

Tares among the Wheat, by H. Melvin James, Chapter 8, The Bullet

"I can see a splotch of light, Unole! It is there, at my feet. Is it a bright lamp, or is it a window filled with sunlight? Is there not a light, Unole?"

Amy no longer called out for Unole to see if she was present before she addressed her. Wearily accustomed to her senses-starved condition she now simply talked into the emptiness whenever she felt like it. If Unole was present and if she replied, that was pleasing. And if Unole did not respond Amy would simply accept that she had been talking to herself and that was, at least, a preferable experience than the haphazard wandering of her mind. If she had something worthwhile to express she could tell Unole later. It is curious, Amy now pondered. *Unole always seems to be near when I call for her. It seems that she is absent when I am preoccupied with my own private thoughts or asleep with dreams or nightmares.*

Unole interrupted Amy's thoughts. "Yes, Amelia, there is a bright sunlit window before you. And your sight of its glow is another encouraging indication of your improving condition." Amy thought that she could hear a hint of cheerful emotion in Unole's ordinarily matter-of-fact tone. Amy chuckled to herself as she imagined that Unole had the makings of an excellent radio broadcast news reporter, speaking with authority while void of attachment. *But she would not be the least bit suitable for television,* Amy thought to herself. *The spooky sight of her would chase the viewers to the other networks.* Amy felt herself smile at her own amusement. Then she shuddered and thought, *I hope I wasn't thinking aloud so that Unole could hear. I am so often confused nowadays, not knowing if I'm thinking or speaking or if I am awake with thoughts or asleep in dreams.*

"Unole, I believe I can feel the warmth of the sun on my feet!" Amy treasured each item of her improvement as if each was a Christmas present or birthday gift that she had just unwrapped with surprise. Amy wanted to dwell on enjoying the gift at hand for a while before she began to anxiously anticipate the next. "I feel quite comfortable and cozy now. I just want to linger with these comforting sensations. Tell me more stories, Unole. Please."

Unole responded unemotionally, "Very well. You will recall that I was last telling you about your great-grandfather, Ardal McClary. Ardal's uncle Calvin Clarke had just informed him that he and his wife, Lockie, had seriously considered his romancing of their daughter, Hattie. Ardal was happily surprised to learn that his aunt and uncle would not object to his and Hattie's engagement for marriage."

Having their relationship accepted by Calvin and Lockie gave Ardal and Hattie's romance a measured degree of freedom to blossom, but alas, to bloom only as flora in a private garden, not for the public to see, not to become the talk of the town. Discreetly then, their romance matured, like fine wine, transforming richer and more rewarding. More seriously now, they discussed marriage and their future together. The assumed legitimacy of their relationship allowed them a new freedom to discuss all things, personal and emotional, to the depth of their hearts and the height of their reasoning.

Between his job at the mill and his discreet courtship of Hattie, Ardal found little time to sip ale and banter with the blokes at the tavern. Indeed, after paying for his room and board and giving three dollars a week to Hattie, he could scarcely afford a couple of cheap cigars and a pint or two of bitter ale each week.

Hattie was also eagerly and dutifully contributing to their nest egg. After paying for materials, Lockie divided the seamstress work earnings equally with Hattie. In some weeks, the two women collected as much as six dollars for their various labors, including dressmaking, mending, tailoring, and virtually any craft that involved fabrics, threads, and yarns. Hattie's share was as much as two dollars in such busy weeks. But when they had a heavy workload, Hattie and her mother often toiled sixteen hours in a day. Such a work schedule left little time for Hattie and Ardal to spend together, other than their cherished Sunday afternoons. Being separated through the week amplified their longing for each other and intensified their anxiousness to wed. If not for their having so little time together and, even then, so little privacy, their young and powerful passions would certainly have triumphed over chastity.

Beginning with the five dollars that had changed destiny from the purchase of a pocket watch to the purchase of wagon wheel parts, and then to be saved, Ardal had since stashed away a little over thirty dollars, a full month's pay. Unusually considerate and mindful of his own faults, he gave Hattie twenty-seven of those dollars to "safe keep" toward their marriage and the establishment of a new household. His noble deed set Hattie glowing with joy. She felt as spoiled as a princess to whom a handsome prince had just presented a fabulous chest of gold in asking for her hand in marriage.

Regularly contributing to their wedding trove left Ardal with little money for discretionary spending. Having only a few coins in his pockets reminded him of a joke told by one of the fellows at the mill, "Is there any difference between a penniless bum and a man whose wife takes all of his money? Yes, the bum is happy and carefree." Thinking more seriously, Ardal admitted to himself that Hattie's admiration and praise of his every display of skill, wit, or muscular strength made him feel proud and as wealthy as any king. And somehow, he felt wealthier with his pockets empty, so long as he had emptied them into his fiancée's trove.

One evening in the middle of the week Ardal counted his spare coins and decided he could just afford a cigar and a pint. It was one of those evenings when Hattie and Lockie planned to work late to finish a wedding dress, a silver-colored gown for a middle-aged spinster to wed an elderly widower. Since the Roberson's were having dinner with Kathy's folks that evening, Ardal was alone and restless. Such congregation of circumstances led Ardal to the tavern. As Ardal sat down with his first, and only, beaker of beer, Pug and a stranger entered the tavern.

Pug introduced Ardal to the stranger, Wayne Barlow, a racing horse trainer from Louisville. Ardal was aware that his muscular frame and bold personality could seem threatening to a stranger. In contrast to the environment of the huge city, Ardal had found that displaying an image of "Don't tread on me" was often inappropriate and unnecessary in this small town. Thereby Ardal tried to present himself more socially urbane and less suspiciously inquisitive. "Might I ask, what brings you to our town, Mr. Barlow?"

The stranger seemed to accept Ardal's question without offense. "Oh, I have a few business matters to conduct. One of my tasks is to discuss the construction of a building with the master mason, Mr. Clarke. That is how I incidentally met Mr. Peugeot Reneau, here, just this morning. Furthermore, in addition to the masonry contract, I have a couple of other activities planned hereabouts before I return to Louisville."

Ardal found a bit of amusement in Pug's proper name. He had simply accepted the man's nickname as sufficient. As far as Ardal was concerned, a man's chosen moniker was his own business and he need not explain its derivation or his reasons for using it to represent himself. Many of Ardal's acquaintances were

known by nicknames, some of them exclusively so, and some of those purposely so, to obscure past identity. Owing to his big-city savvy, Ardal avoided inquiring into such matters.

As they talked, Ardal sipped his beer to make it last, as if it was expensive wine. He had spent his last nickel for that one beer. He would not admit that he had not a nickel for another pint, and he wasn't about to mooch. Ardal gratefully accepted offers of drink, but he was averse to the notion of asking a friend to buy one for him. Pug swigged his beer in the fashion that Ardal normally followed, no more than four tilts to the pint. Wayne drank his beer in gentlemanly fashion, like drinking coffee and taking time for the palate to appreciate its flavors. Appreciating that he could learn more by listening than by talking, Ardal allowed Pug to ask Mr. Barlow the ignorant questions.

Occasionally Ardal's general expertise of equines allowed him to slip a comment into the conversation and impress Mr. Barlow. Although the notion of racing horses in a large open field seemed foreign to the dingy confines of the Bowery, bet makers frequented the public houses in the city, and Ardal rubbed elbows with them. Ardal lacked discretionary funds to risk on a gambling scheme that was foreign to him, so he never bet on the ponies. Ardal's gambles were for immediate excitement and gratification on the spot, not something unseen and miles away.

Nevertheless, Ardal was not unfamiliar with Thoroughbred racing. At one or another local pub, he had helped console sad losers of the sport, and he had enjoyed the free drinks and merriment of the occasional big winners. In those instances, Ardal had been shown sheets of paper describing odds, bets, and fact sheets on the horses. He had reveled in the arguments of what horse to bet and why a carefully strategized bet went wrong. Now Ardal's novice understanding of the sport complimented his exceptional knowledge of equines in general to portray a man of respectable expertise. Mr. Barlow's impression of Ardal was enhanced by his personal philosophy that anyone who brags and talks too much is not genuine, but a quiet, humble man who only speaks to correct a misconception is likely one who knows much more than he confesses.

By the time Ardal had nursed his beer to the last sip, he had gained appreciable knowledge, from Mr. Barlow, of Thoroughbred horses and the sport of racing them. Out of beer and money, Ardal staged his need to depart. He leaned back in his chair and withdrew his magnificent pocket watch. Cupping the gold disk in his upturned hand, he deftly pressed the tiny button on the rim with his thumbnail. The cover plate sprang open.

"Well, gentlemen, it is time that I should be on my way. I have an appointment." Ardal hoped that he would not need to provide any details of his imaginary reason to leave. Pug seemed unconcerned about Ardal's announced departure. He was just enjoying his beer and his relaxation after another arduous day of toting several tons of brick and cement up onto work scaffolding of steadily increasing elevations.

Mr. Barlow appeared to be somewhat disappointed that Ardal was leaving. "Well, Mr. McClary, it has truly been a pleasure to have met you and to have shared interesting conversation with you. I will accompany you out of doors as I bid you fare thee well. I can use a bit of cool, refreshing winter air. If you will excuse me for a minute, Mr. Reneau?" Pug nodded his disinterest and tipped his beer for another gulp.

Once through the door and out onto the sidewalk Wayne clutched Ardal's shoulder. "I have something I would like to share with you, Mr. McClary. But please, you must keep this strictly to yourself." Wayne

looked about to make sure no one was listening. The sidewalk and the dark street were vacant. "There is a special horse race this Sunday that might interest you. This race was arranged by a couple of eccentric horse breeders, men that have an overabundance of money, idle time, and audacity."

Wayne paused to assess Ardal's reaction. Ardal was obviously impressed. "The race is set for two o'clock Sunday afternoon at the training track of the Tulley Farm. You will want to arrive at least a half hour early to look over the animals. The farm is two miles south of town along the river road. The two wealthy tycoons want to settle an argument between them. Each claim that his three-year-old horse would be faster than the other's in a ten-furlong run. This grudge match is not entirely proper, so it must be kept under hat. The horse racing officials must never learn of it."

Ardal was fascinated. He thrived on escapades, especially if there was an ingredient of mischief, and he hadn't been involved in anything of much excitement since he and his friend Morse teamed to fight the four scoundrels of the lumberyard crew. "Why, yes, Mr. Barlow, I would much enjoy seeing the Thoroughbreds run. Would you suppose there might be some friendly betting on the side?"

Wayne smiled. He was pleased that his offer had been well received. It was always a calculated risk to disclose special information such as this, or rumors of a fixed race, a dark horse, or a forged pedigree. "Yes, Mr. McClary, there will be some friendly betting, but only there at the farm that afternoon. The two breeders will financially back the betting. They have each selected a trustee to set the odds for the race. Those two will collaborate on the betting odds and average them if they cannot agree. They will also take the bets, collect the money, and pay the bets after the race. There will also be several men there with guns, hired to guard the horses and the money. Then afterwards, everyone is to disperse, stringing out in time and in various directions so as to not raise attention."

Ardal was now all the more interested in the race; he was excited and anxious for it. "And will you be there, Mr. Barlow?" In contrast to their conversation up until this point, his reply came with volume and a slap to the back of Ardal's shoulder. "Yes. And please, call me Wayne."

"Then I will look for you there, Wayne. And if you will, call me Ardal."

"Of course, Ardal. Now do not tell another soul of this and remember my name to the letter, Wayne Barlow, and do not stutter if you are asked. Your well-being and mine will depend on that."

Mid-morning of the fourth day later, Ardal watched through the parlor window as Hattie bounded from the Clarkes' wagon, collected her bag, and stepped onto the cobblestoned walkway that connected the brick street to the Roberson's porch. It was a bleak winter day, damp, overcast, and breezy. Ardal thought in a second how enjoyable it would be to have Hattie as his wife on such a dark drizzly day. He imagined, on such a day, how he might persuade her back into bed after breakfast, and then to feel the comfort and warmth of her flesh against his.

