

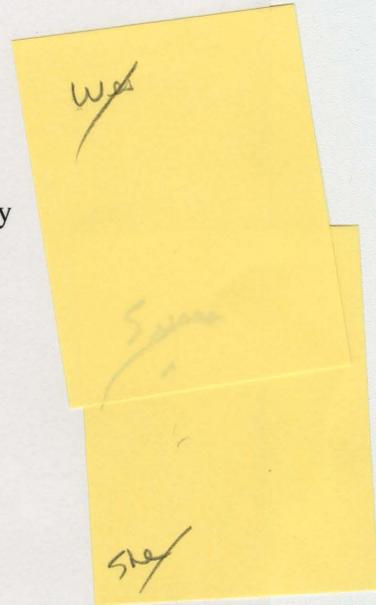
He was about to laugh and hoist his glass with the remark that pink champagne was more likely a dead giveaway in such circumstances, when she said: "Pink is the color of guilt, isn't it?"

<sup>was</sup> He put his glass back down. "I've just hit town, so I'm running behind on the guilt issue." Although, he caught himself at, he was staying conspicuously silent about his exegesis of the North Fork. He gazed over at <sup>Susan</sup> her to try to stroke away her mood. "I suppose we did heat up things to the color of blushes this afternoon. Just when I wanted to try to do better by you in one way, at least."

<sup>he</sup> Susan leaned forward in listening attitude but tautly enough that he knew he needed to be on the mark with the phrasing of this. "Knowing you, I have to calculate that you'll take yourself back to Helena as soon as you have Monty put right and the Observance out of the way."

"I ought to, yes."

"Don't deprive us that way. Stay in New York. We've hardly been together at all, this year. I don't like the sound of 'arrangements' any better than I know you do, but something could be managed that would let you be on your own--a music school here, why not--and we could just call it our way to be together."



"That's a big step. If I were a certain someone, I'd call it a major step."

"That's short of a yes. But I'll take what I can get. I'll break my back to set you up some way like that, Susan, if you'll stay."

"I need some time to think about what all that would mean, Wes."

"Of course. Think it over from every direction of the compass, but I can't see how you'd be worse off by trying me out on this."

The meals came.

"Fair warning," said Susan after an approving mouthful of lamb. "Your wife." He went still. "Van is going to put the arm on you to coax her and her circle, he calls them, in on the Observance. He seems to think she hobnobs with the governor's wife, among others. A slum relief committee together, is it, the Cardinal and some others thrown in?" Her face was perfectly straight.

"You know how that is, committees make"--just in time he backed off from the cliff where the sign read 'strange bedfellows.' Something like a chuckle came along with the realization that a conversation with Susan still was next thing to a blood sport. He could feel a stirring in his lately underused capacity of verbal thrust and parry. "Van knows how to turn a circle into a round number," he

polished that off. "I'll see that Merrinell's phalanx pitches in on the event, don't worry."

"I wasn't, particularly. Now I have a better surprise for you."

"Isn't there a limit on them, in one calendar day?"

"Monty's first musicale, since."

"Already?"

"And we're going to it. We're expected."

"Are we. When is this?"

"Oh, around ten."

"Ten when?" Then it dawned on him, or whatever the nocturnal equivalent is. "*Tonight?*"

"Of course tonight."

"I've been on a train practically forever, not to mention--" he did not have to <sup>cite</sup> mention their bedroom matinee to have it active in both their awarenesses again.

As Susan started to say something, he managed to beat her to it. "Of course I'll come hear Monty, after everything the two have you put into this summer. A musical interlude, just what the doctor ordered." He sat back to compose himself for a moment. "I hope you're not going to tell me next it's at my house."

*cite*

“Even J.J. wouldn’t pull anything like that, now would he. It’s what he calls ‘a Park Avenue do.’ Who did he tell me the people are, Baxters, Hatchers, Thatchers--*voila*, Brewsters!”

“Susan, this is pushing it. I do business with Howard Brewster, and Lord only knows who else like that will show up.”

“Don’t fret, we’re not strolling in together. Phil Sherman is squiring me. You can make your appearance when you like, only don’t you dare miss any of the songs--Monty and I worked ourselves to the bone on them.”

“That Phil. I’m going to have to keep an eye on him.”

“Actually it was Monty’s idea. I still have never heard him sing in performance, you know.”

“That’s purely silly,” he said as if just noticing that state of affairs. “Of course you need to be there, it’s only fair.” They both busied themselves with their food. When they were nearly done, Wes felt he should smooth this part of the evening away a bit more. “I’m sorry to have sprung that on you so quick, about wanting you to stay. Forgive me that, all right?”

