

Quicker than he had figured, Susan was down from her quarters to answer his rap on the door. Abruptly she stood there only the distance of the sill from him, angular but poised, still magical in the nightframe of light, which made this even worse. Surprise came and went on her face, and something else settled in as he watched.

“What’s wrong?” Not that she had to ask.

Everything. Us. The two of you. The history that our skins are the descendants of. The fact that life wants to be so strict with us that we only have to strike a match to get a whiff of Hell. The skirmishes of desire that we fall into blind, and get worse. The list could go on. Wes waited, not ready to try to put any of it into words while perched on a doorstep.

Susan gauged him some more, his elegance at odds with the thing on a string dangling in his hand as if he were an unwilling participant in a scavenger hunt. “You’re not just taking that for a stroll, I suppose. You had better come in, come up.” She led the way up the stairs, glancing at him over her shoulder. He still carried what he came with. “A bonnet box? Collecting Easter finery now, are you?” He simply trudged up after her, tread by tread, still wordless.

They came into the organized muss of the room she used for work.

Correspondence files were stacked, state by state, on the trestle table along the wall. With the typewriter on its traveling stand neatly drawn up beside the raft of paperwork, that end of the room looked scupulously secretarial. The writing desk by the window, on the other hand, had a strew of music sheets as if a whirlwind had gone through a concert hall.

He stood as if brought in on inspection, she stood watching him. Neither of them showed any inclination to sit. "Major," she said as if trying out a word in another language. "You're in, you're up, and you have a captive audience. Has the cat got your tongue?"

"There's talk. About Monty and you."

"And not much of it for," she estimated forthrightly. "Except your own spirited defense of our normal adult right to such conduct, I'll bet anything."

"Susan, don't mock, not now." He gave her a gaze crimped with pain, then looked off from her unyielding eyes. Whiter than the music sheets on the desk were the coupled pages, open, with the fountain pen in the seam between them like a bookmark. It was the time of night, he realized, when she did her diary.

"It's all in there, I suppose? If I had any sense I'd probably make you an offer on it. Maybe that would make this go away."

"Wes, not even you can buy ink back from the page."

He felt the cut of that, but would have let parts of him be lopped off rather than betray it to her just now. As solidly as if on guard duty, he stood planted to his chosen spot of the room and challenged: "Can you drop it, this with Monty?"

She shook her head. "Even if I could, I'm not sure I would scoot away from him on anybody else's say. We are not some kind of a stain on other people's notion of things, all they have to do is look the other way if they don't like the shades of our faces together. You look all too bothered by it yourself." Her eyes were penetrating now. "Cuba? You never?" She trailed a finger on the black leather cushion of the desk chair. "You didn't even once touch a woman this color? Or this?" She touched the mahogany-brown corner of the trestle table. "Or this?" The warm walnut tone of the window ledge. "You really must have been an exceptional soldier if you never resorted to a woman darker than you when you were a young buck on leave, furlough, whatever. Didn't even your St. Augustine ask for virtue only when he was ready for it?"

"Please, Susan, don't--what race Monty is isn't the direct reason I--"

“No? Indirect? Just a little something that sets you off like this? Wes, I suppose you’re entitled to a man’s usual hissy fit because I’m drawn to someone else and you couldn’t imagine it happening. But this other--you’d better tear that out of your bones.”

“There’s more in back of it than that.” He undid the lid of the hatbox and brought out an old cavalry hat, battered and dark-specked.

Soldiers**1889**

A frown was not something you wanted to see on Ninian Duff, particularly when it was in connection with his trigger finger.

On the horse beside his, Donald Erskine also sat looking as peeved as a parson whose Sunday dinner had been interrupted, which in a sense it had. The two of them were out after deer, and there near the upper pasture salt lick where their small herd of red cattle were congregated, a sly three-point buck and his dainty does were picking their way ever so gradually to the lure of the lick.

Tempting as the presence of venison was, Ninian kept on tapping his finger against the walnut grip of his rifle but made no move to draw the long gun from its saddle scabbard.

Finally his words bit the air :

"I don't see my brockle-face."

"Nor my cow with the one horn," Donald said bleakly.

This was the third time since calving that cows of theirs had gone missing, no matter how anxiously one or the other of them rode up here noon and night from the labors of their homesteads to check on the livestock, and they long since had absolved bears, wolves, coyotes, and other four-legged suspects. Much the greater likelihood, they were by now convinced, was a blind corral somewhere considerably to the north of here near the Agency for the Blackfoot Reservation, where a few cows at a time were butchered, their hides burned, and the cheap rustled beef doled out as tribal allotment by some conniving agent who booked it at market price and pocketed the difference. Scottishly numerate as they were, Ninian and Donald had worked out that the economics of someone stealing their cattle only by twos and threes must necessitate a regular wage elsewhere for the riders involved; rustling as an encouraged sideline, a bit of a bonus. It weighed constantly on both men: encouragement of that kind had only one logical home in the Two Medicine country, and its address bore a double set of the letter W.

