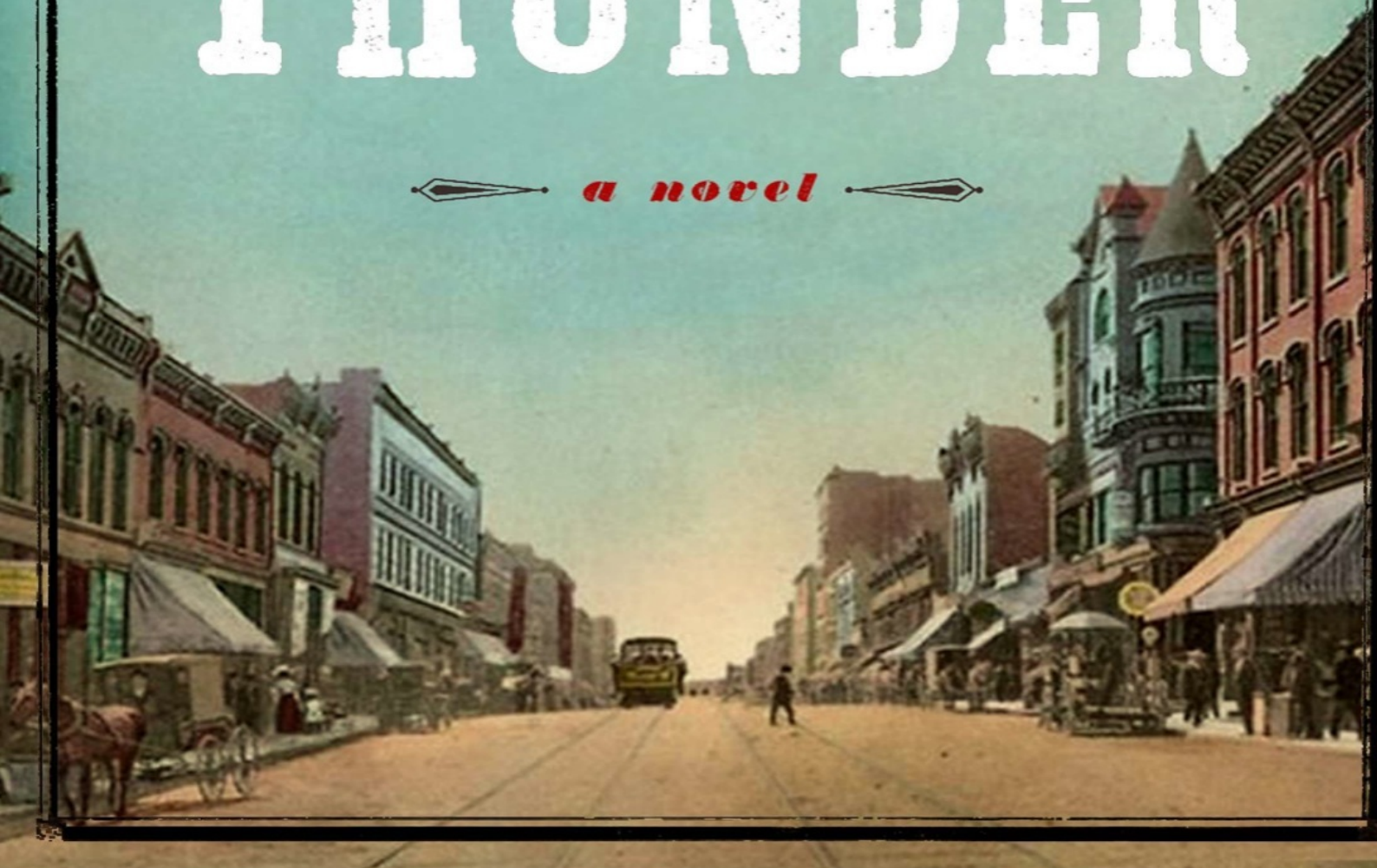


# IVAN DOIG

author of *The Whistling Season* and *The Bartender's Tale*

# SWEET THUNDER

— a novel —



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ALSO BY IVAN DOIG

FICTION

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NONFICTION

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*Winter Brothers*  
*Heart Earth*

# — † SWEET THUNDER † —

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IVAN DOIG

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RIVERHEAD BOOKS

*a member of Penguin Group (USA)*

2013



RIVERHEAD BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Group (USA), 375 Hudson Street,  
New York, New York 10014, USA



USA • Canada • UK • Ireland • Australia • New Zealand • India • South Africa • China

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England  
For more information about the Penguin Group visit [penguin.com](http://penguin.com)

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Published simultaneously in Canada

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Doig, Ivan.

Sweet thunder / Ivan Doig.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-101-63217-8

1. Newspaper editors—Fiction. 2. Montana—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3554.O415S84 2013 2013015397

813'.54—dc23

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*I was with Hercules and Cadmus once,  
When in a wood of Crete they bay'd the bear  
With hounds of Sparta . . . I never heard  
So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.*

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE,  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream*

---

*And we worked at the writer's trade,  
Many a magical book we made.*

TO MY WRITING BUDDIES

David Laskin  
David Williams

AND OF COURSE, THEIR MUSES

Kate O'Neill  
Marjorie Kittle

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“MORRIE, DON’T FALL OFF THE cable car, please. At least not until we reach the top of the hill.”

Grace’s flash of smile and dimple reassured me her warning was of the teasing sort, although hardly the usual honeymoon endearment. Indeed, standing precariously on the steps of the crowded conveyance as I had to, I nearly lost hold in my startled reaction to what I was seeing. Not the fancy San Francisco shops bedecked with holiday wreaths nor the picture-book view of the dusky bay and its ferry fleet like bright water bugs, arresting as those were. No, what caught my eye as the cable car climbed the steep street was the bowler-hatted figure evincing sudden great interest in the cooked chickens hanging by their necks in a Chinese grocery storefront. My heart beat with the question: Could it be? After the gambling mob in Chicago all those years ago, after the goons of Butte, another one?

Another window man.

The species was unmistakable, in my experience. Someone tailing an individual of interest by blending in with other pedestrians until the individual happened to glance around, as I had just done, forcing an about-face to the nearest display behind plate glass. But why now, why here? What perverse kind of luck was following me through life like a secondary shadow?

“I thought I saw someone I recognized,” I vaguely made my excuse to Grace.

She craned to peek past me from where she sat. “Somebody from Butte? We should have said hello.”

“No, no, I must have been wrong. A case of mistaken identity.”