“All is forgive,” Susan resorted a comic tragic accent that could have got her hired on the spot at the Brevoort.

The grand piano at the Brewsters' had the type of gleam to it that comes from that assiduous polishing agent, old money. Cecil hung around the great dark lustrous instrument looking as pleased as if it was his to take home. *Run your hands under hot water before touching it, did you, Cece?* Monty stood by, anchoring himself into what seemed the best spot to sing from, watching as Cecil enthroned himself on the piano bench and began manipulating the follow sheets, and along with them his third beer. Prohibition, in Cecil's opinion, had made brewing an uncertain art, and as usual he plopped a cough drop into his glass to give the beer some snap.

J.J. was down at the far end of a living room that at a minimum had to be called sumptuous, making chitchat with the heir to something or other. Monty never liked taking it on himself where Cecil was concerned, but an accompanist who was not up to the mark was the last thing this night needed. He pattycaked a brief drumbeat on the piano top, leaving fingermarks that drew Cecil's instant attention. "“Easy does it, partner,” he issued. “Those cough drops can get you.”

The pianist looked up, irked, and just as quickly learned he had better not be. Cowpoke or wrangler or whatever he was, Monty had a set to him that

suggested you really ought to start herding yourself in the direction he wanted you to. And he hadn't come out of that beating any less determined to have performances done his way and no other. Privately Cecil had figured Monty was headed for the scrap heap. But that woman, whatever kind of music witch she was, and him, however they did it the pair of them had come up with renditions that made his fingers itch, they were so good.

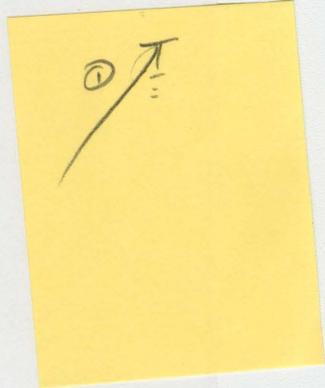
“Only oiling up enough to be loose, Monty,” he soothed. “I'll be right on soon as we start.”

“That'd be good,” Monty said deadpan.

He turned away from Cecil and scanned the party-comers as they gathered in flocks of four or six. Pompadoured men and bobbed women, about like the last one of these all those months ago, but none of these evenings quite mirrored any of the others; he was pretty sure that was their point. Costumes, sometimes--once there had been a hat night, with half the crowd in sombreros and hawkshaws and he sang in his tux and Stetson--and more generally some ins and outs to the mix of the invited each time. High society constantly put itself through a strainer, it looked to him like, and keeping track was J.J.'s job and thank heavens not his. He did know that without coming out and saying so J.J. had wanted tonight's do

to be out of Harlem, to see how the resuscitated voice and redone songs went over with white hearers. *Got his wish on that, for sure,* tonight's guest-list sift had shaken out like pure flour. The only dark skins in evidence anywhere in the room were J.J.'s and his and Cecil's, except of course those of the serving staff, as carefully distant-faced as Eskimoes.

At the point now where his music was ready in him and the waiting had to be got through, Monty occupied himself by watching the faces, all the rituals of expressively widened eyes and laughing lips and butterfly kisses on cheeks. Tonight's host and hostess were the type who pollinated the party by staying on the move, shunting this famous couple over to meet that notorious one, bringing a hipper-dipper with the ladies over to meet the newspaper versifier who had recently left her husband. He knew there were places in the world where people like these would be taken out and shot, but at the moment he found it hard to hold much against anybody whose worst quality--at least out in public--was trying everything in order to have a good time. Quite a few of these, he figured, were the sort of person who would be fun on a picnic, if it was a short enough picnic.



At last he saw Susan come in, on the much-used arm of Phil Sherman.

*Here we go, hon,* his thought cried across the room to her. *Someplace we never thought we'd get to, let alone in a bundle.*

*Do I have enough faces for this?*

Looking at herself in the abstract, which was currently the only way she could stand to, Susan believed herself to be as revealing and moment-by-moment duplicitous as a mirror with multiple panels. The first reflection showed a man her heart went to, across the room there. Somewhere on his way up Park Avenue to join the picture, a man whom her impulses had <sup>desperately</sup> tried to fit with, that very afternoon. And this divided version of herself, about to enter <sup>stratospheric</sup> an evening where they would both be. She hoped she could hold together long enough to sort herself out.

First, though, she had to survive the onslaught of hospitality.

*"Delighted...acquaintance...welcome to our little evening,"* was luxuriantly drawled at her from both sides before either she or Phil could put a name on herself. When he managed to, the hostess and host beamed expertly while they tried to place it. Even the muscles of their smiles, Susan sensed, had pedigree.