Donald dourly glanced across at the thundercloud that was his oldest friend's bearded face. These were men who at the best of times were not happy with the thought that they were being toyed with.

"Ninian, are you lighting on what I am, though? That obstinate brockle of yours--"

"Ay, her natural element is the brush, isn't it." Ever a verifier, Ninian glanced behind them at the North Fork's coil of cottonwoods and willows where the brockle-face herd quitter liked to lurk, fly season or not. *Had Donald had to fight her out of there to*
bring her to park pasture with the others *Then* he turned his eyes in the direction that led to the Reservation. "Let's just see if our callers are earning misery by trying to drive her." *and*

"Old Williamson thinks it's so easy, walking over us," Donald mused.

"One day he's going to have another think coming." Ninian rose in his saddle a little as if testing the air. "Just possibly today."

The two men rode north at a quick trot, into a carrying wind that they somehow knew would aid their cause. Beside them but a mile and a half loftier, the Rockies already showed early snow, first bright ash of the dwindling year, the fourth these determined men had expended on the homesteads that drew them and theirs to America. They used the uneven ground to advantage today, riding in

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short order to familiar timberline on Breed Butte so they could see across the swale of Noon Creek and all the way onward to the kettle hills between the next creeks, Birch and Badger. No horsemen nor abducted cattle out in the open, near or far. Exchanging looks of satisfaction that their objects of pursuit were not making a run for it, Ninian and Donald urged their horses down toward the jackpines and brush that hemmed the foothills.

They came onto the rustlers not far into the gulch country at the head of Noon Creek. The bawling brought by the wind sent them off their horses. Each jacked a shell into the chamber his rifle, then slid another into the magazine to have it totally full, and side by side they maneuvered up the low hogback ridge that the creek bent around. Just below the brow of it, they removed their hats and cautiously looked things over from behind an outcropping. The commotion was beyond a rifleshoot away but , as they had figured it would be, near the tangle of the creek brush. Taking her stand in the diamond willows, the brockle was lowing like a mad thing. The pair of men on horseback who, by chance, were trying to drive the worst cow ever created kept circling her vicinity as if they were on a frustrating carousel.

“One’s a black fellow, Ninian.”

"Thieves are plaid."

The lay of the land was not bad for their purpose, they decided. "I'd say let's try them from that coulee," Ninian provided in the same low murmur they always used when hunting.

To make sure they were playing the same hand, Donald countered: "And then?"

"It's still the old drill, isn't it. 'Ready, steady, fire.'"

"Hurry the hell up, Rathbun, dab the rope on her," Flannery encouraged or jeered, it was hard to tell which, while he more or less hazed the one-horned cow away from joining the brush expedition.

Mose flung him a look that would have taken a trooper's tongue out by the roots, but had no apparent effect on his fellow taker of cows. Flannery's qualifications for rustling apparently amounted to his having been in a scrape of some kind in Texas. *Not that mine are a hell of a lot better*, Mose had to admit to himself as the brockle-faced cow went one side of a willow clump and his lasso toss caught only wood. Easy money for a little hard riding, this was not turning out to be.

"Roping was not in my schooling," Mose rumbled back, but on his next throw his loop flopped over the cow's neck. She immediately bellowed and lurched deeper into the willow thicket before he could manage to dally his rope around the saddlehorn and get his horse started on dragging her out of there.

"Better see this," he heard Flannery say. "Honyockers think they're an army."

Still cinched to the creature in the brush by the lariat, Mose dubiously turned half around in his saddle. Flannery for once wasn't just woofing. The pair of men at the mouth of the coulee were a great deal closer than Mose liked to see. One figure like a mop, the other like a chopping block, both of them in antiquated infantry kneel that he had only ever seen in tattered manuals. Flannery carried just a pistol, the idiot, and right now he was a lot slower with it than advertised. Plainly it was up to Mose. He kick-spurred his horse forward to take the tension off that rope and simultaneously pulled his carbine from the scabbard.

Before Mose's rifle was clear of the leather, Ninian shot the horse from under him.

Donald's rifle echoed an instant after his, and Flannery went out of his saddle backwards, hit at the base of his throat.

In the brush, the horse on its side kicking out the last of its life and the alarmed cow trying to crash its way free of rope and willow, Mose scrambled on all fours to dodge them and the prospect of hanging for rustling as well. The rifle he had lost in his hard spill was somewhere right here, and he hadn't yet seen a situation he and a cavalry-issue Springfield couldn't deal with. The damn thing couldn't have flown very far when he hit the dirt. As he crept in search, it was on his mind that the honyockers were not firing wildly the way a person had a reasonable right to expect, not mowing down brush every time a willow swayed.

They would not be anywhere near out of ammunition, ^{the devil.} He would have to deal with that as it came, if he just could ever find the damn-- There. He spotted the Springfield ^{twice} beyond a thatch of willows about the length of his body away. CVP

Counting on the screen of brush to give him enough cover to get into action and make quick work of these down-on-their-knees scissorbills, he gathered himself and scooted low and fast to make a grab for the weapon.