As Ardal stepped down from the porch to meet Hattie, Calvin, a rein in each hand, gave him a stone-faced nod. Lockie presented a ladylike wave, and seven little arms reached out from a clump of several blankets to wave so heartily that the shrouds slipped down to their laps. Ardal and Hattie held their arms out to each other as they drew near. Without looking away from each other's eyes, their hands met and clutched. They each wanted to embrace tightly and kiss, but the setting and the stage of their romance in the eyes of others was not appropriate for such a display of passion. Soon they broke from their hand-

holding stance and headed toward the house, their small talk and light laughter uninterrupted. Ardal glanced back to see that the Clarkes' wagon had already disappeared.

After the midday meal Hattie was quick to help Kathy with clearing the table. Ardal and Morse usually withdrew to the parlor after dining to sip coffee and talk until the women finished with the dishes. If the weather was not fit for Ardal and Hattie to take a walk or sit on the front porch the four of them might play parlor games until Calvin arrived to take Hattie home. Morse rose from the dinner table and suggested that Ardal join him in the parlor. When Ardal checked his watch, Morse knew that he had some other plan for this afternoon.

"I must excuse myself, Morse. I have agreed to meet with a man and help him appraise some horses." Morse looked curious, but he responded mundanely and went alone into the parlor. Ardal rose and stepped toward the kitchen. He met Hattie in the kitchen doorway.

"Hattie, I have to meet with a fellow and help him evaluate some horses. I promise to be as quick as I can. Will you excuse me, dear Hattie?" There was disappointment in Hattie's eyes, but she forced a quivering smile to her lips. She said something soft and raised herself up on the tips of her toes to kiss Ardal on the cheek. Then she bid him a successful and speedy task. As he slipped from Hattie's side, Ardal complimented both ladies for the delicious meal. With both hands emerged in the dish tub, Kathy's head had been turned to look over her shoulder from the time Ardal entered the kitchen.

She teased Ardal, "If you do not hurry back there might not be any of Hattie's pie left for you." Ardal was embarrassed. He had forgotten that Hattie had made an apple pie as she helped Kathy prepare the dinner. She had brought the apples in her handbag from home to church and then to the Roberson's. Earlier in the week she had purchased little bottles of spices, ginger and cinnamon, from the grocery. Early that morning she had handpicked five perfect Carolina reds from the big wooden whiskey barrel in the cellar. Calvin had brought two bushels of the apples home from the rail yard. He and Hattie's eldest brother carefully placed them into the barrel, between layers of bright yellow wheat straw. Hattie and Kathy had planned that the four of them would have tea and pie as soon as the dishes were washed and stacked in the cupboard. The kettle had just been placed on the kitchen stove to heat and make the tea.

Ardal tried to hide his regret for having disrupted the afternoon with a cheerful reply, "Then I will certainly hurry, for I would rather lose a thumb than to miss having a piece of Hattie's apple pie." Ardal left through the back door of the kitchen that opened to the back porch. He and Morse had walled in the back porch so that neighborhood dogs and cats and the usual assortment of wild critters could not steal or ruin any commodities Kathy might store there. Much as Brianna's back porch, the enclosure provided a margin of protection from the elements. It was useful for washing clothes, clipping hair, or using a parlor pot when weather outdoors was entirely too extreme to run to the outhouse.

Ardal took his canvas hat and oilskin slicker from one of the cloaked hooks on the porch wall. He sprinted through the door and down the steps, rounded the house, and hurried down the street. The drizzle turned into sprinkles.

As Ardal came to the last intersecting street on the edge of town, a man approached from his left. "Not a very nice day for a stroll."

Ardal looked him over. He appeared jovial and friendly. "Yes, indeed, a disagreeable day for many activities, particularly those out of doors."

In the same cheerful tone the stranger again spoke, "Where might you be going on such a dismal day, if I might ask, sir?"

"Oh, just out for a walk. Brisk walks after dinner benefit a man's health, I do believe. And you, sir?"

"Yes, I, too, am just getting some fresh air and observing the countryside."

Ardal's natural pace was quick and enduring. His coincidental companion was keeping up, but his breathing had grown more audible. Soon they overtook a third pedestrian. He walked with a cane favoring his right leg, manipulating his feet and his cane with rhythm and a slight hop that resembled a mechanical wind-spring toy.

Ardal and his companion spoke nearly in unison, "Good day, sir."

The man was visibly startled, but he managed a cordial reply, "Good day to you, gentlemen."

Ardal's companion then spoke a bit cocky, "Out for a Sunday promenade?"

"Yes, just observing nature and limbering up my old legs."

As the three men walked abreast, Ardal had to consciously slow his normal pace to match theirs. He wanted to hurry and not arrive too late to carefully appraise the horses. He needed his three-dollar bet to be well-placed in hopes of leveraging it to five or even ten dollars. Every extra dollar was vital to assuring a nice wedding for his bride, a good start for his wife's household. As Ardal considered making some excuse and sprinting ahead, the sound approached from behind them. It was the distinct sound of cupped hooves against the wet road, clip-clop, and then the softer rushing sound of wagon wheels circling in wet sand.

"Whoa!" The three pedestrians looked over their shoulders as if a flank of soldiers just commanded, "Eyes, right!"

"Would you gentlemen care to join me for a ride in my buckboard?" As if they each thought the offer might be spoiled with a wrong word the three men boarded the wagon quickly and offered their gratitude only after they were seated. Ardal helped himself to sit beside the driver. The other two men stepped up on the rear wheel spokes and sat on the back of the bed, their legs dangling. The driver checked that all were aboard, and he set his pair of horses into a fanciful gait. The beasts were obviously well-bred and aptly trained.

Ardal was quick to compliment the man for the quality of his horses. The driver, quick to admit the rig and horses were his property, was as proud to receive Ardal's praise as was Ardal proud to be instantly recognized as an authority. Ardal was relieved that no one was continuing the pretense of being out for a stroll. Without a word concerning the destination, soon the horses were steered to turn the wagon smartly into a wide gateway without missing a step of their prancing gait. A one-horse carriage entered the driveway close behind them.

When Ardal returned his sight forward he saw a one-horse buggy had stopped some two hundred yards ahead of them. Three men stood next to the buggy, two on one side and one on the other. The driveway sloped gently uphill for more than a quarter mile. At the top of the hill was a magnificent redbrick house trimmed in white. It was two full stories with a third level of half dozen gables. Georgian-style white columns suspended an enormous porch roof above the second floor. Downhill and to the left of the

house stood a large wooden structure. It was a barn, even more massive than the mansion, painted dull black.

As they drew up behind the buggy the men stepped aside and the buggy sped on. The three sentinels regrouped, shoulder to shoulder, and concentrated their sight on Ardal and his companions' approach. As the wagon approached the greeting party, Ardal could see that each man held a rifle, the muzzles pointed down to shed the rain. The man in the center stood statuesque as he held up his right hand in the certain gesture to halt the wagon. He stared at Ardal and the driver. His face projected a mean and hateful expression. His intense posture and piercing glare was directed at Ardal and the wagon driver. His eyes darted toward them, glancing in half-second focus, to their hands, their faces, and about the bench where they sat.

From street fighting in the city, Ardal learned from an early age how to propagate an opponent's line of sight. Survival in the Bowery depended on unique skills to anticipate a foe's actions, was he glancing for a weapon to grab, glancing to see what, if anything, his victim may hold in his hand, or watching for his victim to glance aside for a quarter second and thereby not see a left hook projected under his chin.

As the one gunman keenly watched Ardal and the driver, the other two were circling the wagon from each side while keeping their eyes on the two men seated at the tail of the wagon. With a feigned smile, likely interpreted as brazen, Ardal stared back at the gunman. It was a habit of Ardal's to evaluate and size up anyone that might pose a challenge. Ardal assumed the man was both hardened and skilled through his experience with violence. He was paid to be both tough and smart. Obviously, the wealthy man of the mansion did not want any disruptions from robbers, riprap, or foolishly righteous lawmen. Ardal knew there was a lot of cash money in play at this event, and the value of the highbred horses was even more, enough to justify the hiring of a number of seasoned professional gunmen.

The gunman in front of the wagon spoke, "Driver, tell me the last name, and the last name only, of the person that invited you here." The rifle now pointed at the driver. "Whitley." Without expression, he looked to Ardal. "Now you."

"Barlow."

"Now real quiet-like, so your companions in the back do not hear, tell me Whitley's first name."

"Maybelle." Ardal was a bit concerned. He hoped the driver had not miscalculated the situation and was now being flippant. The man with the rifle didn't blink. The rifle now pointed between the two horses and directly toward Ardal's gut. "And you." Ardal only broke his disingenuous smile to respond. "Wayne."

"Just sit there now, do not speak, and do not move until I tell you otherwise."

Ardal could hear the voice of the first man he first met on the road. He was arguing with one of the riflemen at the rear of the wagon. The words were not audible until the rifleman shouted, "Get down and walk to that barn ahead of me! Don't try to run away and don't argue. You will sit the afternoon away in the stable."

"But I honestly believed his name was George or—" Ardal heard the undeniable sound of flesh and bone being smacked with something hard. He imagined the butt of a rifle stock had silenced the argumentative man. Then he heard erratic shuffling of boots in the muddy ground, and a moment later he caught a glimpse of the man stumbling toward the barn. A rifleman followed behind him, and another

man with a rifle walked up from the barn to meet them in the intervening meadow. Now the man in front stepped aside and ordered, "Go on." His rifle continued to point at them as they passed.

As they approached a grassy yard spread broadly in front of the huge barn, another sentry directed them to the side. He pointed to other wagons and buggies parked in a row, facing a handsome wooden fence of four rails of timbers stained dull black to match the barn. As their wagon rounded a huge holly bush a loud shriek startled the riders and their horses as well. A large white bird had flown up in front of the team, fluttered between the horses' heads, fell onto the wagon tongue, and toppled beneath the then speeding wagon. As the spooked team sprinted, the wagon helplessly raced in tow. The horses were momentarily oblivious to the driver's profane commands and his pull on the reins. Once the horses were resettled, Ardal glanced behind. A large white goose lay limp in the rain-soaked grass. Its long neck was crossways to wheel rut, tucked and formed into the mud. A poorly dressed stable hand rushed to retrieve the goose carcass as the wagon driver pulled the team up to the fence, jerking and jolting, still nervous from the "goosing."

The wood-rail fence in front of the parked wagon curved gently to form a sweeping half circle. The guests' wagons and buggies and such were parked perpendicular to the semicircle. The fence ran straight from either end of the half circle for about three furlongs, and then it connected to another half circle at the far end. A tangential lane reached into the circle at the far end. It appeared as a means for the horses to get a running start before they entered the oval track. A concentric fence inside the elongated circle defined the racetrack belt and confined a lush green grassy center field. That inner fence leaned toward the outer fence as if to give the horses a space to kick their hooves aside and not contact any fence posts.

This was Ardal's first acquaintance with a horse racing track. He estimated the circumference at a full mile. Ardal was impressed with the particular fashion of the track, obviously constructed with attention to precision and form.

The stable, where the gunman had taken Ardal's walking companion, was on the south side of the track. The huge barn, larger than any Ardal had ever seen, stood along the north side of the track. An open-air lean-to angled from the barn wall and faced the track. There, Ardal could see other people, all men, gathered under the sloped roof, out of the sprinkling rain. The men were milling about, laughing, shouting greetings, carrying drinks, and spewing puffs of blue smoke into the cool damp air.

