoke into the general hubbub.

“Good evening. Welcome to an evening of magic.”

Naturally that brought hoots to pull a rabbit out of that hat. Down in the front row I saw Jared cover his face with his hand, while Rab mouthed something like The songs, get to the songs!

“Ah, but there more kinds of magic than the furry sort that a stage conjuror plucks up by the ears,” I said, carefully setting the hat aside so as not to spill the slips of paper. “The more lasting sort is not really visible. And that is the variety we hope to produce tonight. Something that will sing on and on in us like a fondest memory.”

“It better be a doozy, Mister,” a skeptic in the middle of the crowd yelled out, “to beat what the Wobs have got.”

“I take it you refer to that celestial pastry, ‘pie in the sky,’” I replied, more cordially than I felt. “You are quite right, that is indeed a clever musical couplet.
Yet it is not on the same footing with the classic musical compositions your fellow miners are striving to emulate here."

"Like what?" came back like a shot.

That snared me. A couple of hundred unconvinced faces were waiting for my response, which had better not be a stuttering one.

The lesson of the old tale-tellers whispered itself again: sometimes you must set sail on the wind of chance. I whipped off my suitcoat and tossed it over the music stand. Rabrab nudged Jared forcefully, recognizing the signs in me. I stepped to the lip of the stage, snapping my sleeve garters like a sideshow Barker.

"You leave me no choice," I announced, "this is the kind of thing I mean." In music-hall style, I shuffled some soft-shoe and twanged out at the top of my voice:

In a cavern, in a canyon,
Excavating for a mine,
Dwelt a miner, a Forty-Niner,
And his daughter Clementine.

As catchy as any song ever written, that ditty caught up this audience to the fullest extent, a roomful of voices joining in with me by the end. After raucous applause and my brief bow, I slipped into my suitcoat again and stepped back in favor of the song contestants. "Just as darling Clementine is unforgettable to us all," I told the readied crowd, "now we shall choose the song that works a similar wonder for the union." Or not. I hoped with everything in me that the efforts of the neighborhoods had improved spectacularly since the last Lyre Club session. There was one way to find out. "The representatives will now come up to draw for order of presentation, please."

The burly half dozen of them crowded around me as I held out the hat with the numbered slips in it. Quin winked at me; the others were as serious as
novitiates into some mystical ritual. At my signal, work-callused hands dipped into the hat crown and drew out.

"It be we!" The man at my left happily brandished the slip with a big penciled 1 on it while the other five studied their lesser positions.

"The luck of the Cornish has prevailed," I announced. "Our Centerville friends will sing first." I retired to the side of the stage, the concertina made its pneumatic presence known, and the song competition was underway.

It was a contest, I realized with a sinking feeling, in which the participants felt bound by no particular rules but their own.

The miners from Cornwall in their practical manner sang from a standard recipe: a verse about the iniquities of the mine owners, then a verse about the travails of working in the mines, followed by a verse about the toll on miners’ families, capped by a verse about standing solidly together and defeating the villainous mining overlords.

The Irish entry, as rendered by Quinlan, sounded suspiciously like a borrowing from a drinking song.

The Welsh nomination was so grave and bass in register that only the Welsh could sing it.

And so on down the line. By the time Finntown and the Italian contingent from Meaderville had been heard from, I had to generate a good deal more gusto in my remarks than I really felt. The plainly mandatory smile on Jared and Rab’s overenthusiastic clapping told me they had reached the same conclusion; even Hoop and Griff looked a little worried. One by one and all in all, the songs were at that level which causes a person to say, oh well, it could have been worse. Which always implies that it could have been much better.

The audience members were muttering among themselves, not a good sign, when I reclaimed center stage after the last song.
“There we have it,” I swung my arms as if pumping enthusiasm into the room, “somewhere among those is the anthem that will carry the union to victory. Now, Jared, if you would come up and conduct the vote, and I’ll do the tallying.”

As Jared was getting to his feet, I searched through my coat pockets for the tally sheets I had tucked away. When I looked up again, something like a shock wave from the audience met me. A roomwide gulp might be the closest description. Whatever had materialized in back of me, it had caused two hundred people to swallow their Adam’s apples and Jared to angle his arms out to protect Rab.

With a sense of doom, I turned around expecting to be face to face with Eel Eyes, Typhoon, or some walrus-mustached policeman.

It was worse than that. It was Sandison.