Ninian dropped him with the next shot, and when Mose went on thrashing, shot him again for good measure.

The sound of the rifle fire repeated from gulch to gulch, then rolled away at last into the timber at the base of the mountains. Rising as righteous bearded

men had from the plains of Jericho, Ninian and Donald at once began about the next of this messy business. As he stalked cautiously toward the creek Ninian worked it out in his mind that they would have to hope to get into those deer on their way back, to account for all the sounds of shooting. Not that he at all liked the prospect of alibiing that they had banged away at venison for half a day until finally hitting it, but there was no choice.

Even with the echoes of the shots at last stilled, the silence seemed to ring. Ninian looked everywhere around. The two cows were hieing for home, the lariat still dangling from the brockle-face. Without expression he examined the hunched-over dark man he had killed. ^{Nearly,} Donald's victim lay toes-up, an ^{and} incredulous expression on his face and a red stain over his entire chest. The one in front of Ninian at least didn't look as if this was never expected.

By now Donald had coaxed the riderless horse and tied its reins to the trunk of a young cottonwood. He came puffing over and in his turn studied down at the two riders where they lay, then blew out a long breath. "Old Williamson is going to be cross, toward us."

"I doubt that he will," Ninian said in his most considering tone. "I would wager that two empty beds at the bunkhouse will give him more than he wants to

think about. No, it seems our man Williamson shies away from all-out war on the likes of us or he wouldn't have spent so much care trying to just peck us to death, a few cows at a time. The Williamson way is to work around the edges. At any rate, he'll know now we're not so easily done away with."

Donald's round cheeks still were the color of cottage cheese.

"Donald. They had rifles, we had rifles. The race is to the swift, man."

"I know it is. Still, this isn't like when they chaired us through the Castle grounds while we waved the shire targetry trophy around, is it."

"Edinburgh or here," Ninian was giving no ground, "marksmanship in a good cause is no sin. Let's get cracking. We'll use the other horse with ours to drag ^{at} this one into the beaver dams there, then ^{do away with} shoot it." He studied down at the bodies, his beard moving with the grimace beneath. "As to our adversaries, I'm afraid their graves are going to have to be coyotes' bellies." Luckily there was a lot of country, back in here, and the pair could be disposed of in one timber-thick gulch or another. As a known man of the Bible, Ninian had spoken at more ^{occasions necessarily lacked holy} funerals than he could count, but this ^{one} would be wordless. Before starting on ^{making the dead vanish to the extent that they would} that, Ninian put a hand on the shoulder of his companion. "Never a word,"

Donald. You understand that? To anyone. We never can."

"Jen knows my every breath."

"Jen will need to forebear, this once. As will Flora." A grim light of idea came into Ninian's eyes. "Williamson, though. Ay, let's give him something further to think about. We'll leave a hat on a ^{that wood gate of his} ~~fencepost~~. A bit of prairie glue"--a Cyd piece of barbed wire--"will hold it until they find it."

Donald scooped up both hats and, one in each hand, asked punctiliously:

"Which, for the occasion?"

"It doesn't much matter. I suppose the one with the play-pretty on it stands out a bit better." Donald handed him Mose's hat with the crossed-swords escutcheon of the Tenth Cavalry pinned front and center.

Finale

1925

“That may not be quite the right of it,” Wes concluded, after his necessarily sketched-in version, “in every particular. But close.” His voice had gone unusually soft. The telling of it had taken long enough that he’d had to rest his weight against the trestle table for the sake of his leg. There beside him, as if on fashion-of-the-season display, the battleworn hat reposed atop the hatbox.

“Whit and I--we were the ones who found it.”

Dry-mouthed, with the hard corners of the story still bruising in her as she thought it through, Susan could see the rest of it as if though it were taking place now as puppet-play on that table. Royal cubs with the run of the ranch, he

and Whit bringing the hat to their father in excited curiosity. The old manipulator, out-manipulated, his guns outgunned, pulling back to a waiting game. Angeline Rathbun and Monty, casualties of Mose's disappearance, reduced to charitable charges. And coming home to Scotch Heaven, that day, with a bloodwrit added to their landclaims there, her father in his Jehovan determination and reliable Donald beside him, their silences deeper than ever and their spines stronger than Warren Williamson's.

When she could manage, she asked harshly:

"This couldn't wait? Past tomorrow night?"

For an instant, Wes's facial muscles backed away from the ferocity of her tone, but his flinch just as quickly fell before the resolute expression he had worked up to, coming here. "I thought it might be harder on you to find out then."

"Harder?"