As the three walked toward the lean-to, Ardal introduced himself to the wagon driver and thanked him for the carriage. The driver introduced himself as Andy Yost, and he offered to have Ardal and the other man ride with him back to town after the event finished. The stable hand passed them and circled around the barn, holding the limp goose by its long neck.

Upon joining the small crowd of about forty men under the leanto roof, Ardal milled about and meandered among them. Noticing that his and the others' boots and pant legs were soaked and muddy, Ardal appreciated that the affair would not have been suitable for ladies and it was obviously not so appointed. His thoughts were interrupted by a deliberately firm jab to his shoulder. He turned to see that Wayne was the culprit, smiling broadly. "Ardal, my friend. I am pleased to see you could join with us." Ardal started to grab Wayne's hand in greeting, until he noticed that hand held a huge quart bottle of whiskey. In his left hand, he held two glasses.

“Good afternoon, mate,” Ardal stated with certain appreciation as he redirected his arm movement from a handshake to a slap on Wayne’s shoulder. He shoved the glasses at Ardal. “Here, Ardal, take a glass.” Ardal grasped one of the two glasses, enabling Wayne to take a conventional hold on the other. Wayne pulled the cork with his teeth, producing that delightfully familiar poof sound that set Ardal’s salivary glands to secrete. Although he had recently read a newspaper article on the subject, Ardal was not consciously aware that he was reacting as basically as Pavlov’s dogs.

Wayne brought the bottle up and began tilting it. Ardal followed the lead and placed his vessel under the tilting glass orifice. As the warm brown stream flowed generously into his cup-size glass, Ardal read the bottle’s label between Wayne’s fingers. The brand was Jack Daniel’s, a familiar and popular whiskey from nearby Tennessee. The whiskey was a favorite choice in the hill country, and Ardal had soon acquired an appreciation for its taste.

As Ardal sipped, Wayne introduced his two Louisville companions, insinuating to them that Ardal was “an important man in this vicinity for his highly valued assessment of any equine breed.” Ardal wondered if Wayne’s promotion of him served to set up a ruse. Or perhaps Wayne sought to appear more important by exaggerating the stature of those he befriended.

The four of them walked about as Wayne pointed out and explained the layout and events relevant to the day’s highly celebrated but solitary race. They reviewed the big chalkboard placed head high on the barn wall at the back of the lean-to. The horses and their numerical odds were carefully printed in chalk, scribbled numbers between neatly painted lines to create rows and columns on the slate board.

Two men were seated at a big library table in front of the chalkboard. The table was nicely finished and polished. It had obviously been commandeered from the mansion house. Standing behind the two bet takers was another gunman. His belt suspended a holstered revolver, and he held a double-barreled shotgun in the “field arms” position. Much like his peers, the guard was certainly not in the same sporting mood as the visitors he looked upon contemptuously. A large metal box sat on the table at one end. It was less than six inches high, but it was about thirty inches wide and twenty inches long. The flanged metal lid was open and angled back, restrained with a brass chain on either side. Curious, Ardal casually glanced into the box. Even this innocuous eye movement was caught by the keen surveillance of the gunman. Ardal could feel, as much as see from the corner of his eye, the daring glare. The unspoken words were clear, “Make one wrong move and the shotgun will render your abdomen to mincemeat.”

Ardal casually redirected his attention to the blackboard. The gunman resumed his strategically patterned scan of the crowd: primary attention to those near, more attention to those approaching, extra scrutiny to anyone showing interest in the money box, and never fixating long on one person to the neglect of the crowd.

While perusing the chalkboard tabulation of horses, jockeys, and odds, Ardal recalled his glimpse of the money box. The box was compartmentalized, and each pocket had already begun to fill with money, silver dollars, twenty-dollar gold pieces, and a variety of paper-bill denominations. Ardal was embarrassed that he possessed only two silver dollars and a third dollar’s worth in small change. He hoped he might bet his measly three dollars while no one was paying attention. Then he saw the chalked line at the bottom of the blackboard, “\$20 Minimum Bet.” Ardal imagined himself a rat that had wandered into a gathering of mink. Wayne nudged him. “Let’s go into the barn and inspect the horse flesh.”

The four men merged with a handful of others moseying into the barn through an open doorway midway along the wall that the barn shared with its lean-to. Ardal began to admire the barn as soon as he entered. As usual, Ardal could not avoid critically inspecting the structure and its refinements. He reckoned that the barn had been built with more care and craftsmanship than were most commoners' homes. Unlike the dirt floors of the only three barns that Ardal knew, those being Hans's, Dutch's, and Grainger's, this building had wooden floors of heavy oak plank. The horses' stalls were made of shellacked hardwood, nicely fitted vertical boards, tongued and grooved. Open stalls displayed the animals' bedding of generous amounts of bright yellow hay. The halters, bridles, saddles, and every item, including the feed buckets and ropes, were of fine quality and were well maintained. Ardal thought as he sipped the whiskey, *Truly, these horses are treated better than most wives*. Then for a second, he thought of his dear mother working herself to an early grave. *But I suppose that horses, like people, are born to different lives, some to know luxury and pampering and others condemned to hard work, lashings, and drudgery*.

Entering the spacious barn seemed like walking into the big tent of the Barnum and London circus. The broad shed row traversed the length of the barn between huge double doors, opened outward at each end. To his left Ardal saw six horses being led at a brisk pace in a single column. Men stood here and there along the sides of the broad aisle, carefully observing each animal as it passed.

Ardal had remained in the center of the short midway intersecting aisle that led in from the lean-to. The parade of horses and their leaders turned a half circle at the end of the aisle, traveled to the opposite end, again half circled, and came back to the center. The horses were staged at the center of the aisle, standing two lengths apart in a row, facing the barn entrance via the lean-to. Holding the high-spirited animals in place for the formation required apparent determined effort by the attendants. As it were, the equestrians were aligned, facing and centered on Ardal as if he were a high-ranking calvary officer inspecting his horsemen and their steeds in the dismounted position.

In Ardal's appraisal, the magnificence of the highbred racehorses far overshadowed the grandeur of the huge barn he had admired only a moment earlier. Once he began to observe the horses, Ardal immediately concluded that the Thoroughbreds, God's creatures, were the absolute manifestation of perfection. Man may have selectively bred these beasts, groomed, and trained them, but the making of them was entirely the work of the Almighty, Ardal quipped to himself.

Wayne pointed out and described each horse to Ardal. The horses nervously stomped, snorted, and jostled about, often tugging their attendant out of formation. These unruly animals are full of piss and vinegar, Ardal thought, but indeed, they have been bred to be just that. As Ardal perceived them, compared to dray horses, they were disproportionately tall, slender, and stick legged. Nevertheless, they were marvelously handsome in their features, sleek, and hard muscled. Ardal mused to himself, *their fragile leg bones would splinter under only a quarter of the strain Hans's Belgians routinely applied to leap start a heavy pull. But these beasts were bred for only one task, and that was to run*.

Ardal began to assess each horse in this different light, methodically, based solely on this notion of speed foremost and with stamina a close second criterion, and otherwise disregarding criteria he ordinarily expected of dray horses. The two front-runners, at the top of the chart, were the horses of the two advocates of this grudge race. Wayne explained that the other four horses were included to enhance the race's similarity to conditions of official competition and to afford each breeder of the primary challenging pair to invite two of their peers a chance to display and to compete their lesser champions.

Certainly, there would have been considerable sums of money committed, exchanged, and wagered among the six wealthy owners of the six slated horses. The expense of hiring the security guards would alone account to a monetary fortune in Ardal's class of peasantry. Of course, the seventh major party involved, the supposed disinterested owner of the estate, the host of the event, had much to gain in money and reputation. Other financial arrangements for commissions, fees, and bonuses would have been prearranged and at least partly prepaid for the bookmakers, the armed guards, the jockeys, and so forth.

It was obvious to Ardal, there was more money involved at this event than he had ever imagined anywhere outside of a Wall Street banking institution. As a man of common breeding, having a limited education, a lowly station in life, and little money in his pockets, Ardal felt tinges of shame and guilt for being so out of place, like an imposter or an intruder, but he pushed aside his inferiority and carried on with his best impersonation of a confident and arrogant aristocrat.

Without looking over or saying a word, Ardal handed his empty whiskey glass to Wayne, as might a master to a servant. Ardal was preoccupied, intently overviewing the magnificent animals as the first step of his calculated and critical appraisal. In the game of life, this day could direct my future. I can either fold or draw to an inside straight. That is as good of a betting hand as I have ever been dealt. No chance at a royal flush or four aces, but good odds for a fair hand. As Ardal began trying to compare the anatomy of the horses, from those ranked most likely to win to those rated least probable, a loud burst of thunder echoed through the huge barn as if it were a mountain canyon. The horses reared and tried to bolt. Ardal looked down the aisleway and out through the large open doorway.

As if the thunder broke open a floodgate, a torrent of rain instantly ensued, splattering noisily against cedar shingles overhead and splashing into water puddles at every open doorway. The downpour was so heavy, the din of dense droplets saturated the audio spectrum at all volumes less than a shout. Soon the saturated earth shed water in shallow snaking channels down the gentle slope from the mansion and barn courtyard and out toward the front gate, as if the driveway was a mountain stream. Wayne shouted into Ardal's ear, "The owners agreed that the race would go on despite anything short of a raid by any high authorities who were not previously bribed."

Wayne's voice portrayed a curious blend of concern and frivolity. Ardal responded without looking up, allowing no interruption of his disciplined inspection process. Wayne knelt and leaned his head so close to Ardal's mouth he felt droplets of spit to his ear. He failed to understand Ardal's first word or two. "Could upset the odds. It might be anyone's guess now." Ardal rose from his kneeling position in observation of the fifth horse. Wayne and his companions had watched Ardal as he systematically approached each horse from the same direction before setting about to scrutinize the animal, looking his subject up and down, front to rear, and so forth.

Ardal circled this fifth horse, pausing at certain points about the perimeter where he observed from postures of standing, bending, and kneeling. The thunderstorm and its menacing sounds had already subsided substantially, to every man's and animal's relief. Ardal walked to the front right side of the horse, speaking again without breaking his routine, "When will the betting be cut off, Wayne?" Ardal knew that Wayne would have been accurately informed. That was one of several favorable traits that Ardal had identified in his new friend.

"This peculiar race has been set up at the whims of the two top contenders. At exactly five minutes before the hour all betting will cease. The first clang of the big bell in the middle of the track will be on the hour, and that will signal for the starting gates to open. There is a trumpeter, or I should say, an old soldier bugle-blower, to sound other marks of time. He will stand in the back of a wagon in the lean-to and blow his bugle. He will first sound the bugle to mark the beginning of the final ten minutes of betting. Then at the conclusion of that time, he will be puckered up and ready to sound off when one of the bookmakers thumps his belly. That will signal the end of the betting. The horses will already be on their way to the starting gates by then."

Ardal confidently tugged the gold chain and artfully plucked the timepiece from his vest pocket. As he pressed the edge of his thumbnail against the tiny latch, Ardal recalled Gypie's jingle, "Badges of honor, power and beauty, wear to instill love, fear, or duty." Ardal wondered if the impression gained by flaunting his fine watch was not as much to do with the air of confidence it gave him as it had to do with the impression the object made on others.

Wayne and his two companions looked on anxiously. They had been waiting to hear Ardal's opinion of the six horses before placing their bets. Even though they had made notes of their own, mental and written, as each animal was considered, they were curious how their judgment compared to Ardal's deliberate and disciplined appraisals.

Ardal closed the cover to his watch and slipped it back into his pocket. "I need to inspect that racetrack and feel the mud of it on my boots." Ardal had not removed his slicker, as had the three gentlemen. He turned and walked rapidly down the aisle and out of the barn's end doorway. He disappeared into the dark gray streaks of rain as Wayne and his companions looked on and then looked at one another, at a loss for words.