An Aztec god could not have loomed any more ominously than that massive white-bearded figure. For a long, long moment, he just stood there, looking stonily around at the crowd as if counting up the total of trespassers to be dealt with. His sudden appearance from the back of the stage changed the equilibrium of the room, tilted the will in us all. There were men here who had done things beyond reckoning in the mineshaft or on the battlefield, but none with the reputation of having sent other men off the face of the earth with their bare hands.

As for me, I wanted to dissolve into the floorboards.

The crowd began to stir, with Quinlan and other hard-faced miners looking around for the best route to fight their way out through the police, the Anaconda goons, whatever phalanx of enforcement the lord of the library had brought with him.

“Sit down, nitwits,” Sandison thundered at them.

They sat.
He caught sight of Rab in the front row and gave her a gaze that said what
a pity it was she was associated with riffraff like us. Inevitable as fate, his
attention shifted to me.

"Stay where you are, Morgan, you've caused enough trouble." Now he
scowled at the silent audience. "Who's the head fool here?"

Jared drew himself up. "I happen to be president of the mineworkers
union, and we've been having a social evening of musical--"

"Social," my hind leg," Sandison overrode him. "A person would have
to be deaf not to know that you and your gussied-up inside accomplice"--that
initial adjective I found unfair; I was merely wearing my blue serge suit with a
dove-gray vest added--"are using the Butte Public Library for a purpose the
powers that be say is against the law."

I must say, he summarized the situation beyond dispute. Standing
nervously on one foot and then the other as he glowered around, I wished I was
elsewhere, such as Tasmania. From the sound of it, the audience was witnessing
more of a show than it anticipated; someone now shouted out from the back in
jittery defiance, "Are you going to string us up, or what?"

Shaking his head and beard at Jared and me in turn, Sandison said with
final disgust: "Let's get this over with." He lumbered to the very edge of the stage
and thrust a sheet of paper in Jared's face.

Handling it as if it was the warrant that would put the whole crowd of us
away, Jared scanned the single page. Then studied it with more deliberation. He
sent Sandison a measuring look. Strangely, he had that fixed gleam toward the
next objective when he passed the sheet up to me. "Better do what the man
wants, Professor. We'll sit tight until you get done."

Apprehensively I read the piece of paper. I saw why Jared had done so
twice. Once for the handprinted words, then for the dotted lines of musical notes.
“I shall need help,” I announced at once; this was too important for me to flub alone. “Quin, would you come up, please?” Next I singled out the Cornish leader: “And Jack? And, mmm, Griff?”

With no great willingness they joined me onstage and we huddled around the music sheet. The Cornishman’s eyebrows drew down in concentration, while Quinlan’s lifted as if liking what he saw. Griff ceremoniously cleared his throat. At my signal, the concertina wheezed a note for us. Somewhat ragged at first, our impromptu quartet gained harmony as we sang.

Drill, drill, drill,
That’s the music of The Hill.
The Richest Hill on Earth,
We work for all it’s worth.

Those who mine are all one race,
Born and bred ‘neath a tunnel brace;
Down there deep we’re all one kind,
All one blood, all of one mind,
I back you and you back me,
All one song in unity.

Drill, drill, drill,
That’s the music of The Hill...

It was homely, it was distinctly old-fashioned, it was not particularly profound, but most of all, it was infectious. You could jig to it, march to it, swing a pick and chip out ore to it, hum it, whistle it, sing it in your sleep—-it was as catchy as “Camptown Races,” what more can I say? The atmosphere in the
auditorium changed for the better with every line we sang of that lucky combination of unifying words and bouncy tune, Sandison’s song working its magic like the proverbial charm. When we were done, the audience came out of its reverent spell and jumped to its feet, clapping and cheering.

Leaping to the stage, Jared seized the moment, raising his arms for attention. “Are we agreed? ‘The Song of The Hill’ is it?” Unanimity answered him.

Afterward, as Hoop and Griff and the cronies craftily discharged people into the street in imitation of whatever an eisteddfod is like when it winds down, I tended to last things, such as chairs, with Jared helping. At the back of the auditorium Rab was in one-way conversation with Sandison, enthusing about the evening’s outcome while he stood there like a totem.

“Well done, Professor.” Grinning keenly, Jared gave me credit I was not sure I entirely deserved. “It’s a dandy,” he was saying of the song, “it’ll help pull us through any strike. The Wobs can’t outsing us any more. And the Anaconda bosses will hear it in their sleep before we’re done. They might bend us, but they can’t break us now,” he vowed. He stopped to whack my shoulder in appreciation.