*delicately*  
*a stratospheric*

Susetta Brewster was of an old Virginia family, Tidewater roots as far back as the first anchor splashes, and slender and decisive as a sceptre. Her husband, older, possessed a high stomach, on the style of a pigeon, and had a way of leaning in on whomever he was talking to as if offering the comfort of that hearty bosom. As the Brewsters' gracious hovering elongated into hesitation, though, Susan realized that her showing up with Phil Sherman did not fit expectations, rather like a kangaroo print in the snow. She fixed a shielding smile against the determined attention Susetta Brewster was giving her--with just a tiny stitch of wariness at the corner of each eye--as Phil yattered an introduction that didn't make much sense until he invoked Susan's work for the Over There Committee.

At once that pegged her for Susetta: doubtless a war widow, tragic as a mateless eagle from the look of her, most likely an heiress from the West on top of it all or why else would Phil Sherman bother to be convoying her around town? With relief she burst out to her husband: "Oh, then, Howard, you must see to it that she meets Major Williamson."

"Shall!" promised Brewster.

Until that could be made to happen, she and Phil were shooed into action in the crowd. Phil did not abandon her, but in this atmosphere of excess money

and women with telltale sidling eyes he had troling to do and often worked with his back to her.

In the course of the evening she jumped now and then when Howard Brewster shouted "Sooz!" which each time turned out to be robust abbreviation of his wife rather than the start of summons of herself. <sup>#</sup> Maybe it was the marinade in the Brevoort lamb, but in this gathering Susan felt temporarily French. The slightly wicked but of course apt salon saying over there could just as well have been stenciled on the penthouse wainscoting here: "*On the ladder of life one must climb like a parrot, with the help of beak and claws.*" Tonight's rungs were perilously close to the top of New York. She drew on resources she hadn't used in a dozen years. After all, a certain pang kept reminding her, she had been through this before, in the Village; there had been nights then when she was <sup>the</sup> one standing ready by the piano. So, tooth and nail, she set to socializing in this altitudinous throng. She had a good pithy conversation with an old growler who had started as a rigger in the Oklahoma oilfields and wildcatted his way next door to the Rockefellers. Next she had one that spun in circles, with a cottontopped <sup>like the young</sup> actress who had been the stand-in for Jeanne Eagels in *Rain*. The matter of roles all at once fascinated Susan. The actress would go from young and white-haired

*Playing a part off a piece of paper instead of from the scraps of oneself.*



*card*

*card*

to old and white-haired with quite possibly nothing between. What must that be like?

Wes paused in the doorway. In the bit of time between the butler spiriting his hat from him and Howard Brewster hovering to, he performed a rapid surveillance on the room, best chance to do so on evenings of this sort. Utrecht velvet on the near wall, making that statement in a hurry. The newer decorating touch was paisley shawls adorning the backs of all the furniture, as if peasant women the size of gnomes were stationed throughout the crowd. Over the fireplace blazed one of Nikolai Fechin's Taos paintings, a pueblo woman in a dress of many colors and holding out a golden peach. The rest of the significant interior decoration was wall-to-wall people. His scan sorted them in a hurry. Half a head taller than nearly all the other women, Susan, intently mingling. And poised beside the piano, Monty. Seeing them both here, Wes had a moment of he wasn't quite sure what: abashed self-congratulation? Then Howard Brewster clamped his arm and swirled him into the party.

When presented to each other, once again he and Susan exclaimed for everyone else's benefit that their families had been acquainted. Brewster hung on

with them, proud of his prowess at putting people together, until he could not resist foisting other couples into the conversation.

Wes took the chance before the impending blizzard of introductions to say in Susan's ear: "I meant what I said, at dinner. Stay in New York and see the world."

Just then the piano announced itself. Susan brushed fingertips across the back of Wes's hand and slipped off to listen from the far side of the room.

As he squared up for his opening number, Monty knew the work cut out for him. This wasn't a particularly hard audience, but not an automatic one either. Gin had made its inroads in attention spans. Right off, he let them know what they were in for with the newly sneaky *End of the Road*, his voice effortlessly peppering the song just enough. He was relieved to see heads begin to bob in rhythm with his sly phrase breaks by the second verse. Song after song caught them by the gills the same way; the crowd seemed to be breathing the music rather than air. Listening, watching, Susan knew <sup>exulting with satisfaction that</sup> ~~exultantly~~ he could sing his way to the top of anywhere when his voice was on, the way it was this penthouse night. expd

He was happily readying himself for his finale when a hand plucked his sleeve. "Excuse me all to hell, Montgomery," J.J. whispered, holding on to a

tinest inch of fabric to show he was interrupting only to the absolute minimum.

“But I have to hit them with this before the night goes to pieces.”