The cable car clanged to a stop atop Nob Hill and I helped her down, my mind still taken up with that sighting. Grace slipped her arm through mine, gay as a Parisienne on promenade, as we strolled past the flivvers and delivery vans lining the manicured driveway of our hotel. “I can’t wait to hear Caruso tonight,” she snugly pressed my arm to her side. “What’s he singing, again?”

“Mmm? *Pagliacci*. The clown who cries.”

“Oh, my. What for?”

“Effect.”

“Those Italians. Remember Rome?” An even more fervent squeeze of my arm. “But this tops it all you man of the world, you. Caruso. *Polly-whosis*. Deluxe hotel on Snob Hill.” She laughed her delight. “It’s like a dream, don’t you think?”

“Very like.” Knowing what I must do, I stopped short of the columned entrance, where the doorman in gaiters and ruff waited to bow us in. “My dear, you go on up to the room. I’ll just nip around the corner for today’s papers.”



“Don’t be long, darling,” she dimpled in a way more than wifely, “we don’t want to be late for the singing and crying.”

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• • •

The newspaper vendor, Blind Tony, was ensconced in a hutch, practically buried in stacks of newsprint. Throughout our stay I had always made generous with a silver dollar for the day’s two bits worth of the *Sporting News* and either the *San Francisco Call* or *Bulletin*. This time I gave him an amount that clinked in his hand.

“That old silver eagle seems to have company, guv’nor.”

“Let’s regard it as rent on a sense of hearing, shall we, Tony,” I responded. Keeping my voice low I asked whether his keen ears had picked up any footsteps following my own.

The sightless eyes squinted in recall. “Funny you should mention it. Right after your last couple times here, there been a set of leather soles and Cat’s Paw heels that go by, slow like.”

I had to think fast. “Here’s what those pieces of silver and I want you to do . . .”

Having enlisted the news vendor, I turned to saunter off toward the hotel as usual, but as soon as his booth concealed me at an angle from anyone down the street who might be watching, I ducked back and into the structure, hiding behind the bulky torso of Tony and stacks of newspapers. Fresh in of headlines permeated the close quarters. **Harding Vows Era of “Normalcy” . . . Carrie Nation Buries Hatchet in Prohibition Victory . . . Congress of Soviets Sets Russian Economic Goals . . . Earthquake Kills Untold Thousands in China . . .** Nineteen-twenty was going out with sound and fury, as human annals tend to do. But I had no time to dwell on that as Blind Tony, significantly cocking an ear, alerted me to the approach of the man in the bowler hat. I dove a hand into my side pocket for the precautionary item I carried there by habit.

“Help me find my house key where I dropped it, can you, guv’nor?” Tony called him over.

As the stranger obligingly stepped up to the booth, I reached out and grabbed him by the necktie, flourishing my brass knuckles in front of his nose and demanding to know who he was.

The man managed to fumble a business card into sight:

BAILEY PRIVATE INVESTIGATIVE AGENCY  
HELENA, MONTANA  
WE SEEK AND FIND

“I’m Bailey,” he choked out.

Blinking, I asked the requisite question, namely what on earth he wanted of me.

“I have something for you,” he squawked the gist of it as best he could, “from Sam Sandison.”

At that name, I released my grip on his necktie and let the set of brass knuckles slip back into my suit coat pocket. My surprise not lessened in the least, I inquired: “Why in heaven’s name didn’t you simply walk up to me like a civilized human being and deliver whatever it is?”

Sulkily adjusting his tie and what composure he could find, the private detective replied that he liked to get a sense of the person he was dealing with before getting down to business.

Very well, then, I was glad to oblige. “How did you”—I wasn’t going to dignify Seek and Find —“track me down?”

That met with a snicker. “There aren’t any too many Fancy Dans trotting around to places like this who pay off in Montana cartwheels.”

I looked sharply at Blind Tony, who was communing with the heavens. “His money is as good as

yours, guv'nor."

"So anyhow," said Bailey, "let me give you what's coming to you." He darted a hand into his suit coat, and I froze at the glimpse of a shoulder holster and its resident revolver. What he produced, however, was a set of papers. A legal document from the look of it, and as I speedily read through it, confounding one.

While I was trying to digest the contents, Bailey, piqued at being snaffled by the necktie, huffed that he almost hadn't taken this cockamamie case, since Sandison was the client. "He's the Strangler you know."

"Yes, yes, I do know," I said absently, still deciphering legalistic thus-and-therefores. "I am also fully aware that vigilante justice, to call it that, against cattle rustlers happened a long time ago, and ever since then Sandy—"

The detective rocked back on his heels. "Holy cripes, you get to call him that? Maybe that explains something like this."

Thinking hard, I tapped the document against the palm of my hand. "You know what this is about do you?"

"Have to," Bailey replied cautiously. "I never take a case blindfolded."

"Then with this proposition of his, would you say Sam Sandison is of sound mind?"

"Are you kidding? He can run circles around either of us in the brains department."

That at least was no surprise. Pocketing the document, I parted with the private eye. "Enjoy San Francisco."

"Have a ton of fun in Butte," he called after me sardonically.

• • •

Grace was gussying up for the opera when I stepped into the hotel room. Fixing her hair, although her crown braid of flaxen tresses always looked flawless to me. Her compact form filled the latest gown as effectively as a dressmaker's form. In the dresser mirror she gave me her best smile, bright and teasing, as I came up behind her and put my hands on her silken shoulders. How lucky you are, Morrie Morgan, deservedly or not, to have this woman in your life, I told myself yet again.

I stood rooted there, weighed down by a pocketful of legalese, as Grace with a little hum busied herself at her hair again. There are times in life—this most definitely was one—when you can feel fate and destiny pressing on you like a heightened law of gravity. Add in some unknown measure of danger, and deciding becomes a burden like no other. To do or not to do; try that on, Hamlet. A surreptitious telegram to Sandison turning down his madcap proposition would mean Grace's lustrous head need never be bothered with this; other vulnerable parts of either of us as well. That would be prudent, no doubt wise. The other choice, though. What a chance. What an intriguing gamble. What a wink of fate.

"I have news," I announced, although I had totally forgotten to buy newspapers. "Down in the lobby, I met up with an emissary from Butte. The long and short of it is, Dora Sandison has passed to her reward—"

"Oh, what a shame," Grace expressed proper respect. "She was such the lady."

"—and Sam Sandison has bequeathed us their house."

At those words, I felt something like electricity go through her. "In the West End?"

Aren't mansions always? "Very nearly as far in that direction on the compass of social climbing, one can go, I suppose. Ajax Avenue."