One of Wayne's companions, Howie Diebold, had been shuffling through a fistful of papers from the time he was introduced to Ardal. As each horse was approached Wayne asked Howie how the horse had fared in previous races. Ardal listened to those conversations, even as he seemed disinterested, going about his inspections. Now as Ardal returned, rain still trickling from the brim of his hat and down from the shoulders of his oilskin slicker, he demanded with a demeanor of authority, "Tell me, Howie. Horse number five, has he been running consistently?" Ardal had already resumed his regimen toward inspecting the last horse, horse number six.

"Ah, yes, Mr. McClary, he has been consistent, in the middle of the pack, but, uh, once in this list of ten races that I have noted, he placed."

Ardal continued his routine and had already moved to his second observation point. Howie wondered if he should say something more or wait silently a few more seconds for Ardal's response or his next command. The stable hand, fighting to maintain his hold on restless horse number five, leaned an ear toward Ardal. Wayne was grinning in mild amusement. Ardal again spoke authoritatively, "And, Howie, do your notes tell anything about the weather or the condition of the track for that race when the horse placed?"

Howie fumbled the pages nervously. He had been composed until Ardal so pointedly tasked him. "Oh, yes, here it is. The track was muddy."

Ardal had finished his evaluation of the sixth horse and turned to face his three companions. He noticed that he had also gained the attention of the stable hand. It was the same man who had recovered the dead goose. Ardal spoke again with confidence, "If the hard rain had not spoiled the conditions, all of your carefully calculated numbers would no doubt have prevailed. Obviously the two top ranked animals are links ahead of the other four, on any day of behaved weather, that is. Minutes ago, I climbed over the perimeter rail fence and I tramped about that track. The mud is deep, it is sloppy, and it sticks and builds up on the bottom of my heels. It will build up on the bottom of the horses' hooves and hamper their pace. This contest, gentlemen, is going to favor the steady, the strong, and the consistent runner, this big black horse, horse number five."

Ralston, Wayne's other companion, had been silent until now. He scoffed with a growl, "Oh, I cannot agree. While you were tramping in the rain I rechecked the numbers board. Horse number five is at fifteen to one."

Just then the bugle sounded. Wayne and his two companions turned and went, mumbling argumentatively, to place their bets. Ardal found himself looking directly into the eyes of his chosen winner. The attendant of horse number five had been observing Ardal, intermittently catching his direct eye, and establishing a degree of rapport. It was obvious that he had expended extra care and effort to hold the frantic horse in proper stance for Ardal's observations. He was mindful of Ardal's posture near the horse to guard against the restless horse accidentally contacting him. He had appreciated that Ardal greeted him personally when he first approached and looked him in the eye as if he were an equal man. The aristocrats he served, and their uppity companions, usually ignored stablemen as if they were barn fixtures. If they needed to address a stableman, they invariably called him "boy," whether a young man or old.

Ardal stood up and stepped back from the horse. His inspection was finished. He smiled and looked at the attendant, "My name is Ardal McClary. May I ask your name?"

The stableman was instantly pleased, and it showed. "Yes, sir. My name is Wilbur, Wilbur Creech. But you may call me Will."

"Well, Mr. Creech, Will, I thank you for showing this fine animal to me. What name was given to this horse number five?"

"Yes, sir, this horse is officially named Rifle Bullet of Lexington. He is not the fastest runner here, but he has more heart than any two others put together."

"And tell me, Mr. Creech, what do you mean when you talk about this horse's heart?"

"Well, sir, that's how hard he works and how he doesn't give up. You see, some of these horses just run crazy, some are as finicky and unpredictable as my missus. But the Bullet here, he gives it everything he has, every time, to the very end."

"Thank you for sharing your opinion with me, Will. And by the way, did I not see that you retrieved the unfortunate goose that the wagon ran over?"

The peculiar question surprised Wilbur. His expression turned serious as he worried if he had done something blameful, but he replied promptly, "Yes, sir, I took the goose to my missus. The master allows me to raise a few chickens and geese. Me and my missus make a little extra money with the fowls, but

not much. Our fowl scratch the barnyard, eatin' spilled grain. That keeps the sparrows and rats from having the feed and there being so many of those pests. The chickens and geese also peck up the stunned horseflies when the horses flip them to the ground with their tails. And for our fowl to earn more of their keep, we give the master fresh eggs for his kitchen. When there is not company staying in the big house, we have extra eggs for my missus to sell in town."

It was obvious to Ardal that Wilbur was justifying and defending his poultry activity. Perhaps he was worried that the goose's startling of the horses may have caused injury to a person, horse, or damage to a wagon. "And we sell the old hens and old geese when we get too many. But, the master demands that I pin them all up anytime the horses are running, so they don't spook a horse to throw a rider and such."

Ardal smiled and Wilbur's expression relaxed. "I was just curious, Will. I am quite fond of cooked goose."

"I understand that, yes, sir, I enjoy a nicely cooked goose myself now and then. If you would like that goose, the missus will have it plucked and gutted by the time the race is finished. I usually get a quarter dollar for a dressed goose."

Ardal chuckled, reached into his pocket, and produced the small silver coin. "One sitting goddess for you."

Wilbur smiled broadly to show a full mouth of stained teeth. He took the coin, flipped it above his head, danced three steps, caught it, and placed it in his pocket, as deftly as a stage performer. Ardal laughed and slapped him on the forearm "One last thing, Wilbur. Are you aware that your bootlace is undone?"

"Yes, sir, I know. A few moments ago, the Bullet bolted and reared up when it thundered real loud. I got my boot twisted and the lace snapped. I really need to fix it before time for me to mount a lead pony to escort the Bullet and his jockey to the starting gate."

"Well, let me hold the Bullet while you fix your lace." Wilbur looked about. All the spectators had moved from the barn to the lean-to. Some were queued up to place their bets. Others had ventured toward the outer edge of the roof to pre-position themselves to observe the race. Ardal knew Will was concerned he might get himself in trouble for letting a spectator hold the horse, but he also knew he could get into a worse situation if he lost his boot in the critical time of getting the horse up to and into the starting gate. Wilbur took a couple of steps away, knelt down, and tied his broken lace with a knot between two eyelets halfway up the lace track. But when he tugged the lace ends at the top, the worn and weathered string snapped below the last eyelet.

"I have an old pair of boots in the tack box. If you don't mind, sir, holding the horse a bit more, I will run and get a lace from there." He nodded toward a big wooden box against the wall between two stalls.

"Sure, Mr. Creech. You go ahead." Ardal watched him sprint toward the box. The other stablemen were leading their horses to the far corner of the big barn. There was a lot of activity there, horses being saddled and riders mounting. Ardal found himself looking directly into the Bullet's eyes. Ardal saw his face reflected in those glassy dark globes. The animal stood reasonably still, either fearful of Ardal or curious him. The stallion was tense and restless with energy, but he continued his stare at Ardal's face, perhaps into his eyes. His ears pointed forward.

Ardal spoke in a low melodious tone, "Now see here, Mr. Bullet. Do not try to bolt on me. I'll jerk your lead rope and make you think your head will come off." The horse seemed to relax by a degree. Its ears

returned to the normal stance. "Listen to me! I want you to run your heart out in this race. You can win this race. It's an opportunity you might not have again. If you win this race there will be a lot of gentlemen wanting to buy your sired foals. So, you will be treated with many a fancy filly to screw. Now, one last thing, Bullet, if you win this race for me, then I'll name my firstborn for you, girl or boy, and your name will be in the rolls of mankind as well as cited in Thoroughbred registries."

Wilbur returned to retake control the stallion. He thanked Ardal repeatedly and led Bullet away to catch up with the other five equestrian contenders at the far corner of the barn. Ardal turned and walked quickly into the lean-to. He had forty dollars' cash, having hocked his watch to Andy Yost, the wagon driver who had given him carriage to this event. Moments earlier, rain in his eyes and minding his footsteps between mud puddles, Ardal had clumsily bumped into Andy as he was hurrying back from inspecting the racetrack. After apologies and chuckles, Andy confided in Ardal that he had brought money to the race but he decided he would not risk it, "what with the weather having turned so mean and the odds all debatable." Ardal was reluctant to recommend a long shot to a man so cautious with his money, a man unlike Wayne and his companions who placed bets as a matter of play with discretionary funds.

Instead Ardal asked Andy if he would loan him forty dollars against his pocket watch, at a fee of 10 percent, if Ardal decided he could make a good bet. Andy would have nothing to lose, at least four easy dollars to gain, and at most, a gold pocket watch worth two or three times the amount loaned against it. Andy was no fool. He readily agreed to the tentative exchange. Ardal quickly located Andy and, without a word, handed him the watch. Also without an utterance and without even looking away from his observation of the horses trotting down the track toward the starting gate, Andy slipped the watch in one pocket, retrieved a small roll of bills from another pocket, and handed the money to Ardal.

Ardal was the last person to place his wager. The bookkeeper snatched the forty dollars and placed it into the money box with his left hand as he jotted in a ledger with his right hand. He then refreshed the ink on his pen with a dip into the small bottle and plucked a slip of blank paper from a strewn pile banked against the right side of the money box. Ardal watched closely as the clerk artfully scribed on the slip, "No. 5, Win, \$40, 15:1, Line 46." He handed the slip to Ardal, closed the ledger, and slammed the lid down on the money box.

Ardal kissed the slip of paper and tucked it into his jacket's breast pocket, the same nook his watch had occupied. Observing that the span of fence in front of the lean-to was crowded, shoulder to shoulder with spectators, Ardal decided to step onto the empty unhitched wagon where the bugler had stood. He could now see the entire track.

The rain had abetted. Gray clouds swept in layers across the sky, allowing only enough light to define daytime. A bell rang loudly. The pack of horses leapt from the starting gate in close proximity, but within a few strides, two horses, running neck to neck, moved a full length ahead. Ardal presumed that those were the two favored runners. Clamor arose from the crowd. Several observers sighted through spyglasses and shouted a confusion of the horses' relative positions and the varying changes of their relative positions. Within seconds of time the crowd's cheers grew to growls as Ardal observed the horses had bunched together as they rounded toward the final stretch.

As the pack moved on to the straightway approaching the finish line, a big mouse-brown horse stretched its neck ahead of the conglomeration. Then the brown's broad muscled chest emerged from the closely

grouped bunch. “Damned it all, where is my black champion?” Ardal grumbled aloud. Then he observed that all the horses were brown, the blacks, grays, and bays, all colored brown with mud. The jockeys, the colors, and the numbers all were monochromatic brown.

As Ardal held his breath, clinched his teeth, and closed his fists the thundering animals slammed hooves and splattered a spray of muddy soup across his view. Then the frontrunner, three quarters of a length ahead of the next horse, a full length in front of the third and multiples of lengths ahead of the other three horses, broke across Ardal’s line of sight over the tops of the whitewashed and red-striped posts that marked the finish line. Only at that point in time, looking directly at the side of the lead horse, could Ardal discern the horse’s number. Faintly through the film of mud appeared, miraculously, the number five. The Bullet had won.

The crowd’s enthusiasm wilted quickly as the horses crossed the finish line. Many tossed their ill-fated bet slips aside to become bits of white swimming in footprint puddles of muddy water. It was apparent that most had followed the piper and bet on the proclaimed front-runners. Apparently, there were only about a dozen successful bettors, and most of them had only won by placing safer wagers on one of the top two horses to either place or show. Those few winning bettors promptly headed toward the cashier’s table to collect their marginal winnings, holding tightly on to their slips, pleased with themselves for hedging or tempering their bets. Their winnings would be meager, owing to scarcely better-than-even odds for either of the favorites to place, or show.

Ardal believed, having just proved himself, he had earned the right to philosophize, at least to himself. Alas, big rewards and more excitement are wagered with higher risk. And that seems as true for life itself as it is with gambling. But what is life but a gamble?