Monty backed up, knowing J.J. would not do this if it didn't count.

“Good people,” J.J. raised a hand as if swearing an oath, “I need to make an announcement. Would you believe, I get paid to spill the beans and these are some delicious ones. On the eleventh of November, Montgomery and Cecil have another little do.” He gave an indicating nod to one and then the other of them.

“They're hearing about it for the first time along with the rest of you, look at their faces. They know something is up, all right, but they don't know it's going to be them. They will be performing that night at a place called Carnegie Hall.” An *ahhh* like an ascending run plucked on a harp zephyred through the room.

Skillfully J.J. went on to make the pitch on behalf of the Observance, singling out some in the room who had cut their teeth over there in the trenches--Major Williamson, Phil Sherman, “and for that matter yours truly”--and who now felt prepared for Carnegie Hall. “So come be with us that night, hear? And need I say, bring any money you're tired of having laying around. Now for another good cause, the way these two are flying high here tonight, back to our music.”

Monty had barely heard the last of J.J.'s spiel, swept up as he was into the thin air at the peak of the announcement. *Carnegie damn Hall, whoo. About the next thing I better do is check myself for nosebleed.*

Instead he squared up again to sing.

Something phantasmal came into the room now <sup>with the first words of</sup> as he sang the Medicine

Line song. Wes felt it as a chin-level chill, up around where his officer tabs used

<sup>Hauntingly,</sup> <sup>and with rhythm beyond mere tune,</sup> to be. He realized there was a tinge of something all the way back through

<sup>came through</sup> history, some note of the ancient fate-haunted trade of being a soldier, in Monty's

voice when he sang that song now; Homer sang so in his epic lines, and kilted

Monty's every previous performance of the ballad, Wes had listened to with something like fascinated reluctance, but never with the thought that footsloggers in accompaniment to bagpipes. Knowing that his was not the "Sgt Mose and old Black Jack" would force a way into musical canon. But this evening,

keenest musical ear in the room by far, Wes with a shock understood how the

earned magnificence of Monty's voice elevated the tune from the Fort

Assinniboine barracks. Until now, the classic parade song of the prairie wars was

that of the Seventh Cavalry, Custer's outfit, the spirited "*Gerryowen.*" Until

now.

When Monty finished and stepped back with a bow, the applause beat <sup>and beat</sup>

against the walls and city-spangled windows of the penthouse. Then it was time

of beat

to circulate, take plaudits, make modest conversation, without seeming to, he managed to work the route around to the vicinity of Susan.

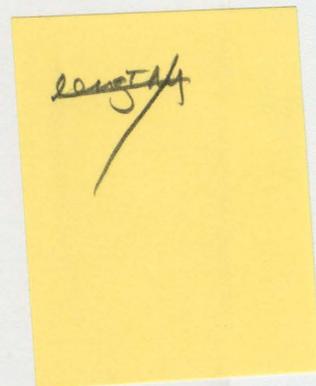
She had been cornered, no small feat in the middle of a room that size, by the big Dutchman he had been warned about. Artist of some kind, no one seemed quite sure on what basis. The man's wife was across the room, although her hard dark eyes were not. She watched, Monty watched, as he leaned intently in on Susan. "So you are from the wilds of Montana, ha. Had you heard of this musical gentleman out there? His singing is amazing. So--so natural."

Over the man's shoulder Monty traded a sneaking glance with Susan, knowing she had caught on in the same instant he had as to how close that was in the alphabet of fate to naturally so-so.

"Only barely," she answered about Monty's voice having made its way through the wilds to her, "over the sound of the tom-toms. Wouldn't you say, Mister Rathbun?" The Dutchman sputtered a laugh and moved on.

Watching his chance, Monty caught her alone for a minute at the table of food.

*extensive*  
1



"Carnegie Hall, that's pretty foxy," he said low and offhand as though consulting her on whether the Pecorino cheese carried any advantage over the Stilton. "Wonder where the Over Theres might've got that idea."

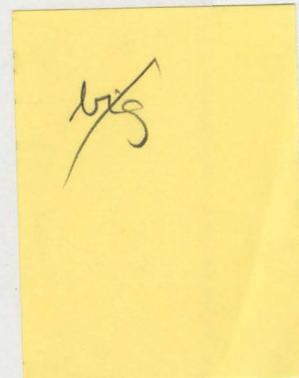
"I'll never tell."

"Right. It's only all over you. Susan, good godamighty, you know I'm sort of leery on <sup>big</sup> audiences yet and you're going to plop me in front of--"

"You'll get over it," she assured him, confident enough for both of them.

"You'll have to. Now shush about that. Your following wants petting, here come some now. And just so you know--you were everything I could have hoped, tonight."