“Is it,” her eyes were large with trying to take the prospect in, “one of the show-off ones?” Her boardinghouse, where all this began, was considerably down the scale in every way from the profligate showpieces erected by the early generation of Butte copper barons.

“Mmm, in reasonably better taste. I was only ever there a time or two, but I remember it as roomy and done in a style of its own.” Much like Samuel Sandison himself, I did not bother to add.

Grace absorbed that for a moment. Then flung herself into hugging me. “Morrie, you rogue! What a wonderful Christmas present!”

As I regained my breath, she ran her fingers up and down my lapel and confided with a bit of a blush: “I have a confession to make. It’s awful of me, but . . . I’d begun to wonder how you are as a provider.”

That made two of us. For the fact of the matter was, our money was evaporating fast. Just prior to winning Grace’s hand, I had attained a junior fortune on a sporting wager. More like a sure thing, actually, for who in his right mind would not have bet against the heavily favored Chicago White Sox in the 1919 World Series, intuiting as I did that the team would not play its best for owner Charles Comiskey, known in sporting circles back there as Cheap Charlie. I admit I did not foresee that his baseball minions would succumb to bribes and deliberately let Cincinnati win, but it came to the same, which is to say a satchel of cash for Grace and me to embark on married life. With that wherewithal, our honeymoon had turned into a honey year. Europe, New York, New Orleans, and of course San Francisco, we hit the world’s high spots in the manner to which we were all too soon accustomed. The document beneath the fabric Grace was so fondly fingering had spared me a confession of my own, namely that I possessed not the foggiest notion of how to support us, in high style or low, once the satchel was empty. Now, whether or not we had any money, we at least had a mansion, ready and waiting for the claiming.

“Ah, Grace,” I tucked a stray tendril into her interrupted hairdo, “there is one slight wrinkle in Sandison’s bequest that I should perhaps mention.”

“Fire when ready, you sneaky provider, you.”

“The house comes with Sandison.”

THE TRAIN—WHICH HAD ROYALLY WHISKED us away to more comfortable climes not so many months before—deposited us now onto the wintry platform of the Butte depot. Snowbanks of apparently arctic depth lined the railroad tracks, and the depot eaves showed long teeth of icicles. One of us at least was unbothered by the cool reception; Grace’s cheeks bloomed in the frosty air. “As they say, there’s no place like home,” she smiled encouragement to me, each of her words a smoky puff of breath, “even ten below.”

I merely nodded, distracted as ever by the eye-popping view. The Richest Hill on Earth, always bragged of with capital letters, did not look the part as it hunched at the back doors of the wintry city. Rather, it appeared to be a conglomeration of belching factories and bizarre steel towers leading to nowhere and grim gray dump heaps pocking a misplaced hump of earth, which, with a fresh covering of snow, gave the startling impression of having risen like bread dough. Looks can be deceiving, never more so than in this instance, for the Butte hill contained unmatched deposits of copper, at precisely the time when civilization was wiring itself for electricity. Some twenty billion dollars of the conductive metal had been mined from the Hill. As for the community that had exploded from rough western mining camp to a secular capital of political power and cultural aspiration, Butte was no beauty but held an allure of its own. Literally sitting on riches, the unlikely mile-high metropolis, which always appeared to be trying to catch up with itself in sporadic skyscrapers and flung-together neighborhoods, had drawn seekers of wealth, from miners to moguls. I myself first arrived practically penniless in the tumultuous year of 1919, and while my path to good fortune was not the standard one, I had to grant that Butte had been a lucky diggings, as the saying was, for me as well. Although, as is too often the case where men battle for control of the earth’s yield, not without risk attached. What a crime, on what a scale, for a city of such treasure to be forever squirming under one mighty thumb. Even in the innocence of snow capping the distant roofs and cornices of tall downtown businesses, it stood out to me: the top floor of the Hennessy Building, where power resided. Where the offices of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company looked down on the city and, for that matter, the state that it had long ruled like a corporate fiefdom. Where suspicions ran high against interlopers of whatever sort.

With a well-learned sense of caution, I glanced around for anyone taking undue notice of our arrival. Window men, if any, would have stood out like penguins against frosty glass backdrops, and passersby swathed from the crystalline cold all seemed to have their heads down to watch the tricky footing on the tilted streets. Nothing unwelcome about our welcome, so far. Still, certain shards of memory from 1919 sent an occasional quiver through me.

Shivering more than a little herself as we waited for our luggage, Grace murmured in wifely

concern, “You look bothered. You aren’t nervous about the Sandison house, are you?”

“No, no, just wondering at the whereabouts of our belongings,” I alibied, looking around for the baggage handler. With sinking heart, I spotted him emerging not from the baggage car but the depot, claim check in hand.

I groaned. “Not again?”

“That trunk of yours got sidetracked somewhere between Frisco and here, I’d say,” he cheerfully proffered the claim check. “It’ll catch up with you sooner or later, you can just about bet.”

“Not if experience is any guide,” I protested hotly, citing my own previous trunk lost when I first arrived to Butte, and still missing after all this time. I was well launched into an impassioned lecture to the unimpressed baggage man about this trunk of ours having accompanied us uneventfully on railroads around half the world until this accursed one, when Grace tugged at the sleeve of my overcoat. “Morrie, never mind. I have my overnight case and you’ve your satchel, we can get by.”

Resigned to the loss, evidently my own personal admission ticket to Butte, I sighed heavily and accompanied Grace out to the street. A jitney sat chugging at the snowy curb, and the bundled-up taxi driver poked his head out to ask, “Where to, folks?”

I said with what I hoped was the air of a mansion owner, “Ajax Avenue, please.”

“Horse Thief Row it is,” the driver said nonchalantly. “Hop in.”

• • •

Probably since the villas of Pompeii, palatial homes are ornaments of wealth, and Butte had more than its share of fanciful big houses. Our route swung past the monstrosity built by the early copper magnate William A. Clark, a many-gabled Victorian monument to vanity that took up half a block. More ostentatious yet was the château his son had imported from Europe and reassembled to the last cubit. Housekeeper that she’d had to be in operating her own boardinghouse, Grace peered apprehensively through the frost-flowered windows of the taxi as we passed other West End behemoths, her gloved hand gripping mine harder and harder. “Grace, Sandy’s residence as I recall it is not as gargantuan as these,” I sought to reassure her. To no avail. More firmly, I tried again. “It’s only a house, remember.”

“Around here, that’s some ‘only,’” she said with a swallow.

Now I was the apprehensive one. “I hope you’re not getting—”

“No! I’m fine. Fine.”

The driver called out, “This’s the street. Which shack is yours, pard?”