Her voice ripped him. "Oh, let's travel 'round more such Christian ground," she tore onward. "A kick in the heart is better a day early than a day late, is that your thinking? Wes, damn you if you've pulled this stunt with Monty

too. *Tell me! No, look at me and tell me!* If you've thrown him, with everything riding on tomorrow night--"

"I haven't said word one to him. We never have." The Williamson We, embedded in Wes since the christening moment when it was made part of his name. Susan struggled with the ramifications from that answer, him and his. Do the Double W's of life, principalities of the prairie and other swaths of the earth, entitle themselves to their own rules? Take unto themselves the privilege to use the Mose Rathbuns like poker chips, then when their bluff is called, convert the washhouse to sanctuary for the widow and orphan? Ever so charitably never saying word one, of course, letting silence hide the past, and does that wash them clean? *Does kindly count as* Is deceit a charity? In this blooded instance, was she in a position to say it *cd* *did* wasn't?

Amid all that was going on in her she had to marvel at Wes, she couldn't even make his eyes drop. She shook her head as if bringing herself out of a spell. "So it's up to me. You drop this on me. And now I'm supposed to what--swear off Monty as if I were taking the temperance vow? Or hand this along to him: 'By the way, my father one time did away with a rustler who happened to be your father--more tea, my dear?'"

"Susan," he pleaded, "you and I haven't been able to line out any kind of life together, don't I know that. But if you try it with Monty, just by the nature of things you'll be up against worse trouble."

"I wonder, Wes. I wonder."

Her words were like pepper in the air. "All this. You backing Monty once he saw how to make something of himself. Then coming to me--'I have the pupil of a lifetime for you,'" she mimicked with sad accuracy. "All that expense and involvement. What did you think you were doing, buying yourself forgiveness for being a Williamson? Granting yourself an indulgence, was that it? My understanding is that went out several dozen popes ago." If that drew blood on him somewhere, he did not let it show. "Monty has had his own reasons to wonder what you're up to, did that occur to you? Even if you didn't outright think of him as bait for the Klan"--Wes's lips parted, but no sound issued-- "weren't you glad to rub him in on them, boost him to show them how little they are? And luck or design, have it work out that you ^{held} got your whack at them, in the ^{CA} end?" With a catch in her throat she relentlessly went on down the list. "Or was it all to coax me around. Did you want Scotch Heaven, what's left of it, that

badly?" Her last charge was the calmest and therefore the worst. "Or do you even know what you were playing at, any more?"

"Are you through?"

Her glare said No, but she compressed the rest into an accusing silence for him to try to fight out of.

Wes made the effort. "Tomorrow night Monty steps onto the stage at Carnegie Hall. He *is* the pupil of your life, damn it, Susan, unless you manage to take Chaliapin under your wing. Maybe I didn't know precisely what I was setting into motion, but where was the push for any of it if it hadn't come from me? Monty didn't look you up on his own, and you didn't come scouting the woods for his voice." Susan said nothing to that, an acknowledgment of sorts. For this next, Wes kept himself anchored with a white-knuckled grip on the table while he forced out the words: "Given that, I can ask as much as anyone--who's been up to what? I didn't do this to start a Lonelyhearts Club for Monty, you can bet on that."

"Well, there now," she said point-blank back at him. "Just that quick you're more sure of your motive than you've shown so far."

“This isn’t getting us anywhere,” he said, ^{gave} giving in to battle fatigue.

“What do you say we wait until the Observance is out of the way and talk this over sanely.”

“Which means you better leave now, while the wind is with you,” her burr of anger sounding for all the world like her father’s. She stalked back toward her desk and the still-opened diary, flinging a hand of contempt at the cavalry hat as she passed it. “And you may as well leave that.”

“Not bad,” J.J. sized up the nicely appointed accommodations--a discreet suite at the rear of Carnegie Hall usually reserved for performers whose travel arrangements nudged uncomfortably close to performance time--the next afternoon, “the Carnies giving us out-of-towners’ treatment.” The three Harlemites shared out a grin that said *Pretty much what we are* and helped themselves to the atmosphere of luxury. Cecil adjusted the royal-blue drapes to his liking as Monty poked his head into a bedroom twice the size of the washhouse quarters where he had spent his ranch life. *Couldn’t have whistled for this.* Susan at that moment was in the working part of the hall, he knew, on the early side to help oversee arrangements for the Observance. *We’re both here, at*

the tip of the top. Take that, odds, that particular observation warming him as if he and she had confounded all the laws of all the games of chance. With just enough of a smile, he took off his hat and skimmed it in onto the extravagant bed.

"They're going to want us spang on time for the run-through, what with all the bigwigs," J.J. was getting back to business. "Montgomery, you going to catch some rest first, I hope?"

"Figured I'd sack out a while like usual, sure."

"Cece, you?"

"Not me, too wound up. I'm going to get familiar with my instrument."

A little late, Cecil realized just what level of roasting that particular choice of words entitled him to, Carnegie Hall or no Carnegie Hall, and he huffed off toward the door: "You'll find me at my *piano*."

After the slam of the door J.J. chuckled. "He'll settle down, always does. I see here"--he flapped a hand on the rehearsal schedule--"there's a quite a set of speeches before your turn. If you want, Cece and I can hold the fort until they're about done practicing those, then I can come get you."