Past one in the morning the evening began to break up, as raggedly and inevitably as floes calving off an iceberg. The noisiest contingent wanted to go up to Harlem. Cecil immediately enlisted as guide. When they swept by Monty he declined by rote, saying the only place up there he wanted to see this time of night had a bedpost in each corner and a pillow to welcome him. From her windowseat Susan sat watching what happens after the finale, content to her core that Monty's music--their music--had reached into this gathering.



Before long, Phil detoured over and manfully asked her to come along with a bunch he had assembled to go to the Kit Kat Club where the liveliest hoofers from *Flapper Revue* congregated after the show, there would be dancing--“Phil, I’m sorry, but I don’t flap.” He offered to flag her a taxi for home, and out they went, she once again on his arm, past the indefatigable cordialities of the Brewsters.

Wes had waited for the party to thin out before going up to Monty.

“Major, how you doing, how’s the ranch? Hoped we’d have a chance to shoot the breeze,” Monty fended industriously while thinking *How over is it with her and him? Williamsons don’t any too often say ‘uncle.’*

“I’m calling it a night,” ~~the usually indefatigable~~ Wes surprised him with.

“I just wanted to add my bravo to all the rest. You and Susan have done wonders.”

“She’s one of a kind, for sure,” Monty testified, feeling he could afford to say that much. “The Lord Himself wouldn’t know how to put a price on her, don’t you think?”

*Wesley indefatigable*

J.J. was in a purring mood when he met with Susan to work out the Observance details from his side of things. "The newspapers will lap it up. 'Negro singer shrugs off Klan beating, reaches heights of Carnegie Hall.'"

"As you say, Vitamin P," she said, meaning the power of push.

"You know, I can sort of see the audience that night in here," he palmed his forehead like a phrenologist. "You ever do that?"

"Only every time I ever performed."

"Then let me tell you the kind of thing I see there in great big gorgeous Carnegie Hall." He sketched dreamily in the air with his hands. "People dressed to the nines, Vandiver and the Major's people wearing their money on their backs, they got every right to. Lots of medals catching the light, I may even put on my set. Montgomery and Cecil up there on stage, looking so fine--oh, by the way, since it's the finale, we'll hold them to <sup>half a dozen</sup> ~~five~~ songs, tops. Double encore that way, if the whole crowd isn't out there sitting on their hands."

"Right," Susan muttered, writing down the <sup>six</sup> ~~five~~-song stipulation on her list.



"All that, then," J.J.'s voice pussyfooted on, "I can see just as plain as anything. And all of us of a certain shade up, ever so high, up there in...peanut heaven."

Susan's head yanked up. Cinnamon eyes to almond eyes, she and he stared to a draw. After a bit she said, "No one has told us the seating has to be that strict."

"There is a way to encourage it not to be."

"J.J., I'm no good at mind-reading."

"Round up the cripples."

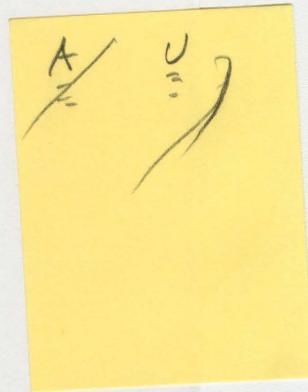
Susan had to swallow hard. She kept still, so he would go on.

"Ours and yours both. Crutchers, one-lungers, blind beggars, any of the wounded vets." He clicked these off like an abacus. "Make them honored guests, put them in the front row, mix them up. Speckle the place with them, that way. How can Carnegie Hall make a fuss about where anybody else sits if those are up there together, I ask you?" He didn't even stop for breath. "Another thing. Welcoming speech from Major Williamson. Hero and big giver and all, it would be good for the crowd to see him limp across the stage."

"But he doesn't--" She realized she had never thought any gait of Wes's could be called that. "I'll see that he's asked."

After the last musicale--it had been at the Dutchman's place on the upper West Side; the man went around sputtering like a tea kettle, but he knew how to throw a party--Monty was already fondly missing them when J.J. gave him a lift home as usual. He didn't even much care that the weather had turned nasty. November had come to New York as if colliding with it, rain pouring down like the clouds were being punctured by the high buildings, but slick streets were nothing new to J.J. Monty sat back perfectly glad to be gliding up to Harlem on a night such as this as a passenger instead of a chauffeur.

"Good do tonight," J.J. was musing out loud over the working of the windshield wipers. "Nice and speckled," his term for a mixed audience. "Your better class of ofays, but you couldn't swing a cat in there without hitting a hushmouth poet either." He added a short knowing laugh. "Not to mention the fine assortment of brown honeys. Wouldn't hurt you to get yourself one of those, you know."