I pointed over his shoulder to a stonework architectural mix with a peaked tower room predominating. Draped in snow and icicles, the three-story house looked like a polar castle.

“There, see?” I soothed Grace when the taxi left us off outside the gray granite manse. “Smaller than Versailles.”

“A little,” she allowed doubtfully, as we negotiated the frosty front steps and porch. The second time I rapped the brass knocker in the shape of a helmeted warrior’s frosty-eyed visage, Ajax on guard duty, a familiar gruff voice called from somewhere inside. “Coming. Don’t wear out the door.”

“Morgan,” the figure that flung it open and loomed there almost filling the doorway issued, as if identifying me to myself. As commanding as Moses, he rumbled, “It’s about time you stopped gallivanting all over the landscape. Heh.”

Samuel Sandison himself was nearly geographic, the great sloping body ascending from an avalanche of midriff to a snowy summit of beard and cowlick. Glacial blue eyes seemed to see past a

person into the shadows of life. Attired as ever in a suit that had gone out of fashion when the last century did, and boots long since polished by sagebrush and horsehide, he appeared to be resisting time in every stitch of his being. Description struggled when it came to his mark on history, cattle king turned vigilante turned bookman and city librarian, who had bent every effort and not a few regulations to provide a rough-and-tumble mining town with a world-class reading collection. And always, always, the long shadow of the hangman's tree followed him, carried forward from when he owned the biggest ranch in Montana. Having shared an office with him in something like companionable exasperation—the feeling may have been mutual—I always connected this outsize man with those lines of the poet Cheyne: *Greater than his age was he / Story and legend his legacy.*

Right now, he was some manner of unprecedented tenant ushering us into a sprawling residence newly ours. Parlor, drawing room, music room with piano and peach-and-plum wallpaper wrongly inspired by Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*, living room, dining room, nameless others, kitchen somewhere in the distance. Fine-grained oak here, bird's-eye maple there, Turkish carpets everywhere. "Bedrooms and such are upstairs," he waved toward the heavens, "there's a mob of them. Help yourselves." With Grace wearing the wide-eyed expression of a first-time museumgoer, he trooped us on through the downstairs until we reached a conical room at the base of the substantial tower, practically submerged in books. "Library," he pronounced, probably just for the satisfaction of the word. Spying a rare-books catalog open on the overflowing desk, I couldn't help but ask, "How's shopping, Sandy?"

"About like dealing with pirates, as usual." He frowned at me a certain way, book lover to book lover. "What do you think of *The Song of Igor's Campaign*?"

"Where 'the wolves in the ravine conjure the storm,' if I am translating rightly? The poetic flavor of that might not be received as well as it should by your library patrons, this time of year." I inclined my head to the depths of snow and thermometer, which evidently were here to stay through the Butte winter.

"You maybe hit on a good point there," Sandison drawled. "I'll hold out for something less Siberian." Noticing Grace biting a finger—I could tell she was trying to tally the number of rooms encountered so far, with floors yet to go—he addressed her with elephantine gallantry. "My hat is off to you, madam, for turning this hopeless case," he indicated to me, "into husband material."

"What? Oh, yes. I mean, Morrie had a hand in that, too." The topic of matrimony reminding her, she paid her respects to the late Dora: "I'm sorry about your loss."

He bobbed his head in almost schoolboyish fashion, evidently not trusting his voice. Clearing his throat, he returned to eyeing me critically. "What are you doing with all that foliage on your face? Hiding the mud fence?"

There is quite a philosophy to growing a beard—or a mustache, as I occasionally resorted to—but in this instance, I'd done so simply as a precautionary measure. That winning bet on the corrupted World Series may have upset the Chicago gamblers who lost their shirts to some smart aleck with too much of a hunch, as they no doubt saw it, and I thought it best not to fit my description while Grace and I hit the high spots of the world. I had also added some pounds in our sampling of national cuisines; advancing from lightweight to middleweight, as I preferred to think of it. A bit of camouflage never hurt, in my experience.

"I think it's very becoming on him," Grace said loyally, of my carefully tended whiskers. "Hmmp," Sandison grunted, himself bearded as a Santa. The glint in the gaze he gave me showed he was restraining himself, barely, from asking, "Becoming what?" Before he could hold forth about me any further, Grace put in, "I'd like to look over the kitchen, if I may."

“Madam, be my”—he halted the sweep of his hand toward the rear region of the house—“I started to say guest, but landlady is more accurate, isn’t it. Heh.” Grace flinched ever so slightly and left us.

“That brings up something, Sandy.” I strolled the circle of the room for the pleasure of running my fingers over the valuable books. “Exactly how is this living arrangement supposed to work?”

“Easy as pie, simpleton. I’ll hole up here when I’m not downtown at the public library,” he deposited himself in his chair at the heaping desk, “and use a stray bedroom. The rest of the place is yours and hers. Signed, sealed, and delivered.”

“That leads to my next question.” The chair groaning under him as he shifted haunches, Sandison waited for me to ask it. I gestured to include everything from ancient Ajax guarding the entrance to the mansion to the gift of title in my pocket. “Why?”

“You don’t think I’m going to live forever, do you?” he said, mildly for him. “You might as well have the place instead of the taxman.”

That seemed to sum the matter up, at least as far as he was concerned. It was only the start of it for me. “Thank you very much, I think. But ah, taxes, and upkeep—”

“Coal,” he added to the list with a grunt. “The place eats it like a locomotive.”

“—and staff—”

“The cook and a couple of maids left, after Dora passed away. I figured you and the missus would take care of all that your own way anyhow.”

“—all of which,” I drew a needed breath, “leads me to wonder if I might have my old job back. A steady wage would be most welcome at this point, Sandy.”

For the first time, he looked less than commanding, the chair groaning some more as he shifted uncomfortably. “Can’t be done, Morgan, as much as I’d like to. The trustees have gone off their rock about the payroll. The idiots won’t even let me hire a book-cart pusher, let alone an assistant like you were. It’s a damn shame.” His turn to take in the mansion with a gesture. “Naturally I’ll kick in some rent. I’ll discuss that with the landlady,” he said with another glint, “she looks like that is right up her alley.” From under snowy cowlick and frosty eyebrows he studied me in a way I knew all too well. “The rest, though, you’re going to have to provide by putting that head of yours to work, aren’t you.”

“I see.” I wished I did.

• • •

That night in bed, an ornate one that must have held Sandison and Dora comfortably enough but was big as a barge for us, neither Grace nor I could close our eyes, let alone sleep. A large arched window at the end of the bedroom looked out over the lights of the city, with the white web of stars above like a reflection. I have always loved the night sky and its desires coded in constellations and comets, but it was not that keeping me awake. It was Grace.