Ardal stood aside as he watched the winners receive their payoffs, invariably for one of the two favorites to place or show. When the last man in line stepped away Ardal moved to the table and presented his slip of paper. The clerk didn’t crosscheck Ardal’s slip with the ledger as he had all others. There was only one entry in his ledger for horse five to win, and he remembered that one peculiar bet. He seemed almost happy to count the bills to Ardal, six hundred dollars. This was fifty times more cash than Ardal had ever held in his hands. He quickly curled the bills into a tightly wrapped roll and shoved the coil of dreams to the bottom of his right hip pocket. Habitually he felt the inside of the pocket with his fingertips to ensure there were no holes to permit his fortune to slip away. Instinctively he looked about as he thanked the clerk and turned away to look for Andy Yost, the wagon driver who had picked him up on the road, the man who accepted his watch in hock for forty dollars, and the gentleman who offered to take him back to town.

The winning of such a fortune made Ardal giddy. He wanted to shout with glee while a crowd of friends slapped his back and offered him drinks and cigars, but no friend of his was nearby. The upset race had spoiled the mood of celebration. Rather than gradually spilling out so as to not cause suspicion of the illegal event, visitors were quickly departing en masse.

Taking a more sober attitude, Ardal told himself, I should be sensible and cautious now. I have known of men being killed for a lot less money than I now hold. As he walked across the earthen lean-to floor, he thought about all that he could do with such a fortune. He toyed with his reasoning. *What I “could” do is not the same as what I “should” do and may not be what I “would” do.* Child’s wordplay aside, he considered. *I can now marry my lovely young Hattie in fanciful style. I will give her a wedding fit for a*

princess, and that she truly is. I could whisk her away in a new wagon with a fine team, away to a new town where there would not be whispers of us being married cousins. I could set up a freight company of my very own. Why, I could then earn enough money to buy a house and begin a family. I would want at least a half dozen children, or seven, or eight. Eight is a good number.

Ardal imagined in that moment a myriad of marvelous scenes of living a rewarding life. Hattie would spoil him, his children would adore him, and men about their town would shower him with respect and admiration. All of that was now his to proclaim. He was anxious to get back to exclaim his good fortune to his promised bride and his friends who would be envious on all accounts. If ever there would be a time in his life to gloat and boast, this was that time.

One of Ardal's cautionary glances revealed two of the gunmen looking at him out of the corners of their eyes as they spoke, close in whispers. At that moment Wilbur appeared with the goose. Will was holding the fowl by the legs. The goose had been stripped naked of its feathers and slit from its tail to its severed neck. A heavy cotton string held the body cavity closed.

"Congratulations, Mr. McClary, on your winning bet. I heard the moneyman telling some other fellows about your fortune. Here is your goose. It's a young goose, so it will be good eating. My missus wrapped the liver, heart, and gizzards in wax paper and stuffed all that inside, with the neck."

Ardal took the goose with his right hand and reached into his left pocket with the other hand. His fingers sought out and brought forth two silver dollars. He held them up to Wilbur. "I could not have selected the best horse without your help, Mr. Creech. Take this tip for my gratitude. You earned it. I insist."

Wilbur hesitated, looked about to see if anyone was watching, and then reluctantly took the coins. It was apparent that Wilbur was elated with his reward. It was, most probably, equivalent to or more than two long days of his labor, above the room and board his master apparently provided. Wilbur only mustered a simple, "Thank you, sir," but he repeated the short phrase enthusiastically, three times over.

Ardal slapped him on the arm and turned to walk away. A man shouted somewhere behind Ardal, "Oh, Mister!" Ardal had just spotted Andy Yost walking toward his wagon, and he had set out on a fast-paced walk to catch up with him. Now being suspiciously paged, Ardal hurried along, fiddling with the goose, and pretended not to hear the calls. But the next shout was loud and from close behind, "Mister, stop!"

Ardal turned to see the two gunmen who had been eyeing him a moment earlier. "Mister, we have been told that you are sort of a master at judging horses." The voice was disingenuous and demeaning. "If you can spare a few minutes, we have a horse that we want you to appraise. It will not take much of your time. And we will gladly pay for your opinion." Ardal was leery of their motive and suspicious of their words. Certainly, these two had intentions that were not in Ardal's favor.

"No, mates. I am sorry, but I must be on my way. I am riding with that wagon driver over there, and you can see, he is ready to leave." Andy Yost was already so far away that Ardal would have to shout loudly to get his attention. Andy would wait awhile, and if Ardal did not show, he would be on his way. Whether or not Ardal could get rid of these two gunmen, he did not want to walk back to town. Alone on the road, he could be highjacked at any point.

"Well, Mister, we must insist that you look at our horse. Then we will take you back to town in one of our buggies. We are staying there at the hotel on Main Street, so we need to go back to town ourselves, don't you see?"

Ardal looked about and pretended to be considering their offer. There was sparse activity in the adjoining big barn where Wilbur had just entered. The lean-to area was vacant except for Ardal and the two gunmen. The visitors' wagons and buggies were departing quickly, nose to tail, down the driveway. Darkness was creeping across the landscape, mixed black with the rising mist of gray fog. With each second Ardal was becoming more alone and more vulnerable.

"I tell you, gents. I will return here tomorrow and inspect your horse then. I absolutely must be leaving now. I have an engagement this evening."

Ardal turned and stepped away. Then a hand grabbed his right shoulder from behind as a hard rod rammed against the vertebrae of his lower back. The voice was lower now, in both pitch and volume. "You will come with us, or I will blast your backbone into splinters. Then we will righteously declare that you were attempting to rob the money box. And you should know, the local sheriff would not question the word of the master of this estate."

Ardal pretended a jovial mood, as if he thought it was all a joke, as if he were intoxicated and naive. He smiled, purposely slurred his words and staggered. "Very well, then. It seems you blokes are determined. I see that this must be important and"—hiccup—"urgent for you. So I will be happy to look at your"—burp—"horse and tell you what I think of him, or is it a filly? Just let me give this naked goose to my friend and tell him to go on without me."

The two looked at each other, each seeking the other's opinion. The man at Ardal's back returned his revolver to his holster as inconspicuously as possible. "You go tell your friend and be quick about it. And don't plan to head out. All we have to do is to signal to our men at the front gate and the both of you will be riddled with lead. The robbery story will work as well for two as for one. We will walk along with you to meet your wagon driver."

Ardal stepped out quickly, holding the goose in front of him and still pretending to be unsuspecting and under the influence of drink. He whistled and staggered as he went, with the two gunmen breathing on the back of his neck. Ardal greeted Andy and explained that he would settle up with him later for the "loan." He asked Andy to deliver the goose to his landlords, the Roberson's. Andy acknowledged that he knew of their house and he agreed, but he seemed offended, or perhaps, Ardal thought, he suspected some foul play in the making. He glanced repeatedly, from Ardal to the gunmen and back to Ardal again, all the time maintaining a null expression.

"Tell the Roberson's that I will be home very soon, unless the horse I will be evaluating happens to kick me severely." Ardal faked a laugh at his own quip. Andy was not amused. The two gunmen appeared impatient and annoyed. One of the gunmen grasped Ardal's forearm and tugged him as he gave him a nod and a mean frown.

"Let's go look at that horse now." Andy backed his team away from the fence, turned them in a half circle, and headed for the gate. Ardal stepped toward the barn, but the two blokes blocked his path. One pointed across the way to the stables on the opposite side of the track. They were directing Ardal to the

same building that gunmen had taken Ardal's companion from the entrance interrogation, after he had failed to correctly name his confidant.

Ardal was shoved along as he continued to fake a degree of drunkenness. He hoped this pretense might cause his captors to underestimate him. He wondered with every step how he might get out of this predicament. He glanced at every post, bush, and byway in search of a means to escape. It frustrated him that he could not simply take them on with fists and feet. He was confident that he could whip the two of them in that scenario, but with guns at play, he would certainly be shot after delivering his first blow.

As they approached and entered the stables Ardal looked about desperately but still saw no means of combat or escape that would avoid their deadly gunfire. *If only they did not have guns, I can imagine a dozen ways to overpower these two and give them a whipping they would not soon forget, if only. How often*, he thought to himself, *I am taunted by those two words, "if only."*

The stables were quiet except for the occasional snort of a horse. "Over here. Tell us what you think of this horse. We have been offered to buy this horse, to run in the circuit this spring. Here, have a drink or two while you evaluate this horse."

Ardal glanced at the horse. It was a brood mare of several years of age, not a serious contender. He had not needed to see the horse to know the encounter was a ruse. He knew it was a setup from their first approach. Ardal was now concerned they would now realize he was on to their tricks. One of the men drew a half-empty fifth of whiskey from his overcoat side pocket and, all too conveniently, a single drinking glass from the other side pocket. He uncapped the bottle and poured a liberal amount into the glass. With insistence, he handed the glass to Ardal.

If only they had offered me to drink from a two-gallon jug, Ardal thought, I could have smashed both their skulls with a single sweep. The two men stood motionless to await and watch Ardal drink. "Well, you gentlemen must have a drink with me. It is bad luck to drink alone, do not you know?"

Again, they faked good humor. "We are still on the job. If the boss caught us with whiskey on our breath, he would have us whipped and sent down the road without pay. So, you go ahead and drink up."

Ardal suspected the drink was spoiled with some poison or other. He gestured, "Here is to you." Then he took a tiny sip, barely wetting his lips and tasting the bitter concoction.

"He's too good to drink our whiskey."

"Oh, very well then. I will drink the whiskey to show you I am an agreeable fellow. Then you must allow me to appraise your horse and be on my way." Ardal convinced himself that he could persuade his stubborn mind and stout body to resist, at least for a good while, the complete loss of his will and faculties. Perhaps he could fool his foes and pretend to pass out, he thought. He might then find a chance to flee. He took a second drink, expecting to empty the glass and toss it away in celebratory fashion, but his glass had been refilled to the brim and so he gulped much more than he anticipated.

Ardal choked, growled, and threw the glass hard to the side. It shattered against the wall. He was struggling to form words and produce a false laugh. He planned to complain about the whiskey, pretending a jovial mode, and then proceed to evaluate the horse, but stumble and then act as though he had blacked out.

He had just begun to speak when he felt the back of his head explode. Immediately, a surge of excruciating pain raced through his skull and down his spine. All of his being evaporated into a void of absolute silence, darkness, and finally, nothingness.

Ardal's next realization was that of a different world. His head seemed immobile, but his peripheral vision was broad. He saw a vast expanse of dark gray clouds flowing before him, from his head to his feet, as if an endless column of dingy sheep were scampering silently over him. The darkness was that between day and night or, similarly, between night and day. Was this the evening of Sunday or the predawn of Monday? he wondered. Slowly, painfully, he moved his head to look from side to side. He was in a ditch alongside a road. The ditch trickled streams of cold muddy water from the direction of his feet, and along both sides of his body.

Those damned cowardly gunmen must have tossed me in this ditch, he cursed. If I had not landed face-up, I would have surely drowned. It was certain to Ardal that he was rolled into the ditch with no concern for his fate. Indeed, if the rain had poured heavily and the ditch accumulated but eight inches of water, he would have drowned, even if he had happened to be facing up.

Ardal tried to sit up, but his head seemed to spin and circle like a billiards ball in a wash pan. With tremendously disproportionate effort, he eventually manipulated his body to pivot on his butt a quarter circle so that his head was at the edge of the ditch adjacent to the road and his feet were up the other side pointed to a board rail fence. His butt remained in the bottom of the ditch, damming the water that now overflowed across his crotch.