Monty made an amused sound at the back of his throat and was about to rib back by asking him what sort of manager he was, trying to push a poor angelic recuperating singer into the clutches of wild women, when J.J.'s next words hit:

"Because you ought to lay off the white lady."

Monty swung his head around the gingerly way he used to when there was trouble in the vicinity of the bull chutes.

"Goddamn it, J.J., where's your evidence on that?"

J.J. tapped his temple impatiently and then went back to squinting past the wipers into the torrent of taxicabs the rain had generated. "Too careful says something, too." exd

"I thought you got along with her."

"Getting along with her isn't the same as getting in deep with her.

Montgomery, the last time I looked half an hour ago, that woman was white, white, white. Mingle with them, tooth and nail, hide and hair, that's fine. But draw the line where the skirt starts, okay? You got no business up there anyway. Whatever you may have heard, that pink thing of theirs doesn't run sideways in them. At least not in the French ones, I can speak from experience. So don't go being curious."

"She's--the music--" Monty fumbled for how to say it. "We've gotten to be friends, her and me. Been through damn near everything together, trying to bring the songs up out of nowhere and me along with them. Christamighty, J. J. You know most all of that. I don't see why--"

"You're not seeing, that's why I have to bring this up. Christamighty yourself, Montgomery. You can't count on the rest of the world going around blind. Cecil's noticed, too."

"Cecil is going to be counting his teeth in his hand if he--"

"This isn't about Cecil. It's about the fact that you and her can be mental kissing cousins over the songs, if you have to, but you're still of the colored persuasion and she's still Miss Pond Cream. Bruise around among the ladies if you want, you're entitled. But you're plenty bright enough to tell black from white." J.J. delivered the next with the finality of slamming a door: "Don't let these lah-de-dah musicales fool you. This is still a country where they run one of us up on a rope every couple of days, and making eyes at their women is one of their favorite excuses. Didn't that axe handle give you enough taste of that?"

Helpless on his own part, Monty tried to defend hers. "You wouldn't be creaming off your cut of the take, every time I sing a note, if it wasn't for her."

"That's as may be. I figure I'm doing her all the favor I can by trying to clout some sense into you." J.J. changed lanes as deftly as a jockey. "You got to watch your step, man. You'd be better off shoveling coal to Major Williamson than to her."

Now that rehearsals and musicales were at an end, meeting without drawing notice was desperately hard. They resorted to the bridle path.

~~the countless seagulls and pigeons staking early claims to one of Central Park's nearly countless monuments their only spectators.~~

"Any trouble?" Susan asked as her horse caught up to his,

"They figured I was looking for a job as a stable hand, is all." Monty cast an eye over her riding outfit, a purple velvet divided skirt. "Bet they didn't ask you that, did they?"

"Grace Vandiver loaned it to me. It makes it, but it's snug."

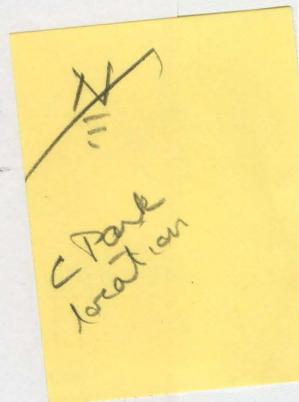
His evaluating smile said all that was necessary.

"They'll maybe think I'm your--what's that the French have?"

"Equerry," she rolled the word. "A Two Medicine equerry, first of its kind in the world. You're rare enough for it."

They rode without saying anything for a few minutes, <sup>while</sup> ~~as they~~ <sup>ed</sup> ~~accustoming~~

themselves to the feel of their saddles and fit of their stirrups. True daughter of



her father, from the side of her eye she studied Monty's potbellied mare and its plodding gait. Son of a cavalryman, he dolefully eyed Susan's broadbeamed bay as it waddled along.

"Plugs," he said it for both of them.

"And they call these silly things spurs."

They cantered along as best they could make the horses move, well ahead of other horseback denizens of dawn and those were few. At that early hour, the park seemed something central to not merely the metropolitan island of Manhattan but all the kingdom of autumn, the ramble of its gravely outlined barebone trees and subdued lawn greenery and quiescent waters where even the mallards still dozed a portal between the summer that had been and the winter well on its way. *Let dark winter comes its worst/we minor suns were here first,* Susan's memory was jogged by the rhythm of the hooves. *I'm getting as bad as Angus,* she told herself, and brought her thoughts back onto the immediate calender. Ten days into November now, and tomorrow one of history's steep ones.