“I have to keep pinching myself that this is really happening, Morrie.”

“I know what you mean.”

“I’m practically black and blue.”

“No doubt.”

She turned toward me, her flaxen hair garlanding the pillow. “I have to tell you something. Don’t take it wrong. Promise? This, this palace or whatever it is, is a housekeeper’s nightmare. I mean, it’s wonderful, in all other ways. Everything done so fine. The woodwork. The furniture. The Turkey rug. But it’s so”—I could just make out her face in the dark as she searched for the proper word—“endless.”

“Yes, I’ve begun to notice that.”

“Not that His Nibs”—the jocular lordly moniker fit Sandison rather nicely, I had to grant her—“isn’t the soul of generosity for giving us the house. But he had reason to, didn’t he. Imagine how he must have rattled around in here alone until he had his, his—”

“Epiphany.”

“—whatever you want to call it, to pass this barn of a place along to us and turn himself into a high-class boarder. Him and a thousand books.” She was gaining speed all the time. “It’s too much house even for me, Morrie. I could work myself to a nub trying to keep up with all that needs doing, and it would still gain on me every hour of every day. Can we afford hired help?”

“In a word, no.”

“Then I know of only one thing to do. I take that back. Two.”

“Grace, love, you’re not really going to say—”

“Griff and Hoop. They’re the only answer.”

With difficulty I held my tongue from asking, “To what question?” Describing themselves as retired miners—“at least the tired part”—Wynford Griffith and Maynard Hooper had been fixtures at Grace’s boardinghouse when I alighted there new to Butte, bandy veterans of mine disasters and union struggles and other travails they could recite at Homeric length. It was true, as Grace now was pouring into my ear, that Griff was something of a handyman and Hoop was, well, constantly available; we had left them in charge of the boardinghouse during our honeymoon sojourn without too many qualms. The pair of them as house staff on Ajax Avenue, though? For one thing, they were getting so old they creaked. For another, as I protested to her, if they moved in here, who was going to mind the boardinghouse?

“We’ll have to close it until we get this place whipped, that’s all there is to it,” she said conclusively. “No boarder in his right mind is going to show up in Butte in the middle of winter anyway.”

She raised on one elbow, her flaxen hair spilling to her shoulders as she gazed down at me.

“That leaves you, J. P. Morgan.”

I matched her wavery smile with my own. “I don’t suppose it’s an honor I can decline, hmm?” We had counted on my old job at the library, which Sandison scotched. The void yawned distressingly large.

The fact is, I do not take well to most forms of employment. The acid of boredom sets in insidiously and my mind finds other pursuits. Life among the blessed books of Butte aside, the one occupation I had found to give my head and heart to was teaching in a one-room school, in my first venture into Montana a dozen years before. Grace knew only the vaguest of that brief prairie episode of my life, and the question was what gainful work I could find, and stick to, in the here and now. Her first husband, who perished in Butte’s worst mining disaster, the 1917 Speculator fire, evidently had been a paragon of husbandly virtue, uninterruptedly employed, steady as a clock in most ways, right down the list except for an unfortunate habit of betting on greyhound races, the surest way to have one’s wages go to the dogs. Given that, I knew what a leap of faith and love it had been for her to risk life with me. Trying to sound as confident as a man can while flat on his back, I gazed up at her. “*Nil desperandum*, my dear. Never despair.”

“House rules. English only, in the marital bed.”

“What, you’ve never heard of Ovid?”

“I’ll Oafid you, chatterbox,” she tickled me in the ribs. And with that, everything else could wait until morning.



“Big.”

“Righto.”

“Lots needs doing.”

“Nothing we can’t fix.”

Hoop and Griff moved in as though tooling up to attack a rockface in the days when they were a flash team of drillers in many a mine, with a clatter and a magpie glitter of interest in what awaited. Squinting around at the expanse of the house as Hoop likewise was doing, Griff assured me, “Don’t worry none, Morrie. We’ll pitch in here and there and it’ll all add up, you’ll see.” His tool bag beside their battered suitcases there in the side hall struck me as somehow ominous, but I was in no position to turn down help of any sort. Grace had disappeared to the far reaches of kitchen and pantry, and Sandison had not yet made his appearance for the day. The snow-bright morning practically wreathed our new arrivals in wrinkles, Hoop and Griff having worked underground side by side for so many years and boarded together for so many more that they had grown to resemble each other, wizened and bent as apostrophes and nearly telegraphic in their talk. Mineral, vegetable, or animal, the pair could boil down a topic almost instantly. Grace had great affection for them—as did I, with reservations—and Griff, a lifelong bachelor, and Hoop, a widower, shared a near holy reverence for her; “Mrs. Faraday,” as they primly had insisted on calling her up until now, when their tongues were going to have get used to “Mrs. Morgan.”

All at once, their speculations back and forth as to which ailment of the house merited most urgent treatment petered out as they looked past me down the hallway, and in unison doffed their hats and clasped them to their breasts.

I scarcely had to turn around to the object of their respect. “Good morning, Sandy. I hope the accommodations”—he had taken over a back bedroom in what amounted to servants’ quarters, but handiest to his beloved library tower—“were up to expectation?”

“It’ll do. Hell, I’ve slept in bunkhouses before. What’s all the commotion?”

Ceremoniously I introduced Hoop and Griff as new boarders, doubling as household staff. Sandison grunted a greeting to the bandy-legged pair, who returned the sentiment in hushed tones of awe. Reputation is a mighty thing, I was reminded again. Even in this city where justice not uncommonly was meted out by fist, gun, or dynamite, the legend of Samuel Sandison’s vigilante day stood head and shoulders over other such episodes. It was an old joke that civic uplift came to Montana with the lynching of the villainous sheriff, Henry Plummer, in the gold-strike town of Virginia City in 1864. Tradition of that grisly but effective sort found expression after Sandison’s summary way of dealing with cattle rustlers—hence his lurid nickname “the Strangler,” or sometime simply “the Earl of Hell”—and here he stood before us, wild-bearded and filling a suit that would have held both Griff and Hoop. Practically kowtowing, they said they’d better get at things and disappeared to an inner room, where moments later hammering broke out.

“You keep some strange company,” Sandison commented in their wake.

“They’ll fit in,” I blandly replied.

He gave me a look, but then grunted again and reached for his overcoat and hat. “Walk me to work, why don’t you. It’ll give you something to do besides idle your life away.”