Buoyant with relief, I admitted: “Now I can tell you, I half expected that pair of goons and forty others to burst in on us tonight.”

He tugged his ear thoughtfully. “I guess you haven’t heard. Butte has seen the last of those two.”

Stunned, I visualized the two of them meeting the fate that had been hinted at for me, at the bottom of a glory hole.

I must have gasped, because Jared lifted his hands in clean denial. “None of it was our doing, and they’re still among the living. The word is”--I
Sandison grunted.

"And cleverly adapted," I said the rest to his back, "from when the unheralded pastoral poet Jonathan Cartwright put it to paper as 'The Song of The Mill' a century ago."

He stood deathly still, long enough that my heartbeats grew loud in my ears. At last the slope-shaped man swung around to me, the dim light making it hard to read the face that had taken other men off the earth. Clomp, clomp, the boots advanced toward me, the beard and summit of hair growing whiter as the lord of the library came looming into the lamplight. Just when I began to fear for my neck, he stopped short, an armlength away. "Morgan," he sighed heavily, "you're the only one in Butte who's enough of an educated fool to know that. Sit down, nuisance."

Relieved, I took to my chair while Sandison squashed into his. "All right, just between us, I helped myself to old Cartwright's work where it seemed to fit."

I could not resist: "Rustled it, might one say?"

Another gusty sigh. "That's fair, I suppose. Who the hell ever knows what you end up doing in this life?" He rested his folded hands on his belly. "Anyhow, Dora touched up the tune a little," he blandly shared the credit and guilt. "She's musical, you know."

"How did you know about the songwriting sessions?"

"Hah. Don't you savvy anything yet about running an outfit? First rule is to keep track of what's going on in the bunkhouse."

"You sided with the union."

He brushed away virtue, redemption, whatever it was, with a rough hand. "Anybody who puts a hornet up Anaconda's nose, I'm with."

"If I may say so, Sandy, you've given the miners one of those anthems authored into the mind beyond forgetting."
“They’ll need it, won’t they.”

For a minute we sat in silence, in tribute to the workers’ battle ahead for a fair share of the yield of The Hill. Sandison stirred before I could. Gruff as a grindstone, at least trying to be, he appraised me. “You didn’t come by just to say nighty-night. Am I going to see that milk face of yours from now on?”

“I fear you won’t, Sandy. I have another chore to tend to, and the library is best left out of it.” Goodbye was not easy to say, no matter how I tried to dress it. “I must draw my wages and--what is the ranch phrase?--ride the grub line for a while.”

Sandison frowned sadly and reached for the cashbox. “Now I’ll have to hire a pack of flunkies to do whatever you’ve been doing.”

We both stood, and shook hands the way people do when they know it is for the last time. “One good thing about you, Morgan,” he looked down his beard at me. “You don’t stick around long enough for a person to get sick of you.”

For the next matter I needed the satchel, which I had brought with me and stowed in the sorting room. A full moon carpeted the library steps with silver as I departed the citadel of books, and there was a promise of frost in the air. Butte slept as much as it ever does. The main activity in the downtown streets was out front of the Daily Post building, where the night janitor was dismantling the scoreboard and I tipped my hat to it as I strode by. Like everything else, baseball was over with the passing of its season.

A few blocks farther on, I turned in at the well-lit cigar store. The regulars telling stories at the counter fell silent and met me with stares, all except the messenger, Skinner, who jerked his head toward the back room.
When we were alone there, Skinner jittered from one foot to the other in agitation. "How’d you know?" he asked sourly. "The World Series stinks. The Sox should of won."

"Rightly or wrongly, Cincinnati did," I chided. With the kindness that can be afforded from picking a winner, I elaborated: "Use your noggin. If you were any of the White Sox being paid Maxwell Street wages, would you play your heart out for Cheap Charlie Comiskey?"

"It beats me," he surrendered, and got down to business, "Like I told you, we had to lay your bet off with the big-city boys to cover it. The bookies back east in Chicago ain’t happy with this, but we pay off honest in Butte."

"I was counting on that." I opened the satchel. Sorrowfully, Skinner began dumping in the bundles of cash.

Grace was waiting up.

"I heard." Apronless there in the dining room, she nonetheless appeared to be laboring over something. She tried a smile that she couldn’t make stick. "Hoop and Griff came home to spruce up before they spend the night celebrating in a speakeasy. They went out of here singing the thing at the top of their lungs."