"More newspaper people coming this afternoon," Monty was saying in a fog of breath. "I feel like one of your records." He slowed down his voice as if a mighty finger rested on it: "*Leht Cahrnehgie Hawl gahthur uss toogethur...*"

great  
stilled

"It all helps."

"Something you better know," his tone dropped until it was all but lost in the clop of the horses. "I'm catching hell from J.J."

"About us, naturally."

He nodded. "Funny how we can get on people's minds in a hurry." He started to say something more but held it as a mounted policeman on his morning round crossed the riding path ahead of them. Susan gave the officer a look of such imperturbable ladyship that he may well have figured Monty was along to help her on and off the horse. As he rode away from them, Monty retrieved what had been on his mind:

"I'll bet the Major wouldn't figure this is what he bargained for, either."

"He's the one who tossed us together," she said speculatively as if the words would stand clear in the chill air, "he must have figured he was getting something out of it. The Williamsons generally do." She turned her head and met his look with one that said that was as far as she should go on the topic of Wes.

"We have to give this some time, Monty. Tomorrow night will carry you a long way. After that, let's--let's see what happens after your tour of Europe. That's

the vital thing. You should be fine over there. There won't be any"--she gestured toward the side of her throat.

"That's what J.J. keeps saying," Monty shook his head as if it was too good to entirely believe. "Of all damned things, colored performers are--how's he put it--at a premium in those countries. Tells me they practically made Robeson the second king of England last winter, and the French upped the ante. Bricktop, Jo Baker, they're all learning to eat snails." He was silent for several moments, then said as if putting that away: "Doesn't help us any here, does it."

They rounded <sup>last seasonally solemn</sup> a grove of trees at a bend of the path, a clear stretch ahead. Susan leaned forward in her saddle and held her horse back until his was even with hers. "Race you to the stables." <sup>g</sup>

"Think so?" His sudden grin expanded into his voice. "You know I wouldn't have a chance against a fancypants rider like you, I'm just the eq--"

She whipped his horse across the flank with the end of her reins, then hit <sup>swatted</sup> hers on its bountiful rump.

The horses seemed to shudder into life. Grunting in alarm they bolted down the riding path, eyes wild, hooves pounding, prairie warriors clinging to their backs.

seasonally  
solemn

“It’s on me today.” Phil palmed the meal chits almost before they had settled to the table. “If you don’t look back in your checkbook, you can pretend it’s a free lunch. Cheap enough for me, too, considering you’ve roped the Governor into the Observance. I kowtow to anyone who can get <sup>alley-mouth al</sup> ~~him~~ inside a concert hall.”

Wes grabbed up a fork in one fist and a knife in the other and sat posed like a trencherman ready to attack the feast of a lifetime, then dismissively clinked the silverware back into alignment with the crimson crest on the tablecloth. “Honesty is a costly policy,” he said with a tired smile of admission. “The ones you really ought to be tucking oysters and slaw into are my wife and the Honorable Mrs. Smith.”

“The Club isn’t ready for that,” Phil gestured languidly around at the wholly masculine roomful of alumni in protectorates of three and four, “and I doubt that those particular ladies are ready for the delicatessen behind the Garrick. You have to be the stand-in. Pile on the grub, you can probably use the nourishment for your Carnegie debut. Everything down pat?”

*Honorable A P  
 friend  
 nickname  
 probably  
 alliterative*

“I’m so rusty it’s pitiful--it’s been five years since I made a speech, can you believe? I used to reel them off almost without thinking. This one is giving me fits. I can see myself tomorrow night, I’ll end up reading it from a piece of paper like a town crier.”

“Maybe you should have Susan Duff rehearse you for a change.”

Wes examined his oldest friend. The start of a chill came into him at hearing Phil, cunning about women, make a point with her name on it. “You aren’t just telling me that to see if the silverware will jump again, are you.”

“Hardly. I don’t like what the side of my eye has been seeing at our man Monty’s musicales.” Now Wes felt the frost of apprehension fill in fully within himself. “Susan is as clever as a woman can be about it,” Phil’s tone betrayed nothing and granted nothing; he could have been discussing a character turn in a script that had come in over the transom, “but she and Monty keep crossing paths a tad too often. Let’s hope they haven’t come down with a case of each other.”

Afraid of how he would sound, Wes didn’t say anything. He sat all the way back in his chair, pinned as a butterfly, waiting for what else the suddenly prosecutorial friend across the table would come out with.

“You’ve backed Monty enough it ought to earn you sainthood,” Phil went on making his case, “but it’s reached the point where you need to bend his ear on what goes and what doesn’t. It’s a fact of life, is all--the two of them are asking for trouble if they so much as make eyes at each other. If I’ve noticed they’re on the brink, others will.”