We set off in sunshine that did not take the chill out of the air, as though the sun’s warmth was waning with the year. The other residences along Horse Thief Row were as frosted as cakes, and I learned from Sandison’s rumbling commentary on the neighborhood that it had been his wife’s idea t

move there when they left the ranch. “Dora wanted a fancy house for a change,” he said of the mansion I still had to get used to thinking of as mine and Grace’s. “Myself, I’ve never been keen about living on a street named for a two-bit soldier in the Trojan War.”

“It depends on the version of Ajax you believe in,” I protested. “In one telling of it, he was larger than life and a warrior of great prowess. In the other tale, I admit, he comes across as a bit of a peewee and thinking too well of himself. But—”

“That’s what I mean, oaf. If he was an unquestionable hero, he’d have his own epic poem, wouldn’t he.”

“But, I was about to say, if antiquity’s penchant for dualism has given us Janus, a god with faces looking in opposite directions, why can’t there be a twofold reflection of character in the myth, or myths, if you will, of Ajax? Perhaps representing mind and matter?” I thought I had him there, but Sandison just snorted.

“Pah. I said he was a two-bit soldier, didn’t I? A bit of this and a bit of that. You should learn to listen, rattlebrain.”

About then we rounded the corner toward downtown, leaving mythology behind. Like Grace, I nearly had to pinch myself into believing my own senses, for the view ahead stretched like no other in America, with the winter-capped Rocky Mountains rising to the Continental Divide seemingly just beyond the city limits, and every manner of dwelling place and work spot of a hundred thousand people jumbled in between here and there. It was as if a section of Pittsburgh had been grafted onto an alpine scene, the power of industry and that of nature juxtaposed. The contest between the two was in the air, literally. You might think a city dominated by smokestacks and dump heaps would look its best under a covering of snow, but logic did not always apply to Butte. The weather could not keep up with production on the Hill, its low industrial rumble lending to the illusion that the humpbacked rise simmered like a volcano, belching constant smoke and venting muck from dozens of mineshafts, so that the snow being shoveled from paths and doorways as we passed was a mushy gray. “We need a good blizzard,” Sandison prescribed as we made our way down the sloping streets toward the business district. Once again I marveled at my benefactor-cum-boarder, as wintry himself in his silvery wreath of beard and breath as Father Frost of the nursery rhyme. How did it go—*King of the whitened clime, ever there / Leaving tokens of wintertime everywhere*. Season in, season out, Samuel Sandison was like no one else I had ever encountered or expected to.

Conversation was a sometime thing with this uncommon man, I knew from experience, and so to keep matters going I pitched in with topics ranging from the weather to politics. As ever, Sandison’s responses varied from grunts and silences to pronouncements that snapped a person’s head around. As the saying was, life was serious when it made him; in all the time I shared his office, the only real mirth he showed was when he spotted a bargain in a rare-book catalog and would let out a “Heh!” and smile in the deeps of his beard. Yet there was almost no other person, save Grace, whom I found more compelling.

Just now he was grumbling about the recent national election, which had picked as president the most wooden member of the U.S. Senate. “Warren G. Harding is barely bright enough to operate an umbrella. Damn it, what’s this country coming to?”

“History reminds us that worse has happened, Sandy. You will recall that Caligula elected his horse to the Roman Senate.”

“Hah. The American electorate has chosen the north end of that animal going south.”

As we talked on, our breath wreathing our beards, that feeling of being in the company of fate came over me, perhaps just from nearness to Samuel Sandison, a figure monumental enough, Janus-

like, to have “The Earl of Hell” inscribed on one side of him and “Progenitor of the Finest Book Collection West of Chicago” on the other. And somewhere between, the unlikely genie who bestowed a mansion as if giving away an old suit of clothes. Impetuously I told him he must inform me or Grace if there was anything we could do to cushion his life at the house. “I know you must miss Dora greatly.”

“About like losing one eye,” he said simply.

Glancing at me and then away, he turned gruff again. “The natural order of things turned upside down somehow, Morgan. Who would have thought you’d be the married man and I’d be the tangle-foot bachelor.”

By now we were approaching his domain, his realm and his scepter, the Butte Public Library, and my heart skipped at the first full sight of it. How I loved that castle of literature, a granite Gothic extravaganza, with its welcoming arches like the entranceway of a cathedral and a balcony neatly cupped above and a corner tower with its peak inscribing the sky. The library’s holdings were the even greater glory, with beautiful first editions of the output of authors from Adams, Henry, to Zola, Émile shelled along with lesser works. Again like a many-sided figure, Sandison as librarian was also the institution’s prime benefactor by mingling these treasures on loan from his own collection with the library’s standard fare, an act of stupendous generosity that also made it impossible to fire him.

A block away, overtaken by so many memories good and the other sort, I was slowing to such an extent that Sandison looked over his shoulder at me. “Coming in?”

“Not today, Sandy.”

“Suit yourself, if you’d rather loaf than improve yourself,” he drawled, lumbering off to where the staff awaited him as usual in a line at the top of the library steps. With a pang, I watched him count them in through the arched doorway as he had counted cowboys at the corral in his previous life.

On my way back to the house, it was only when I stopped at a newsstand to buy the *Sporting News* and what passed for a local paper, the wretched Anaconda-owned *Butte Daily Post*, that the odd fact occurred to me. Sandison in our wide-ranging conversation had not bothered to bring up the copper company and its mailed-fist grip on the city at all. Which was a bit like that Sherlock Holmes mystery of the dog that did not bark in the night.

I HAD NEVER BEEN DOMESTIC. Which is to say, a householder, owner of a home of any sort—let alone a moose of a house up there with the most grandiose of them on Horse Thief Row, thanks to Sandison’s quirky bequest. Back a decade and more ago, my brother and I and the love of his life necessarily dwelled under the same roof during the rise of his career, but the Congress Plaza Hotel in Chicago, when we were in the money, was such address as the three of us had. Therefore, Ajax’s pop-eyed stare each time I put a key in the big front door of what was now the Morris and Grace Morgan domicile was apt enough.

The house, the mansion—the manse, as some imp within me couldn’t help categorizing it—this home-owning opportunity or burden or responsibility or whatever it constituted, made me look at myself in a new way. To be painfully honest about it, until then I amounted to something like a tourist excursionsing through life. Episode followed episode, never uninteresting but somewhat lacking in basic design. I lived by my wits, sufficient company most of the time. But now there was Grace to be thought of. Didn’t I owe her, if not myself and my page in the book of life, a more settled and assured existence? In a word, domestication?

It would have been less a test of my resolve if the most perfect example of carrying a house on one’s back were something other than the snail.