Monty gave a short sharp shake of his head. "I want to be there for the whole works." *She's there.* Now he said in easy fashion but meaning it: "While

Cecil's playing with his piano, I hope you're going to polish up your medals and slap them on."

Trying not to look embarrassed and pleased, J.J. tucked away the schedule in the handiest pocket and muttered: "Polish up Phil Sherman, more like. I better go see if there are any kinks in the production, be the first time if there aren't. I'll roust you thirty minutes before the rehearsal." Monty nodded to that, and turned to follow his hat to the regal welcome of the bed.

"Montgomery?" J.J. sounded as if a kink had just occurred to him. But something in the way that the lanky figure in the bedroom doorway tautened to hear what was coming put a pause in him. Swallowing, J.J. said only: "Sweet dreams, man. You've earned them."

There on the soft raft of bed, borne by tides he couldn't have forecast if he had tried when he and she and the Major first embarked on this, Monty let himself drift, half-there, half in the latitudes of yearning: Susan and the night's music, the night's music and Susan. Not so much a nap as a trance, this time of waiting. Susan he had made up his mind on, and to keep from battering himself endlessly on the nerve-ends of that, he mentally worked through the songs, the imaginary flow of piano keys beneath them, even though he knew them as well as his own

skin. Maybe better. Always there was going to be a mystery in that, why the fairly puny human range of colors--nobody was cat-puke green, were they? there wasn't any race that was a monotonous eggplant purple--didn't register all the same in the basic human eye. "*We are not some kind of stain on their notion of things,*" she had said. No, he thought, but we're not the pattern they show any sign of picking out to like, either. Her own decision, as far as it went: "*Let's see what happens after your tour.*" That was the trick, all right, seeing ahead when life kept stretching over the curve of the world.

Restlessly he rolled onto his side, but a moment later he was on his back again, about half-spreadeagled with an arm over his eyes as he tried to imagine tonight. What J.J. had started to say and didn't, he perfectly well knew, was some kind of encouragement about the audience. *Right, J.J., just the usual mob that wanders into Carnegie Hall, hmm?* Words were no help on the audience question, the stomach juices were what made the statement. All he could do was to gird himself--he'd been doing that since he first set foot into the soft soil of a rodeo arena, hadn't he. By now he ought to know pretty much all there was to know about girding. He put his hand to where the scars were, his ribcage and then the column of his throat, reflexively tracing those near misses in a manner as

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old as when warriors of the Iliad touched places where their armor had shielded off a blow, as when a cavalryman stroked a brass buckle that had turned a bullet. Oddly, the grievous harms that he carried on him put him in a calmer mood for tonight. Plenty of company coming tonight, when it came to bearing wounds: the crippled veterans, like--well, like the Major; the busloads down from Harlem, unpenned for one night from the segregation line at 125th Street. Everybody who would be here tonight was a survivor of something. His voice would need to show that.

"Whatever patient clock ticks out there in the night of the universe has brought us again to the eleventh day of the eleventh month, which hold the moment of stillness when the Great War stopped. Into that holy silence we bring, on this night of observance, the greatest vows of which we are capable, some in spoken word, some in glorious song, all from the heartsprings deepest within us."

Wes broke off reading and stepped away from the microphone. "And it goes on like that for a further four minutes and thirty seconds," he notified the stage echelon of command congregated in the wings. He was truculent about the

rehearsal, Susan could tell. Of all of them, Wes was a maestro of impromptu, his political years having given him a natural ease at climbing up in front of any gathering and speaking his piece. *I can think of one I wish he had choked on.*

The stage manager hastily clicked his stopwatch off, Phil Sherman looking bemused beside him. "Major, we have plenty of rehearsal time, you are free to go through your whole speech."

"What for?" the shortly-put question answered itself. "You requested five minutes' worth and I have it timed to five minutes." Wes all but marched off the stage, the slight hitch in his gait made increasingly plain as he covered the desert-like distance from centerstage.

Been around the man since he came back with that in '18 and never noticed it that much. That told Monty something about the proportion of matters here. One more time he glanced around at the amplitude of Carnegie Hall; the place was the definition of big, all right. Extra-tall fancy-peaked doorways with what looked like lions' forelegs carved high up on the frames, huge columns of some Greek kind set into the walls, atmosphere of a mansion about to be toned up for a party--and all that was simply on the stage. Out front, the gilded horseshoe balconies were banked, up and up, like decks of a topheavy steamboat. Not long

from now an audience would squash into that expanse like the representation of everything on two legs; even here at rehearsal this place had a couple of rows full, as if the listening level always had to be kept going like a low fire. J.J. had whispered to him that Vandiver had salted the rehearsal with any of Over There's big givers--"the Major's crowd"--who wanted to come and gawk, and the Carnegie Hall management was there in force as a mark of respect to such wallet power. In his performance tux as he waited with the others in the wings to step out in front of this chosen bunch, Monty felt very nearly underdressed.