He found this newly acquired posture terribly uncomfortable. To move again he coaxed his legs to push his paralyzed torso up the ditch bank and onto the roadway. There he crossed one leg over the other and shoved his feet until he was lying on his belly. Ardal forced his confused mind to behave, to ignore the horrible pain, and to help him reason and recover. His mind was more disoriented and unruly than any stage of drunkenness or head bashing had ever produced. He forced himself to take deep breaths of the cold air. He commanded his weak arms to fold under his chest, but they then refused to lift his shoulders.

For a time, he could do nothing more than consider his dilemma. Certainly, his foes had done more to him other than slamming a timber against his head. He was drugged. *The cowards*, he thought. *They must have feared I would regain consciousness and attack them, and for sure, I would have. They must have poured some of their poison down my throat.*

He remained crippled there for a long time, time for darkness to engulf him. Now he knew that it was Sunday evening and not Monday morning. The cloud cover was broken now and a rising fractional moon peeked through like a kid at an arcade peep show. He continued to breathe deeply, trying to force air into his lungs to revive his demented brain and rejuvenate his derelict brawn. With excruciating pain and every bit of determination he could demand of his injured will, Ardal manipulated himself to the crawling position. Then he struggled to sit upright, forced his legs to fold under his haunches, and rose to a squatting position, teetering in all directions. Eventually he stood, folded at the hips and knees, his spinal column arched down so that he faced his belly. In this macabre posture, he began to stagger. Each body-twisting sliding step sent pain from his neck to the top of his brain. It felt as if a red-hot dagger was being thrust into the base of his skull and up to pierce the top of his brain.

Between steps the world tilted and turned. Repeatedly he had to stop himself from staggering off into the ditch. Ahead he could see the lights of town, perhaps only a mile away. The sight of town encouraged him. He had not been dumped on some remote country road. And even more to his favor, he happened to set forth walking in the direction of town. If he had turned the other way before setting out, he may have labored all through the night only to travel further away.

Ardal estimated that his hesitant and dragging steps propelled him slower than an old tortoise on a hot summer day. By the time he had covered half the distance to town, probably a half mile in an hour or so, he had regained more of his sense of balance and motor skills. He now walked as ably as a severely drunken man, one whiskey sip short of passing out. His condition seemed to plateau at that miserable level, staggering, head throbbing in pain, and as dizzy as a child just off a merry-go-round. His vision and his hearing remained severely impaired.

As he entered the city streets he believed that he heard people talking and shouting at him. He believed he saw people stopping on the sidewalks to gawk and then back away from him. Finally, he came to the gas lamp that illuminated the street sign, Walnut, the Roberson's street.

With greatly distorted sight and sound, Ardal saw a wagon approaching and he heard the driver command, "Whoa!" The horses had stopped near to him. He looked up and concentrated his stare, trying to see the man on the wagon. Then the distorted figure spoke, "Ardal McClary, you are a disgrace to your family and to mine. You are a worthless drunkard, and that is all you will ever be. Giddyap!"

The horses almost knocked Ardal down as they passed. He squinted and forced his mind and his eyes into concert and to focus. Dancing double images merged near but never converged. All in view remained blurred and wavering. The taller figure seated on the wagon barely became recognizable; it was his Uncle Calvin. His heart sank. He redirected his stare to the smaller figure sitting next to Calvin. The second figure was hunched forward, elbows in and hands up to the face. Suddenly Ardal felt yet another horrible sickness spread through his disturbed body, insulting his mind and tearing at his heart. He knew he appeared hideous, he knew his body's involuntary actions were deplorable, and now he knew he was displaying this hideous monster to his beloved Hattie. Ardal heard a loud voice, coarse and breaking. It was his voice, but it seemed foreign and released without permission, as spontaneous as a dying scream, "Hattie! Hattie I'm sorry!"

He was surprised that he accomplished such volume, such horrible loudness. He suspected that his words were not as he imagined but rather the unintelligible roaring of a monster. Dogs barked, doors creaked opened and slammed shut. Voices shouted curses from dark houses. Ardal's legs collapsed to his knees. He began to fall forward in abandon, to smash his face into the brick of the street. Abruptly a pair of strong arms arrested his fall, and a man called him by name, "Ardal. Stand up and let me walk you to the house."

It was Morse. Ardal could not reply. It took all his resources to stand and walk in unison with Morse.

A soft voice cascaded, down like a mountain's brook, through Ardal's right ear and into his slumbering mind. Silence followed as peaceful as the pause between the cries of a soaring hawk in summer haze. His conscience whispered to him sarcastically. *This moment of peace is no more than a brief comfort of death's device. You have passed from the earth and are about to enter purgatory.* Ardal argued, *No! Let me out of here!* Ardal had shouted those words and sat up in the same second of time.

While the initial reception of his senses flooded into his confused mind, his emotions ran through the stages of panic, fear, disorientation, and finally, exquisite relief. Kathy was sitting beside him, a bowl of soup in her lap and a wet cloth in her hand. She had been talking to him. It was her voice that nudged him to consciousness.

"Kathy! Thank God, I am here...oh!" Ardal reached for the back of his head. A pad of bandage cupped the back left side of his cranium. His slight touch amplified the pain that throbbed in the lump beneath the bandage.

"How long have I been asleep? What day is this? What time is it now?"

Kathy smiled and placed the wet cloth around the back of Ardal's neck. "You are so comforting for my weary soul to see, Kathy." She smiled more broadly, lifted the bowl of soup with her left hand, and moved it up toward Ardal's chin as she dipped the large spoon with her right hand. Ardal subordinately opened his mouth to receive a warm chicken broth and soft dumpling.

"It is midafternoon, Monday. You have slept more than eighteen hours. You have screamed and cursed, tossed and turned, sweated profusely and dry heaved. At one time, you convulsed so fiercely that Morse and I expected you to die. But you are a tough young bull, as Morse says. He will be as happy as a robin with a worm to see that you have awakened. I saw you resting easy all day after a fitful night. When you began to mumble I thought you might wake up soon. So I made this chicken soup with noodles. My mother taught me that this is the best food for a body that is laid up, sick, or injured."

She gave him a spoonful between each sentence. It was hot, salty, and amply peppered. It was warming his body as well as his spirits. "Kathy, I must tell you what happened to me. And you must tell Hattie. And Morse must tell Calvin for me. Two men with guns poisoned me with some witch-brewed potion and smashed me in the head. I know my story is hard to believe, but I swear it's the truth."

Kathy pushed another spoonful to Ardal's lips, forcing him to stop talking. "Now you just save your storytelling until Morse gets home from work. Then you can tell us both at the same time." Those two sentences were accompanied with two additional spoons of soup. Ardal was subservient, restricted to bed, weak and light-headed, and being spoon-fed like an infant. For this moment, he did not have the temperament or the desire to behave in any other fashion than that of an obedient and helpless child. By the time the huge bowl was empty his eyelids were heavy. He lay back at Kathy's command and fell back into a deep sleep.

"Well. The sleeping Van Winkle has awakened." Morse stood in the doorway with a grin as broad as the day his son was born. He came forward, bent down, and pretended to make a hard blow at Ardal's shoulder with his fist. Then he sat in the creaking wooden chair and began to joke and tease to Ardal's already happy expressions. Kathy brought two cups of coffee.

Ardal found strength to grasp the big and heavy bone china mug and pull it to his chest. There he steadied the cup with his left hand joining the grip. The coffee was warm and savory. It seemed to immediately supply his anxious body and awaken and revive every wanting organ and muscle. Kathy sprinted away and returned soon with a cup of coffee of her own. She sat on the foot of the bed.

The three of them talked, joked, and exchanged gratitude. Ardal was relieved to learn that Kathy and Morse were already convinced that he had indeed been waylaid. The couple explained that the severe

blow to his head and the varied symptoms, especially the convulsions, suggested that he had also been poisoned. They had summoned a doctor soon after they cleaned him up and wrestled him to bed. The doctor confirmed that he had been drugged. He mixed a chalky solution in milk and trickled it down Ardal's throat. Then he cleaned the bloody wound on the back of Ardal's head and bandaged it.

Morse broke away from recounting the night before and addressed Ardal directly, "When you recover, you hapless mule skinner, you owe me two dollars for the doctor's visit. I told the doctor you were not worth two dollars to me and he would just have to come collect you to work it off as his nurse. Why, that man looked at me like I was the devil himself. It was all I could do to keep a serious look on my face. But then Kathy grunted a chuckle that gave it away and we all three had a hearty laugh at your expense."

Ardal enjoyed the humor for a long moment then he inquired, "Oh my, I almost forgot. Did you receive the goose from Mr. Andy, Andy Yost?" He ended his statement with his mouth still open and his eyelids so high they seemed to be forcing his eyebrows to raise. He portrayed this anxious expression as he altered his glance between Morse and Kathy.

Morse responded, "Oh, that old goose! I carried it out to the smoke shed last evening. It's been hanging in hickory smoke since then." Ardal's expression changed but never lost the look of worry. "Did you take the innards out of the goose before you hung it to smoke?"

"Well, of course, I did. But Kathy and I don't care much for gizzards or liver and such. I just turned that goose up and dumped all of that onto the ground for a hungry stray dog that came begging."

Ardal looked frustrated. "Damned it, Morse, I hid my money in that goose when I suspected I was about to be robbed. All of six..." Morse interrupted Ardal, at two octaves higher, and stole his words, "All of six hundred dollars of bills tightly rolled." Kathy and Morse then laughed in vulgar delight, shrieking, snorting, and slapping until Ardal's worried expression eventually melted. Still not fully recovered, his befuddled mind was slow to catch the joke.

Morse and Kathy explained with glee. Yes, they had thought to check the goose's body cavity to retrieve any innards. The old widow woman across the alley was needy and was always so very grateful for such items. She wouldn't accept charity, per se, but the Roberson's learned to provide excuses. They excused their offerings with such circumstances as they hadn't learned to appreciate liver, which was true, or, they ran out of canning jars and had a fruit left over that would go to waste, and a dozen other such invented stories. They tried to give her something at least once a week. Other neighbors did likewise. The old woman responded in kind as well as she could. Somehow with gnarled arthritic hands she created intricately perfect and profoundly beautiful needlework pieces of lace such as doilies and fine ladies' handkerchiefs delightfully monogrammed.

"It's all well and good that you gave the innards to the widow, but tell me about my roll of money bills." Ardal was anxious now and not amused.

Kathy interjected, "Well, Ardal, your money was a bit bloody and certain to soon be smelly. So I placed your certificates in a pan of cold soapy water." Kathy was enjoying the drama of keeping Ardal in suspense, and she could see that Morse also reveled in the tease. "But then I worried that the ink might wash out and there would only be pieces of blank paper." Ardal was clearly getting antsy now, so Kathy wrapped it up. "But alas, the notes came out looking like new. But when they dried they were quite wrinkled, so I ironed them flat and crisp. And here is your fortune, your highness!"

She reached into her apron pocket and handed Ardal the stack of bills, about as thick as a deck of cards and thrice the size. She had tied them with a torn strip of cotton cloth. Ardal was speechless. He held the stack and looked at it. There was no need to count it and disturb this blissful moment. He had watched intently as the clerk dispensed and counted the notes to him aloud. He also knew he could trust the Roberson's unequivocally, and Morse had already confirmed the total amount.

Morse seemed as excited and happy for his friend as if he had won the money himself. "Aren't you going to count it? And look at those certificates, every one of them is genuine US legal tender. Some are for silver demand and some are for gold. I never saw as much money except for the payroll box at the mill." Morse had complete faith in Ardal. He assumed Ardal earned the money honestly. Ardal now began to regain the elation he had when he first collected his fortune.

Keeping his face serious in order to sneak in a joke, Ardal stated flatly, "I was so worried that my goose had been cooked!" It only took a silent second for Ardal's friends to spontaneously catch the joke and laugh, instantly giving Ardal the freedom to abandon his serious expression and laugh with them.