• • •

The pair of them were hard at it, Griff whanging away at a loosened stairway runner while Hoop handed him carpet tacks, when I returned later in the day after a trek around town scouting for employment, a discouraging exercise if there ever was one. With Montana again on hard times—the Treasure State, as it was known, seemed stuck in the mining-camp cycle of wild boom and precipitous bust—any jobs that I was more or less fitted for were scarcer than hen’s teeth, which left me facing the prospect I dreaded. The C. R. Peterson Modern Mortuary and Funeral Home. “There’ll always be an opening here for you,” Creeping Pete, which was to say Peterson, long since had assured me amid the display of caskets with lids up. Briefly I’d served as his establishment’s cryer at Dublin Gulch wakes when I first alighted in Butte, but this time around, I would have to plead sobriety and confine myself to the undertaking parlor; the rest of the nation may have signed on to Prohibition, but in this city, three hundred saloons merely turned into three hundred speakeasies and bootleg liquor flowed so freely at wakes that the corpse’s brain wasn’t the only one being pickled. I had no doubt that Creeping Pete would make room for me on the premises of the Modern Mortuary and Funeral Home, however. Somebody had to put on a fixed smile and sell those caskets. Accordingly, I was not in my best mood

as I headed for the kitchen to tell Grace she was about to have an undertaker's assistant for a husband

"By the way, Morrie," Griff called between slams of his hammer. "You're wanted."

That stopped me as if impaled. The vision of oneself portrayed in every post office in the land with that incriminating word beneath would halt any thinking person. Confusion asked the sizable question for what?

Griff sized me up as if putting a price on me himself. "Got the note on you, Hoop?"

"Somewhere." The other oldster patted his pockets to finally retrieve it. With no small measure of trepidation, I unfolded the message.

*Mr. Morgan—*

*Welcome back to Butte—we've missed you something awful. Jared needs to talk to you, and you know I always want to. Meet us at the usual place, the usual time, tonight.*

*Yours until the fountain pen runs dry,  
Rab*

I checked to make sure. "This was brought by—?"

"That kid," said Hoop. "Thin as a whisker."

Relieved, I went directly to the kitchen to inform Grace. Slicing onions, she was in tears, but greeted me with a world-beating smile all the same. As Hoop and Griff and I knew and Sandison was about to find out, her years of balancing a boardinghouse budget had made her a canny if unconventional grocery shopper, and today's triumph was a bargain on rabbit. "Those French. Remember that meal, lapin à la something or other?"

Touching her cheek to wipe away a trickle, I managed to look regretful as I told her to set one less plate for supper. "Jared Evans wishes to see me about something."

"Of course you need to go, then," she said at once. The leader of the mineworkers' union inspired almost royal loyalty, and I had been proud to stand with him in a certain episode in 1919. "Still," she sniffled from the effect of the onions, "it's a shame you'll miss the stewed rabbit."

• • •

The spacious eatery with the big red welcoming sign NO WAITING! YOUR FOOD AWAITS YOU! was called the Purity Cafeteria. Butte never undernamed anything. I scanned the ballroom-size dining area but could not spot Rab and Jared yet, and so went to the serving counter at the back and, with a mental apology to Grace, got myself a pasty. Fortunately pronounced like *past*, not *paste*, this was a meat-and-vegetables dish encased in pastry crust, introduced to Butte by Cornish miners, and in my experience, that rare thing, a hearty delicacy. It proved to be so, again this evening, as I ate, watching the traffic of customers waiting on themselves, until a wraithlike presence at my side caught me by surprise.

"Hiya, sir."

"The same to you, Famine!" The boy had grown in height the past year, but not at all in girth, still skinny as an undernourished greyhound. Straw hair flopping over his pale brow as he stood on one st leg and then the other, he retained the personification put on him by schoolmates, Russian Famine, which he greatly preferred to Wladislaw. Close behind the lad, natural authority resting on him as ever, Jared Evans provided me a serious smile along with a handshake and the greeting, "Professor,

how you doing?" Then came the whirlwind, Rab, exclaiming, "Mr. Morgan!" and flinging herself into hugging me while I was only half onto my feet.

What a family tableau they made as they settled at the table with me. The boy restless in every bone but his mind at ease, I could tell, in the company of these trusted grown-ups. Jared, lean and chiseled, his dark eyes reflective of battles he had been through, from the trenches of death in France to the sometimes deadly front lines of the miners' union contending with the copper bosses of Butte. To my thinking, Jared Evans always looked freshly ironed, with a touch of starch. Not his clothing; Jared himself. On that score, though, I noticed he was better dressed than I remembered, which I credited to the influence of Rab, frisky clothes horse that she had been since school days. Properly named "Barbara" until in a classroom moment I never regretted I permitted her to flip that around to "Rabrab," and now a teacher herself, she still exuded the zeal of a schoolgirl, albeit one who happened to have the chest and legs of a circus bareback rider. Jared had made a fortunate catch with her. And she him. Russian Famine luckiest of all, nearly a street orphan but for these two as his guardians. I could tell the boy thought the sun and moon rose and set in them, the pair in his parentless life to look up to.

Gratified to be reunited with them so fast, I wondered, "How did you know I was back in town?" Rab only wrinkled her nose as though the whereabouts of Morris Morgan were common knowledge, while Jared winked and said, "Moccasin telegraph," the old rubric for the soft-footed way news travels. Laughing as much as we talked in catching up, we shared quick stories, including mine of the mansion bequest from Sandison. The fidgety seventh-grader doing his best to follow the maundering of adults brightened. "Ain't he the one called the Earl of—"

"Careful with your language, Famine," Rab admonished.

"I was gonna say 'heck,'" he maintained guilelessly.

I chuckled and asked the boy whether his current teacher was as strict as that stickler last year, meaning Rab.

"Got her again, don't I," he reported with a fresh outbreak of fidgets. "Her and me are in the hoosegow."

I blinked. "He means the detention school, up on the Hill," Rab hastened to explain. "It's a dormitory school, for boys who are truant too much or delinquent in other ways that their families can't handle. They learn some shop work, along with regular classes. They can be a handful—I know what you're going to say, Mr. Morgan, remembering what I was like—"

"Justice is served," I said it anyway with a smile tucked in my beard.

"—but they tame down if treated right." She left no doubt that was her calling, explaining that she was a day matron at the so-called hoosegow. "That way, Famine can come along and go to school under me."

"She's terrible hard, sir," the boy testified.