Susan and he were not standing near each other in the gaggle in the wings, they were mutually showing at least that much common sense. Cued now by the stage manager, she stepped out, heart pounding in spite of her willed poise, strode smoothly to the microphone stand there beneath the proscenium of all American prosceniums, and delivered a ringing recital about the Harlem archive. She made way for Tammany's man in Harlem, whom no one expected to follow Wes's example of deferring a speechmaking chance until the house was full. Nor did he.

As Vandiver zeroed in on the microphone to practice his spiel for Bonds of Peace. J.J. slid over by Monty and murmured, "You're up next."

Everything else necessarily came to a halt as Monty sighted-in his voice from various spots on the stage to choose his mark. The first time he sent "*When I was young and in my prime, I dabbed my X on the Medicine Line*" soaring out into the hall, he glanced upward for a moment, then turned his head enough to wink at J.J.: no swaying chandelier.

Susan had slipped away into the main-floor seats to hear this. As the bell-clear tone shimmered through the air of the hall each time Monty tested the line, she moved from one spot to another, pleased as she could be. From anywhere, he sounded the way he should.

It took more tries than usual--this was Carnegie Hall, after all--but when he indicated the place on the stage he was settling for, stagehands wheeled out the grand piano and its spot was duly tape-marked as well. Over by the curtain Cecil went up on tiptoes and serenely down again, part of his ritual before presenting himself. As if reminded of something, Monty turned to the stage manager.

"There is one change I need to make in the program."

Busy making his lighting notations on a clipboard, the stage manager said aside: "You're getting a bit ahead of us, Mister Rathbun--we can deal with that as you run through the music."

"Can't either," Monty genially contradicted him. "It has to do with the music right from the start. I would like for Miss Duff to be my accompanist tonight."

J.J.'s head jerked around from conversation with Phil Sherman. Cecil looked sucker-punched. Down in the front rows, the well-dressed givers sat up as if now they were starting to get their considerable money's worth.

Where she was roving the main floor, Susan heard Monty's words like a firebell and sped for the doorway that led to backstage.

"Seems like it'd be fitting," Monty offered around generally, as if the frozen onstage group had asked for his opinion and here it was, "what with all she's done to bring in the Harlem side of things for tonight."

The stage manager straightened up as if he expected to be struck by lightning next. Seeing that Monty appeared serious, he said in a carefully juggled voice: "I'm afraid that's not on. Miss Duff may be a perfectly capable musician in her own right, I'm sure. But tonight has been advertised as you and Cecil--"

"--and of course that's the understanding with the radio hookup,"

Vandiver inserted swiftly.

--that's the way we're set up," the stage manager said with a conclusive shrug, "that's the point of this rehearsal."

"No, the music part of the rehearsal hasn't really got underway yet, has it," Monty pointed out, all reasonableness. "That's why I figured this is the time I better let you know she's the one I want at those keys." He called over consolingly, "Just tonight, Cece."

"I'm sorry, but I don't see how--" The stage manager searched out the house manager with a despairing look.

The house manager, crisp as the point of his Van Dyke beard, knew how to handle a tiff of this sort: "Speak up here, Phil, you're the producer."

"Monty, as long as Cecil is in good health, we're obligated to do the program as advertised," Phil called out. "If we haven't given notification of a substitution three days before the performance, the management has the right to--"

Monty cut him off. "Rights are sure cropping up here all of a sudden. Where've they been hiding before now? The way I savvy it, Harlem didn't get invited down here much, before tonight. Before this woman pitched in." He looked around as if marveling. "And you know what, I thought the acoustics

would be better in a place like this. Everybody? One more time: I would like for Miss Duff to be at that piano."

From where he was watching in the wings, Wes in spite of himself had to grade Monty right up there in tactics. *Maybe he did learn something in those Clore Street scuffles. If you're going to run a bluff, why not run a big one.*

Abruptly Susan flew past him, giving him a look that forgave nothing of last night but shared an understanding of how things avalanched, and charged onward to the group moiling at centerstage like a troupe having trouble remembering its lines. She caught her breath and pierced the circle of disputing men.

"Mister Rathbun, that's wildly generous of you, but we haven't even practiced for this."

Monty let that sail in one end of his smile and out the other. "A musician of your experience can catch on to these songs in no time, I'm sure."

"Gentlemen and all," J.J. spoke up. "Give me a minute with my client. Montgomery?" Not quite plucking Monty's sleeve but plainly wanting to, he indicated with his head toward the nearest stage door.

"Excuse me, everybody, I have to smooth some feathers," Monty said to the assemblage as though J.J. had come down with a raging disorder. "Miss Duff," he called over, his eyes saying to her *Susan, Susan*, "don't let them talk you out of this. It's going to work out."

As quickly as the two of them disappeared through the stage door, Phil set about talking her out of it. "A performer sometimes gets this kind of bee in his bonnet," he said as if confiding a truth learned the hard way on Broadway.