"But how did you earn so much money in one Sunday afternoon?" Kathy stated, still chuckling. Ardal grinned and offered his reply almost as enthusiastically as Kathy had questioned.

"Well, it was like I told you before I left Sunday. An important man wanted my detailed opinion of several horses. My assessment of those animals proved to be very profitable, and I was justly rewarded." Ardal was proud of himself for avoiding telling an outright lie. He only insinuated that he was paid for evaluating horses, not that he had earned it indirectly by betting on his own evaluation of the animals. "Oh, and please, don't tell anyone about my fortune." He tried to introduce a bit of humor. "I am not sure I can withstand another assault and robbery. Besides, I want to tell Hattie myself." His mood had quickly fell, and his voice reflected it. "That is, if I am ever permitted to talk to her again."

Ardal shoved the money into the bottom side of his pillowcase. He now wanted to talk about things more important even than his new fortune. "My dear friends, Kathy, Morse, I should be happy, but I am so troubled. My Uncle Calvin and sweet Hattie met me in the street last evening. I was in such a frightful condition. Calvin thought that I was a pitiful drunk, and he said as much. Hattie just hid her face. Please, you must help me. Will you, Morse, talk to Calvin for me? And Kathy, will you speak to Aunt Lockie, and talk with Hattie?"

Both Morse and Kathy leaned forward and reached to touch Ardal. "Of course, we shall," Kathy said softly.

Morse nodded. "Yes. And this very evening too. We have reason to go see them. When the evening grew late and you had not come home, Hattie was beside herself. By the time Calvin came to take her home she was so distracted that she forgot to take her handbag."

Kathy joined in support of Morse's initiative. "And more, she left her hat, her gloves, and her pie pan. If you feel you will be all right here alone, Ardal, we should leave soon so we can be home before the night gets too cold."

Although they were about to do Ardal's bidding he felt he had to protest. "But that is such a distance to walk on a cold winter evening. And I am not sure that, in my condition, that I can take good care of little Jon. What if I should black out when he needs me? Maybe it should wait until the end of the week?"

Morse and Kathy had already sprung to their feet and started out of the room. Morse stopped, turned his head and spoke over his shoulder, "We can harness Mr. Montgomery's old mare to his buggy." Then Morse turned to completely face Ardal. Obviously, he had more to say. "I had not a chance to tell you. Yesterday Monty offered the horse and buggy to me for the value of a gold eagle, two dollars a week for ten weeks. The mare is almost twenty years old, and the buggy needs some work. The harness also needs some repair. But all in all, it's a favorable price. Monty has already bargained for a young gelding, and he has placed an order for a handsome new surrey. With their three children growing big now, the buggy is just too small for them. I thought you might help me fix up that old buggy and clean out the shed to house it. Then the backyard will need some fencing. I'll build a one-horse stable onto the back of the buggy shed."

Kathy stuck her head back into the doorway. She had already put on her coat and bonnet. "And Mrs. Montgomery is biting at the bit to babysit little Jonny. So you just rest. And if you feel up to it, what is left of Hattie's pie is in a bowl on the table. I suggest, though, that you push the chair in front of yourself so you don't fall."

After the Clarkes left, Ardal crawled out of bed, dressed, and, holding onto walls, doorframes, and furniture, made his way into the kitchen. Uncovering Hattie's pie rekindled that feeling of guilt he had when he rudely left for the clandestine horse race.

He had just sat down to partake of the pie when Andy Yost knocked on the door. Ardal gave him forty-four dollars and reclaimed the pocket watch. Yost said little until he turned to leave, "I suspected there was something devious about those two gunmen. Your appearance now tells me that they must have given you a hard time. I would have tried to help if you had given me any certain indications that you were in trouble. Ordinarily, though, I try to not get involved in other people's affairs."

Ardal gave the man a pat on his back. "Now don't feel like you let me down, Mr. Yost. Those two gangsters would have shot and killed us both if we tried to fight back. They meant to rob me, but no amount of money is worth certain death. I took a beating, but I managed to foil them from finding my meager winnings, just a few dollars more than the forty I had borrowed from you."

When Kathy and Morse returned about half past nine Ardal was waiting anxiously in the parlor. Baby Jonathan was asleep, so Kathy took him immediately to his crib and then rejoined Morse, already being interrogated by Ardal. Morse explained that he was not able to get Calvin aside for a man-to-man discussion. Kathy regretted that Calvin insisted the five of them carry on a group conversation at the kitchen table, "with no secrets told aside and away from the children."

"I could not have a heart-to-heart talk with either Lockie or Hattie. I did, though, see that Hattie was uplifted to learn that you were not the deplorable drunkard you portrayed but at the same time she showed a lot of concern for your condition. Lockie was sympathetic for Hattie. It was as if her heart imagined and felt Hattie's despair. Lockie took up a gallant argument in your and Hattie's favor."

Morse felt it was his turn to give his evaluation of the conversation. "When I told them about your ailments and the doctor's opinion, Calvin accepted the fact that you were beaten and drugged and not drunk. He sent his apologies for wrongfully judging you. He was not convinced, though, that you are worthy to take his daughter in marriage. Several times he referred to things your sister Brianna had told him about you. The more we talked, the more his opinion hardened. His last statement was that he

thought you should not see Hattie anymore. Then Hattie got up from the table and stood for a minute, leaning against the wall, crying into her apron, and trembling. Then she scampered up the stairs. Lockie began scolding Calvin so severely that he got up and, without saying another word, went to his bedroom. Lockie followed him there, admonishing him more sorely than a schoolmarm would chastise a delinquent fifth grader."

Ardal, still affected by the head injury and the hangover of the drugging, looked as bewildered as a whipped disobedient mutt. Kathy put her hand on top of Ardal's. "There was nothing we could do at that point, but let ourselves out and travel back home."

She rose, bent over, kissed Ardal on his forehead, and left the room. Morse got up from his chair and gripped Ardal's shoulder. "As they say, good friend, time mends all things. You just wait and see. I have to go to bed now. It is another workday for me tomorrow."

Ardal finally regained enough composure to respond. "I will not be going back to my job. Give my regards to Mr. Grainger and the others, will you please, Morse? The mill will be owing me last week's wages. And I owe the company store for a pair of leather gloves. I will start tomorrow to plan and to set up my own business with my six hundred dollars."

Ardal managed a grin to set Morse more at ease. "And besides, while I think things over, I will keep my hands busy for a few days clearing out the shed, building fences, and repairing the buggy." Ardal was grateful for the tasks associated with Morse's acquisition of a horse and buggy. It was a convenient means for Ardal to keep occupied with his hands, if not his mind, and thus be less apt to commit irrational and illegal, if not immoral, acts to capture his chosen bride, prove his valor, and reclaim his honor.

As he labored and crafted with the various tasks, he imagined himself performing such feats as storming into the Clarkes' house, shoving Calvin through a window, tossing Hattie over his shoulder, and carrying her away on a prancing destrier warhorse. He imagined that Brianna might be standing in the way, and he would turn his steed's rump to knock her down, face-first into a gooey mud puddle, as he and his bride galloped away to a cheering crowd of townsfolk.

On an afternoon of the following week, Ardal was nailing cedar shingles on the roof of the new stable, his last task in preparing the Roberson's property for keeping a horse and buggy. The instant he thrust the hammer, Kathy shouted at him. He was on the back slope of the gable roof of the stable from where he could not see the street or the house. Kathy's loud page distracted his attention and altered his aim by the half-inch radius of the hammer's head. Consequently, as he stretched his back and neck to peer over the roof peak, he smashed his thumb. But in that instant, he saw Kathy and, standing beside her, Hattie.

Ardal felt not so much as a sting in his thumb. Every nerve fiber of his being was concentrated on his heart.

As soon as Ardal stepped from the ladder's last rung and turned, Kathy began speaking excitedly, "Ardal! The Clarkes have settled their quarrels. Calvin and Lockie have given their blessings for you and Hattie to marry."

Kathy thrust her head and nodded to her left toward Lockie and Calvin standing at their wagon. She intended to redirect Ardal's attention toward the driveway in front of the shed, but Ardal's eyes were focused only on Hattie. Kathy took a more direct approach, stepping forward and clutching his sleeve, "Ardal, the Clarkes want a word with you."

Reluctantly, Ardal looked away from Hattie to see Lockie and Calvin. They stood motionless with solemn expressions. As Ardal came near, the Clarkes greeted him contritely with silent nods of the head. Ardal stopped at arm's length. Calvin spoke, "I sent my apology for wrongfully accusing you, Ardal, of being publicly intoxicated. I reaffirm that to you now. I am sorry that I misjudged you in that instance."

Ardal clinched his teeth and drew his lips in against his teeth. He had difficulty sorting his feelings and disposing those that had outlived their due. This time he emotionally shuffled a shabby deck of much familiar dog-eared cards, labeled shame, regret, guilt, and anger. But as he fanned apart his hand of cards for a second time before calling the bet, he found new cards labeled joy, hope, and forgiveness. Calvin had placed the bet, and Ardal had to choose a response, see, raise, or fold.

Ardal called the bet by simply sincerely stating, "I understand." Calvin's stance relaxed. Lockie exhaled and smiled subtly. Calvin leaned against the wagon, signaling that he was at ease, no longer in a stance to either fight or flee. Calvin looked at Ardal, eye to eye, as he took a breath, certainly to prepare to speak. Lockie excused herself and joined with Hattie and Kathy still standing near the one-horse stable some twenty paces away.

Calvin began to speak, his delivery now more demure, "After these past days of talking this out and mulling it over, it came clear to me, and to Lockie also, that Hattie would not rest, or let me and Lockie have any rest, unless she was reunited with you. Now, since I have your word that your intentions with Hattie are honorable..." Calvin hesitated. He was not as sure of his words as he had been earlier, but he soon continued, "And if you are half as determined as our daughter, then there would be no stopping the two of you anyway and no good reasons to try."

Ardal's spirit was instantly uplifted from the pit of hell; that dreadful dungeon to which he had retreated when he believed Hattie was lost to him forever. "Uncle Calvin, I have every intention to be a good husband for your daughter. I will work hard, and I will treat her with respect, just as you know my father treated my dear mother."

Ardal had struck the right chord with Calvin. Calvin stood straight, smiled, and extended his hand. Each grasped the other's right hand, and each gripped the other's forearm with their left hand. The women looked on with an air of triumph while the men naively assumed credit for having resolved the troubling matter on their own initiative. None of the three women would ever make any claim for having played any part in having orchestrated those proceedings. The men would be, as often the case, unaware of having been nudged, influenced, and manipulated.

As the women retreated to the house, Ardal and Calvin continued their confabulation. Calvin explained that Hattie's young siblings were being taunted at school. Kids were mocking phrases they'd heard at home. They were ridiculing about Hattie being courted by a drunkard. They were touting about the modern view of disgrace for marriage between first cousins. Calvin and Lockie were adamant, Ardal and Hattie would have to elope and live elsewhere, at least until the gossip subsided.

Calvin didn't want to admit his own affections agreed, so he added a factor, claiming that Lockie wished that her daughter would not live too far away. "A young daughter could gain much in having her mother near enough to call occasionally, with concerns such as marriage, cooking, and rearing children." Calvin explained that he and Lockie would expect Ardal to make arrangements, as he and Ardal had discussed some weeks ago to line out his work and arrange a home in another town. Then he could come and claim Hattie to be his bride.

Soon Kathy called from the steps at the back porch. Coffee and biscuits had been prepared. The five of them enjoyed a conversation that gradually grew more spontaneous and less guarded until it became jovial and warmly sincere. Calvin explained that his brickwork was delayed for the day while the carpenters caught up to the construction with the second-story ceiling joists and the attic structure that will support the huge triangular brickwork on the gable ends. He and his fellow masons would then be working longer days, including Saturdays, to make up their earnings. Calvin explained how his pay was proportionate to the number of bricks he laid but also how that was predicated on the construction company making sure that scaffolding, materials, and the coordination of the construction phases did not hamper the mason's progress.

