One night, Bill, you had your spree in a narrow arc of lamplight. This was when the dust on your shoulders was of the regular kind, not heavy or shimmering bright. Dishwasher. Broom-sweep. Your name in the general store ledger was still the one you’d been christened. Not mine. I’d etched L-A-M-O-R-E into the piano with a hat pin because that’s what I thought of myself: More. Outside mongrels choked on grease-soaked dishrags and the dog-punchers drank their swill. Inside you bought a round you couldn’t afford and then refused to take a sip. You dropped nuggets down my stockings as I twirled upon the rough-sawn bar-top, stamped in time to piano-song, tried not to trip on the knots. Not here, I told you, laughing. I meant, Not anywhere. Oh, Bill. You’ve always been a fool, from Fortymile to Circle to here. When I walked home down King Street, sweat froze my corset, cold stole the voice from my breast — and you thought you’d done it.
The quicksilver’s froze on the sill this morning: thirty degrees below. Nell calls for hot beef tea, but I bring her the hootchinoo and coo, *Hair of the malamute*. Let’s go to the Palace Grand, I want to kiss a man and dance the hula-hula! Nell says, *Too cold*. Nell says, *Too tired*. I pout on the stoop, where a bottle of whiskey has froze right through, and I say *Well woopidoo* and kick it. Sky-dark. Snow-soft. Make that forty degrees of frost, and my big toe has a heart beating inside it. Then Grace comes to see us. I say I want to hear the Rag Time Kid down at the old Dominion. I want to twirl with the dancehall girls and stomp a sawdust floor. Grace (the priss) is so full of excuses. She tries to light the porch lamp, but the kerosene’s gone hard inside it. Fifty degrees under, then—or colder still. Oh, how I hate the night that lasts all day. In a world like an ink-spill, I could disappear. When the sun rises behind the hills and no one sees it, it’s not really there. By God, Bill! Why am I the only one who knows it?
Windlass shriek, water slosh, the squeal of a wooden rocker box—and I think I hear gold settling in the riffles, Bill, out on the Eldorado. You stand gaiter-deep in glacial melt, your back humped over the river. Gazing for color, you murmur, *It’s a well-known fact the Swedes will dig anything*, and then slowly return to shore. I like the way you look without your Prince Albert coat, the way you walk careful when your feet are heavy with wet. I like the way your hired men break their backs for your favor. When you remember me, you giggle stupid, bucket me, winch me south (*Why don’t you ride down my shaft, Guss?*) and say to keep what gold I find. *Oh, magnanimous!* I smile for you till the dark goes thick and stiff and I don’t want to.
Gussie Goes to the Diggings II

In the pit, the fastened earth breathes ice on every side. *Witches*, I think. *Coffin dark*. A hole in the ground is a hole in the ground. Somewhere above, your hired men rock cradles like demented mothers. They sound so far away. Did you ever send a girl to the Salvation Army for the venereal? I know a dancer who’s given birth to five corpses, each the size of a roasted spud; another who sold herself to a man for her weight in gold—I helped sew buckshot into her corset. In the bloom of match-light, I run my fingers along a glistering seam so like a woman’s wet gash. I prize what I can with my nails. You holler something and shake the roped bucket, but you, too, sound insignificant. I once sat round my mother’s skirts, and she warned me of you—of all men and their great, insatiable need. Bill, I don’t kid myself. Pay-dirt turns us filthy, same as any other kind.