"Nerves, I'm sure."

"Maybe the singular of that in this case, Phil," she said.

"Whichever. It would help like anything if you were to go over to Monty and say you're honored, but you're just not up to playing to a packed house"--he feathered that in as though it would be rude to outright say a Carnegie Hall packed house--"on such short notice."

Vandiver nodded with vigor to encourage her in that direction. The Carnegie Hall staff one after another looked at their watches discreetly. She stood there as if the stage had taken hold her. Not one of these glorified supernumeraries counted any more than the ushers when it came to the making of

the music, as Monty wanted of her. All at once the words came to her, cool and clear:

"I *am* honored. And I don't know that I'm not up to it."

She knew wondering looks were being passed behind her. She swung her own gaze to Wes. He looked away.

Backstage, J.J. cut loose on Monty: "Have you lost all your marbles? The Carnies are never going to go for that woman, and even if they did the Over Theres won't--you see the look on Vandiver and Phil, and even your buddy the Major? They don't know whether to crap in their hats or go blind."

"I'm the one going to get up there and sing at this Observance of theirs," Monty said dead-level. "Let me have the say, this once."

"Be reasonable here. We both know Cecil is a prune, but he's the best in the business."

"Not my business, he isn't. You forgetting that every one of those song arrangements are hers, are you? That woman, as you call her--the bones in her fingers are the same color as ours, J.J. She knows the music, that's what counts."

J.J. sucked in his breath. "Don't be doing this, Montgomery. How many ways do I have to beg?" He cast an indicating glance at the huddle of Carnegie officials. "They'll snake out on us--the 'professional standards' clause. You and Miss Pond Cream can sort yourselves out however you damn want, but not here. You say one more time that she has to be at that piano and they'll be on the telephone getting hold of Robeson's manager, or Roland Hayes', or haul in Blind Mortimer from the streetcorner, if it comes to that. Last-minute substitution. You're asking for it, my friend."

"Let's just see."

The onstage bunch and the now keenly attentive front-row onlookers saw in a hurry: Monty coming back out looking serenely stubborn, J.J. saying with a shake of his head that was that.

The house manager looked at his watch again, nothing discreet about it this time. "Phil, J.J., I'm sorry but as of now we're giving notice--"

"Let's be clear here." Wes's voice took command of the stage. He heard himself saying: "Notice is being *given*, all right, but it's not noticeably being *taken*.."

In the massive silence that met that, he mechanically strode out onto the apron of the stage, contriving as he came. "I don't see what the commotion is about," he boomed, casting a glance at the piano as if even he could play it. "I particularly asked this of Monty. He was simply trying to carry out the favor."

Even more so than Susan, Monty had experience of the ungodly capacities of the Williamsons, but this stretch from the Major startled him to the absolute limits of his ability to keep a straight face. He gazed at the Major--rescuer, rival, sugar daddy in all this, in-over-his-head debtor to somebody in all this--with thankful wonderment. *Who ever knew he can lie as fast as a horse can trot, when he wants to?*

As Wes's sentences added up, Susan felt the agony of last night leave her and something like prospect come in its place. *Wes, you holy fool or whatever you are. Not even you can calculate the cost of this act.*

Wes looked all around, as if to make sure everyone present was wide awake. He needn't have bothered. Several dozen sets of the the most appraising eyes in New York were taking this in. His glance passed over Susan, over Monty, a flicker of resolve in it for each of them. *If each other is so damn much what you need, this is the one way I can give you that.*

Pivoting toward the group at centerstage, he split the cloud of speculative staring, drew the lightning onto himself. "Miss Duff is...someone I've admired from afar, during our time together on the committee. And out west, she has great standing as a musician herself. I thought this would be a way Over There could repay her for her services a bit. I don't like to throw my weight around on this, but the rest of you are busy doing it. So I must insist. If she isn't at the piano tonight, I cancel my backing. What I'm putting up for the Observance, what I've pledged for the Bonds of Peace, any annual giving ever again to the Hall--the works."

The house manager had no trouble reaching his decision. "Van?"

"That does put a different light on things, Major," Vandiver said tightly.

"We appreciate your forthrightness. Naturally, now that we know the circumstances, we can accommodate a special request of this sort. Can't we, Phil."

Head and heart high, Monty stepped toward Susan and gestured her toward the piano as if it was an atoll of refuge. "If you'll excuse us briefly, gentlemen. Miss Duff and I have our music to go over."

"...War is the health of the state,' a good man driven to despair wept the words at a time when the Great War was consuming fifty thousand human lives a day. But the state is not the only body of humanity. It is in gatherings such as this, in the magnificent pinto skin we form when all our human hues are displayed together, that a new being can be created and peace will gently walk the earth."

He had stayed just offstage after he concluded his speech. His knee hurt like fury from standing so long on the hard flooring but he had kept to his carefully planted stance there and watched Susan speak her piece about Harlem, had endured Tammany, and as Vandiver began making his pitch for Bonds of Peace, he knew he could delay no longer and he moved off to the hallway and stairwell that would take him to his seat up in the box circle.