"The union has its work song," I concurred, "and its work cut out for it, as always." I halted near one end of the dining table as she had stopped at the other. From her eyes, I could tell that a question was tugging hard at her. "What is it, Grace? You seem on edge."

The catch in her breath audible, she made a flustered motion in my direction. "I wasn’t sure you would be back. I don’t know why, I just had a feeling--I peeked in your room and saw your satchel was gone."

"I needed it for an errand." Setting the satchel on the table, I opened it as wide as it would go. "Come and see."
Bringing her quizzical expression, she looked inside, and looked again.

"Morrie," she gasped, "did you hold up a bank?"

"Not at all. An honest wager on a sporting event paid off."

Before she could tell me again what she thought of gambling, I hastened to add: "It was very nearly a sure thing." Still, it seemed only fair to give myself a bit of credit. "Although perhaps not everyone would have recognized it as the kind of chance that comes along only once in a lifetime." History soon enough confirmed me in that, as several White Sox players were found to have been bribed and made miscues that let the Red Stockings win. So much for the 1919 Anklet Series.

Unable to resist, Grace peeked into the satchel for the third time. "There's an absolute fortune in there!"

"Mmm, an adequate fortune, let's just say."

"I'm still in the dark." She gestured helplessly at the trove on the table.

"To win this much, didn't you have put up a whopping stake? Where did you get that?"

Her eyes widened with every word as I told her.

"You"--she had trouble finding her voice--"you bet the library books?"

"Sandison's, let us say." I explained that the inventory with the accompanying assessment made a highly impressive asset. Grace still fumbled for adequate words.

"But--then--what if you had lost?"

"Ah, that. Sandison would have told the gamblers in no uncertain terms the books belonged to him and not some minor functionary of the library, I felt quite certain."

With an incredulous laugh Grace sank into a chair at the table and sat looking up at me as if I had grown wings. "You're rich. How does that feel?"
“Better than most other choices,” honesty compelled me to say. I gestured to the satchel. “There’s enough to go around. Take what’s needed to put the boarding house on easy street, why don’t you. And the union strike fund will get a share. So will a certain pair of young lovers, as a wedding gift. Then another sum for them to help Russian Famine along in life and keep the copper collar off him.” I knew myself well enough to admit: “As for the rest, I’ll see how fast it wrinkles.”

I paused. The time had come. Sitting down across from Grace, I reached over and took her hand, patting it as she so recently had caressed mine before I set forth with Sam Sandison to Section 37. “There is a complicating circumstance, unhappily.” If I knew anything in this world, it was that the Chicago gambling mob was going to be angrily curious about the major betting loss in some outpost of the Rockies. So, it had to be said, and pats of the hand did not really soften it: “I must move on.”

A goodbye to a good woman costs a piece of the soul, and having already paid once when I departed from Rose in that earlier time, not much was left in me after I spoke this one. The old feeling of leaving love behind came back like a terrible ache; pernicious bachelorhood was no joking matter. With regret I watched Grace’s face, so near and yet so far, for the effect of my news. I hoped she was not going to cry, because that affliction is catching. But there was a glisten as her eyes met mine. Her chin came up an inch in the Butte way, and I was bracing myself for a landladylike farewell when she uttered instead:

“Morrie? I’ve never seen any of the world except Butte. I—I want to go with you.”

Something like a galvanic shock went through me. Could I have heard right? Her tremulous look took the question away. Mutely I gestured to the two vacant spots at the table.
Those, she took care of with boarding-house dispatch. "Griff and Hoop could scrape by on their own. They pretty much run the place anyway."

Still wordless, I touched a finger to skin.

"No sign of hives whatsoever," she reported bravely, "yet."

"Ah," I recovered my voice. "This is most serious, Grace. We must examine this matter before we do anything rash. Let us say you board the train with me tomorrow--"

She nodded tensely.

"--in full sight of this town and everyone you have ever known--
She could not help sending a lip-biting glance toward the wedding photograph of Arthur Faraday, on duty at the sideboard.

"--in which case," I finished, "we should perhaps do it as man and wife."

Grace blinked.

"Or if you prefer," I spread my hands in offer, "woman and husband."

My proposal took full effect. She covered her mouth with her hand as if a hiccup wanted out. When the hand came away, there was a rosy glow of anticipation on her face, dimple and all. "You mean it?"

"I do. As you shall hear me repeat at an altar, if you so wish."

"Grace Morgan?" she tested out with a lilt very close to music. "I'll need to make a clean start on the name."

I gave her a smile that went back to the beginning before this one. "You wouldn't be the first."

The End