Ardal was politely attentive. He tried to give everyone his attention as they talked or as they addressed him, but to do so he had to repeatedly force himself to take his eyes away from his adoration of Hattie. The more he observed her, the more he was spellbound. He became convinced that she was not commonly an Irishman's daughter, but a goddess misplaced. It was overwhelming to his emotions to fathom that he would soon bed her as his wife.

Ardal told of his fortune of money and how that accounted for his being attacked and drugged by bandits. He watched Hattie beam with delight as he enumerated the amount, even as he tried to avoid being ostentatious. And with his good fortune, he explained, he would forthwith be making arrangements to establish himself with a freight company, for that was the work he knew, and he favored. Ardal then added with a flair of gallantry, "And I hope to also afford, at the same time, to buy a house for Hattie and me, of our very own."

Just then Kathy returned to the dining table with little Jonathan, cooing and grunting, full of fresh breast milk, looking as sweet as he smelled. Kathy passed little Jonny to Lockie, but all three women competed for his attention. The baby's faint giggles and gurgles told that he was delighted in the stupendous entertainment of a cluster of three faces hovering closely above and exaggerating outlandish expressions of sight and sound. Ardal and Calvin leaned momentarily to observe but didn't get up from their chairs. Then Kathy left to make another pot of coffee, and Hattie casually extracted the baby from Lockie's arms.

Ardal watched with intense delight and affection as Hattie deftly lifted the infant and cradled him against her chest. Ardal was enthralled by the sight of Hattie cuddling the baby. He imagined that the moment was a future experience and that the baby she held was from her womb and of his seed. Indeed, the scene had bewitched him. Ardal's attention was totally absorbed in the blush of Hattie's cheeks, the flicker of light on her moist lips as she kissed the baby's tiny fingers, and the flesh of her neck and upper chest pressed warm against the soft skin and corn silk hair of the infant's crown. Strange and strong amatory emotions erupted within Ardal. A powerful longing, almost an aching, flushed through his body. Inexplicably he felt that his most demanding role in life on this earth was to impregnate this beautiful young virgin.

Just then Morse barged through the front door and into the dining room, greeting the visitors with volume and jubilation. *If Morse had not interrupted and broken me from my trance*, Ardal thought, *I might have been noticed looking like a perfect fool, my mouth agape, drooling, and my eyes staring lewdly*. Fortunately, everyone else was looking at Hattie until Morse distracted their attention.

After the second pot of coffee was consumed, Calvin and Lockie excused themselves, expressed gratitude for the hospitality, and suggested that Hattie might want to stay for a while longer. Calvin explained that he had an extra early start to work the following morning so he would not be returning to get Hattie. Morse then confessed that he had forgotten to tell everyone. His neighbor, Mr. Montgomery, had received his new surrey and drove it home with his young horse. Morse announced that he and Ardal would fetch the old mare and the buggy and Ardal could take Hattie home in the buggy.

After Calvin and Lockie left, Hattie and Ardal sat together on the davenport. Kathy and Morse stayed in the kitchen where they were heard noisily washing the coffee cups and saucers, putting dinner wares away, and frequently abandoning their chores to entertain the baby with all sorts of silly talk and mimicked sounds. Ardal was oblivious to the undeclared arrangement, but Hattie knew the Roberson's were allowing her and Ardal a small measure of limited privacy.

Hattie took Ardal's hands in hers, looked sympathetically in his eyes, and asked about his recovery from the cowardly blow to the head and the dreadful poisoning. Hattie's affectionate concern, emphasized with gentle touches and kisses preceded by her soft warm breath, was exquisite pleasure for Ardal. Hattie's exuberant talk flooded Ardal's imagination with visions drawn from her flowing verse. There were plans and suggestions of many splendid but simple notions, planting flowers in front of their honeymoon home, building a picket fence in front and painting it white, building a new room onto the house for each pair of children added to the family, and traveling home to Watertown at Christmastime, Thanksgiving, and Easter.

It seemed only a moment before their evening together had progressed into night. All too soon Morse interrupted their blissful conversation of notions, indistinguishable between plans and dreams, hopes and promises. It was time for him and Ardal to complete the deal with Monty and take possession of the old horse and buggy. As the two men walked to Monty's house, Ardal insisted that he loan Morse the twenty dollars to buy the rig, at no interest. Only after a quiet debate in the middle of the dark street did Morse relent. Ardal demanded that his argument win out, that his debt to the Roberson's, especially for his care after the assault, was greater than their debt to him for coming to Morse's aid at the lumberyard. Besides, he said, "Fighting those blokes at the lumberyard was more fun than work and less work than most antics that I do for fun."

Amelia took advantage of a second's delay in Unole's storytelling to interrupt, "I am growing drowsy now, dear Unole. I do so appreciate our storytelling to help me pass the time until I can sleep. I just wanted to thank..." Amy floated comfortably into sleep, pleased to have a settled mind and feeling secure in Unole's company.

"Good morning, Amy. Did you sleep well?" The nurse was as cheerful and bright as the morning sunlight that danced about the room and flickered everything that could shine. Her voice was clear, her eyes were bright, and her smile was as fresh as her uniform. Amy believed she managed a semblance of a smile in response, but at that instant the nurse had turned her attention to the doorway.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Thayer." Amy discerned an extra tone of delight in the nurse's voice, and she saw her face light up. The vague figure in the extremity of Amy's peripheral view stepped into the room and then into her field of clear vision. Amy judged the man to be in his early forties, perhaps only a few years older than her nurse.

"Have you looked in on your mother already this morning, Mr. Thayer?"

The man smiled as he studied the nurse's face, apparently with delight. "If you please, Nurse Gilmore, my friends call me Sam. And thanks for asking. I looked in on Mom, but she was sleeping and I did not want to wake her. I am so very pleased. She is recovering so well that Dr. Edwards expects to release her to the nursing home next week. She may be able to go back home from there in another two weeks."

The nurse followed every word from the man's lips. Amy knew from overheard small talk, days earlier, that the nurse was keenly interested in the man. Nurse Gilmore had been divorced for three years. In an overheard conversation, she confessed to another nurse that she was delighted to learn that the man had been a widower for eight years. Amy chuckled to herself to recall how many personal and intimate conversations she had overheard, or helplessly eavesdropped on, while the conversationalists assumed she was too incapacitated to hear or at least unable to tell.

"That is good news, Sam. And please, call me Irene. So, with your mother improving, will you soon return to Kansas City?" "Yes."

The nurse's expression dimmed. Sam continued, "But I'm selling my share of the accounting firm to my partner and moving back home. Rogersville has grown since I graduated from college, and I believe the town will now support an accounting firm. Also, while I move and set up my new business, I can stay with Mom and help take care of her until she gets back on her feet."

The nurse's face relit, to glow again, like an oil lantern that was ineffectively blown out.

"I straightened Mom's house yesterday. The burglar left quite a mess. Henry Griffin repaired the broken banister on Mom's porch, and he insists on helping me build a wheelchair ramp on the side of her porch before she comes home."

"Well, Sam, I am happy for you and your mother, and I hope everything goes well. And I'll be looking forward to having you as a new citizen in our community. So, will you be back again later today to visit with your mother?"

"No, I am meeting Sheriff Covington here. I found something at Mom's house that I wanted to show to him." Just then Nurse Radstone stepped inside the doorway, asked Nurse Gilmore to assist her with a procedure in the next room, and then darted out.

Ms. Gilmore gave a hurried response as she gathered her instruments, "Amelia, your vital signs are all perfect. I will check on you again soon."

The nurse quickly turned her smile to the visitor. "Excuse me, Sam, I hope to see you later."

"And I look forward to that, Irene."

Moments later Amy heard Cliff's voice. It gave her a slight giddy feeling, a rare little treat in her mostly mundane days. He was talking at her doorway. "Good morning, Sammy. How is your mother?"

"She is doing better each day, Cliff. I am so relieved; she was not injured worse and that she will recover. I found Mom sleeping comfortably a moment ago, so I stepped out of her room. I was just visiting with Nurse Gilmore while she looked in on Lex's granddaughter."

Cliff talked as he stepped into the room and into Amy's sight. "And how is Amy this morning? You look well, Amy. Your doctors continue to give you good reports. They tell me that you may be moving to the nursing home soon and after continued improvement there, you should be on your own, perhaps before summer has ended."

Cliff gently brushed Amy's cheek with the outside surfaces of his four curled fingers. Amy could smell maple syrup and his aftershave lotion. Her sense of smell had reestablished itself before sight, sound, and touch. He stood up and faced Mr. Thayer. "You have something to show me, Sam? We can talk here. We could trust Amy's discretion even if she could talk. I only have to ask her, and I just did."

Mr. Thayer withdrew a business envelope from his coat pocket. "When I was picking up Mom's house yesterday evening, I found this beneath the clutter of books and things on the living room floor. Either your deputies overlooked it, or they assumed it was Mom's. It is an expensive gold fountain pen. I have seen only one or two of these in the possession of businessmen during my twenty-year career. They are rare, and they are terribly expensive. This pen did not belong to my mother. Here, I was careful not to touch it, in case you might have it checked for fingerprints."

"Thank you, Sam. I appreciate your care. This is another piece to a jigsaw puzzle that is beginning to form a picture. Of course, you know, if the several incidents I am investigating should result in a criminal trial, the attorney general may call you to testify where, when, and how you found this pen."

After Sam left, Cliff remained for a minute to talk with Amy. "Well, Amy, you look well and I must say also, you look pretty this morning. I hope I am not being too forward calling you Amy. Bea, as she demands I call her, teased me unmercifully for calling you Mrs. Meade. And Stuart agreed with her, both of them threatening to address me as Mr. Covington with each and every sentence if I did not relent. I must go now, Amy, but I will try to stop by and visit with you this evening, maybe while Bea and Stuie are here."

Cliff took the pen to his office, and after taking a Polaroid photo of it for his own record, he placed it in a clear plastic bag. Then he filled out a form to describe the evidence and its circumstances. Cliff made a copy of the form and paper-clipped it to the plastic bag. Just as with the button that Hank found, the pen would be studied at the state crime lab.

The sheriff already knew who owned the pen. As he took the package to the dispatcher, who doubled as an office clerk, Cliff thought of the probable devious actions of Hagget, reporting his pen stolen when he realized it might have been lost during his assault of Mrs. Thayer. Then, Cliff speculated, he must have searched his office and his home, looking for the pen.

The sheriff's assumptions about the lawyer proved true. The clever lawyer allowed three days to pass, just in case he had left his pen on a restaurant or business counter and it would be discovered and returned to him. He often flaunted his bright gold pen, and everyone who had done business with him had seen the unique writing instrument. Then, when he did fill out a report on stolen property, he claimed it was taken the day of the McClary funeral, the day Mrs. Thayer was assaulted and battered.

Ralph Hagget claimed he did not report the theft at his office because, until weeks later, he had not found anything missing.

Mrs. Bowman, the lawyer's secretary, told Cliff that the pen was originally the property of Hagget's deceased law partner, Ben Duncan. Ben was her employer years before Hagget came to town. She also admitted that she knew nothing of any robbery of the office on the day of Mr. McClary's funeral, or at any other time. She said that she always opened the office well ahead of Hagget's arrival each morning, as she did the day following the alleged robbery, and she had found nothing amiss that morning. Mr. Hagget, however, had even thought to explain his secretary's conflicting account. He claimed that he returned to his office in the evening of the funeral and found the door unlocked. He further claimed someone had entered without actually breaking in but had left some of the drawers open on both desks as well as several file cabinets. Hagget said that he straightened up the office before he went home that night and he did not believe at that time that the incident was worth mentioning to his secretary.