He went into the darkened box. Nodded a series of apology for his lateness as he squeezed behind the retinue his wife and Mrs. Smith had assembled in the seats there. Automatically shook hands with Governor Smith in passing. Merrinell, in whispered conversation with her sister, gave a little acknowledging whisk to where he would sit. His bolster chair was installed at the angle needed to favor his knee, and he settled into it

facing a bit away from Merrinell, which he figured he may as well get used to. From her flutter of gesture, word had not yet reached her about his rehearsal declamation. But it would be told as many ways as there were tellers. When she heard, whatever version she heard, Merrinell would do her best to make his life a ceaseless purgatory. Not that it much resembled anything else to him from here on anyway.

Straightening up, forcing his mind to the moment, Wes looked out over a Carnegie Hall such as he had never seen before, a marbled crowd, rows of colored faces and other rows of pale ones and mixes in between. Below, in the front row and the space between there and the stage and out into the side aisles, the crippled veterans clutched crutches or armrests of wheelchairs or in the case of the blinded ones, an arm of the person next to them. Their array reminded him of a field hospital, the one place he had seen troops of both colors quartered together in either of his wars.

Up on the stage Vandiver finished as he had begun, with a flourish. Now out they came, one from each wing, Susan to the piano and Monty to the music stand near it. A ripple of programs, and more, met her entrance. In what applause of welcome there was, though, Monty walked toward her and extended

an arm of introduction. They did not quite touch. Wes fully knew that if they hadn't already done so in private, they soon would.

With one finger, then two, then the fan of his hand as if in pledge, Wes pressed lightly on the breast pocket of his suit where Susan's diary rested.

"You'll know the proper cubbyhole for this," she had said as she slid it into his hand, backstage. In the half-light of the stage manager's nook he had done what anyone would do, gone to the pages of the last few days. Lord, should earthly existence cause a person to laugh or gasp? He wondered how long it would take--into the next century?--before some delving scholar burrowed into the papers of the Double W and the Williamson family, flip open this stray item as far as the flyleaf and Susan's elongated handwriting there, and be drawn into the diary to its final inkdrops of sentence: *Needless to say--no, perhaps this is precisely what does need to be set into permanence here--Monty will know from me only the same silence Wes has vowed over this. The cavalry hat, and the knot of harm carried in our family lines, are turning to ash in the fireplace as I write this. Some truths stand taller than others, and the one that I am betting the rest of my life on is my love for Monty.*

Monty stepped to the microphone.

"It's my pleasure to bring back onstage Miss Susan Duff, who has kindly agreed to accompany me tonight. She is an A-1 musician in her own right--as we say uptown, she knows how to negotiate the numbers." Laughter spread, dark to white, at that. "The particular number of hers," he played off the line while the audience was still in chuckles, "that we're going to play for you is the finale of a fine piece she has written. The tune has something of a nocturne to it, and seeing as how we're all nocturnal enough to come out into the night to here, I thought it might fit the occasion." He paused for a moment to gaze out at them all. "Any of you who have been caught in range of my voice before will know that I've been in the habit of starting things off with an old song of the prairie, where I am from--and would you believe it, Miss Duff too. Who knows, this one may kick that one aside." Turning his head toward Susan, he nodded just the fraction needed, and the music came.

"A tide of grass runs the earth,

The green of hope there in birth,

And where we've together been and how we'll together be

Is all in the rolling song of that prairie sea--"

Monty could feel the lift of his voice, the lilt of Susan's song, as never before. He was going to sing his way off this earth. The America patch of it, anyway, and not alone. Susan was coming with him on the Europe tour.

At the piano she delicately put the music under his voice, her every ounce of musicianship focused on Monty at his music stand. He showed no sign of needing to look down.

Her hands knew all there was to do on the keys, and her mind flew ahead. Europe. The join of their lives, which their own country would never let be easy. In asking her if she would come with him, Monty with heartbreaking fairness also had offered her every way out, making her know that all they would be able to count on besides each other would be trouble for being together, until she put the stop to that by saying: "*There's no better trouble we could have.*"

Before coming onstage with Monty, she had looked out past the curtain to spot Wes in the audience, angled a bit apart from the others in his box. His to bear now too, the story as set down. The thought went through her again now, as she knew it every so often would. Then she lost herself into the playing as Monty's transporting voice and her rippling keys combined into the crescendo, the

music reaching out over the footlights into the great dimmed-down hall and its
 unmoving audience, the medaled and the jeweled, the plainspun, the rapt, the war-
 stricken, the colored and the pale, as if each in a seat assigned this night in some
 dark-held circle of a heaven or a hell, Wes's own as usual custom-made.

CXB

of Sunday-
 clothed,
 war-stricken
 & those not
 shaded
 faces & pale,

war-
 stricken &
 spared,
 shadowlike
 faces & pale,