"So are diamonds, my friend," I said with a fond swipe at the hair perpetually clouding in on his eyes. Now Rab suggested the two of them tend to the matter of food, and Famine in a few bounds sprang ahead of her to the serving line.

Silently proud, Jared watched them go, and then there were the two of us, and the topic always on the table in the shadow of the Hill, it seemed. I tried to put it diplomatically: "As those more statesmanlike than I might ask, how stands the union?"

Jared tugged at his wounded ear, an answer in itself. A German bullet had clipped the lobe neatly off, lending him a swashbuckling look advantageous in leading an organization of hardened miners. He was every inch the combat veteran now, in more ways than one. "The war over here goes on and

on,” he more than answered my question. “Anaconda just kills us more slowly than the Fritzie’s did.” By that, I assumed he meant the long-standing reputation of the Hill’s mines as the most dangerous anywhere, one mortal accident a week on the average, not counting conflagrations such as the Speculator fire, which claimed 164 lives, or the slow burn of silicosis in the lungs of hundreds of other doomed mineworkers. But no. Jared Evans practically blazed with fresh intensity as he leaned across the table toward me. “You missed the fireworks, Professor.” I listened in stunned silence as his recitation of the happenings of the past year added to the frieze of Butte’s historic battles between labor and capital. The mineworkers’ union had been ending 1919 on a high note, literally, when Grace and I left on our extended honeymoon. With a newly contrived work song, which I and a highly unlikely collaborator in the person of Sam Sandison had a hand in, to serve as the rousing anthem of its struggle and Jared’s shrewd new generation of leadership, the union was intrepidly facing off against the Anaconda Copper Mining Company on the eternal issue of working conditions in the deadly mines. “The lost dollar” of wages, a cruel twenty percent cut Anaconda had arrogantly clipped from mine pay, was won back that year by carefully spaced walkouts—the phrase “wildcat strike” was never uttered on the labor side—and mineworkers ten thousand strong were finding their voice in the words of that “Song of the Hill,” *I back you and you back me, all one song in unity*. All in all, matters had been brought to what seemed a favorable negotiating stage by the time Grace and I were boarding our train and bidding farewell to a copper-rich city with a fresh start of decade ahead of it. But in Jared’s telling, history brutally repeated itself when an unforeseen circumstance brought in troops again. That circumstance shocked me into exclaiming:

“A general strike? Jared, that sounds extreme of you.”

“The Wobblies forced our hand,” he said wearily. The radical Industrial Workers of the World whipped up such anti-Anaconda fervor, his explanation ran, that the mineworkers’ union had to side with them on the call to strike that past spring. A disastrous showdown followed, with guards outside the emblematic Neversweat Mine opening fire on pickets, killing one and wounding sixteen. Martial law was immediately imposed, miners saw no choice but to return to work, and Anaconda blacklisted anyone suspected of IWW sympathies.

“That pretty well broke the Wobs’ power,” Jared concluded, “but it left us scrambling for some way to deal with Anaconda besides walking off the job into bayonets and bullets.” Good soldier that he was, he wryly credited the enemy who was always there: “Wouldn’t you know, they’re right back at it again, up there in the Hennessy Building, trying to make us swallow a pay cut. That’s right,” he registered my reaction, “the hogs are back at the trough.” Lowering his voice, he passed me a look with more behind it than he was saying. “I’ve given them something to think about, though, in who I’ve got negotiating for us. He not only tears into them about wages, he gives them holy hell every time about conditions in the mineshafts and the company goons who did the shooting at the Neversweat and you name it.” He hunched closer. “And that lets me— Professor, are you listening?”

As deeply as if in a séance, with the ghosts rising in the dark streets outside, those shadows that had followed me in my earlier Butte experience, window men in the employ of Anaconda whom I finally outwitted but not with any great margin of safety; oh, yes, I was listening.

“Has he recited everything but the Bible to you, Mr. Morgan?” Rab and Famine came bearing the meals and Jared’s. But before my companion in conversation could so much as lift a fork, she leaned in conspiratorially. “Show him.” She giggled. “Go ahead.”

Perfectly poker-faced, Jared dug out a calling card and presented it to me. The official-looking imprimatur was as boggling to me as the legal scripture in Sandison’s missive that produced a mansion.

Well, that explained his spiffed-up appearance. “Politics now? Jared, you’re full of surprises.”

Over Rab’s proud boast that he was elected by a landslide, he confided to me: “A change of tactics is all.” This least playful of men grinned ever so slightly. “It seems to have gotten Anaconda’s attention.”

Rab leaned across the table to whisper: “They’re scared he’ll be governor next.” With her racehorse keenness she looked like she couldn’t wait for that result, and Russian Famine between shoveling his food down was listening for all he was worth. Still looking at me, Jared sobered. “The idea is to build some bargaining power, for dealing with Anaconda. They’ve had their way with the legislature and so many other politicians for so long, people are getting fed up. I can at least give the copper bosses a bad time on the floor of the senate and”—the bit of grin showed on him again as he looked at Rab—“beyond, if it ever comes to that. We’ll see what the voters think after I raise enough ruckus.”

“Intriguing,” I had to commend his plan of attack. “And classic in its approach. You draw on the countryside, in this case the voting public, to harass the opponent into retreat, very much as the Russians rose up against Napoleon on his march to Moscow. I wish you every success, Senator Evans.”

“There, see?” Rab nudged him.

“The thing is,” he confided further, “we need to whip up public opinion like never before for this to work. The power of the press, no less. But that’s the catch.”

“Oh?”

“Anaconda owns every daily newspaper in the state.”

“The snakes got their mitts on everything,” Russian Famine echoed that.

“Hush a minute, Sharp Ears,” Rab chided gently.

“Except,” Jared continued, his grin growing now, “for the one the union is about to start.”

“Ah.”

“That’s where you come in.”

I sat upright as if jabbed. “Jared—and Rab, need I say—I am not a journalist. It is a noble profession, but I’m not fitted to scurry around reporting on this and that.”

“You wouldn’t have to.” Jared leaned in closer, his voice lowered. “You’d be our editorial voice. We need a wordslinger. Someone to tear the living hide off Anaconda, day after day.” He held me in his commanding gaze. “Professor, you’re our man.”

• • •

How does it happen with such regularity? As if intrigue and predicament were the Adam and Eve of my family tree, situations seek me out. With the best intentions in the world, I find myself catapulted into circumstances far out of the ordinary. Chicago; Marias Coulee; Butte; and now chapter two of the city of perils. Was this my role in life, to be a gazetteer of risky occurrences?

• • •

My protestations were batted down as quickly as I could bring them up, with Rab pitching in whenever



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