Of necessity Wes found words, for what they were worth. “Phil, really. Aren’t you reading rather a lot into a couple of people simply working up music together? I know you’re a professional noticer, but in this case I think you’re jumping to conclusions.”

“And you’re dodging them.” Phil leaned in, diagnosing as he came. “There are times when you don’t see what you don’t want to, Wes. Probably that saved your skin where the odds of getting past machine-gun nests were involved. But it can cost you everything you’ve put into Monty’s getting somewhere, if you don’t snap to.” Pup of the historic old wolves in his family, Phil Sherman knew how to nip when he had to. When he was satisfied that his words were sufficiently under Wes’s skin, he settled back again. “Don’t I wish I were misreading,” he said more leniently. “Seeing the way he lights up around her--I thought at first it was gratitude, on his part. Missy from the nice house, helping

him up in the world--why wouldn't he feel grateful? He's feeling more than that, though, I'd bet anything. She doesn't show any signs of allergy to his skin either, if you know what I mean. If that doesn't bother her, why wouldn't she set her cap for a man on his way to being famous?"

Incalculably more irritated than he dared to show, Wes managed to say by the book: "My family knew hers. She's from different circumstances than you and I. She doesn't work that way."

"That makes it worse then," came back implacably. "A steel heiress or a countess with enough money to be naughty might get away with a fling across the color line. Not someone whose name only carries the letters it has in it." Phil tapped the tabletop in emphasis. "Susan Duff throws everything out of kilter. I'm not poking my beezers into this for the fun of it--you of all people know me better than that. I like Monty, I'm all for him. Nothing against her, for that matter, if you like them on the tall prickly side. But I'm not entirely disinterested in how they behave with one another. The sky is the limit, for a voice like his--I can imagine him someday in the right kind of Broadway vehicle. *Green Pastures of the West*, why not? If the gossip columns take in after him, though, that fries that." He raised a cautionary hand. "We don't want to upset the applecart before

the Observance. But the minute that's over, somebody had better land on Montgomery Rathbun with both feet about this."

"Damn it," Wes struggled to keep his voice down, "I'm not his lord and master. Something like that ought to come from--well, from his manager."

"If I know J.J., he'll weigh in strong on that, if he hasn't already," Phil conceded. "But a manager is just another kind of hired hand, you know about those. Monty is used to listening to you. Wait until we have tomorrow night over with, then do us all a favor and take him aside and straighten him out about white women." He signaled as though just remembering the purpose of this noon at the Club. "Ready to order?"

Something that outwardly resembled Wes made its way to his street address, handed over his hat to the usual serving hands inside the voluminous front door, somehow navigated stairs and hall and thick silence of office to slump into the refuge of his desk chair. This hollow version of himself echoed without stop with what he had never expected to hear. The Harvard Club conversation, to call it that, tortured all the more because its initiating voice was next to his own.

*Damn you if you brought this up and are wrong, Phil, and double damn you if*

*you are right.* But here in the terrible honesty of aloneness he took over the interrogation of the creature who bore his name in all this and made correction after correction, now that it was too late. What a crude mechanism the mind is, he savagely notified himself. He hadn't foreseen, hadn't headed this off in time, hadn't calculated that their courage could be greater than his. *More fool yet, I hadn't a clue I was being one, did I.*

Eventually what he had left to work with began to come to in him. Clock, social calendar, the footstep chronometry of the household, such reminding taps of time impelled him, however reluctantly, to unmoor from the chair and go through the motions necessary. This next semblance of himself managed to put in an appearance downstairs. It roused considerably at the news that Merrinell was out for hours more, enmeshed in the fitting of the necessary new gown for the Observance gala. Then it mystified Hilliger by discharging him for the rest of the afternoon. This was not like the Major, and every eye of the downstairs staff watched the muted figure climb back up the stairs.

But he was enough himself by now to go about this methodically. His bedroom the first stop, he winnowed through his closet until he found a shirt slightly yellowing with age and tux pants with a wine stain on them, the nearest

thing he had to workclothes. The change of costume usefully occupied him; he decided against risking cufflinks up there and rolled back the shirtsleeves, then glanced down at his usual good shoes and shed them in exchange for his old pair of Army field boots. Looking more like a propbox from Carnegie Hall than someone who was going to appear there the next night, out he went into the upper hallway and tromped on up to the mansard attic, the sight of him freezing maids in their tracks all along the way.

Taking care in dodging under the rafters--he had been conked enough for one day--he surveyed the family flotsam stashed there. An attic was always the overhead catch-basin of life's leavings, but he was surprised to see how things had bubbled up here strictly according to generations. Presiding over upright clothes trunks was a lineup of dressmaking forms, successively more slender than the proportions of Merrinell that were being swathed at this very moment. In a gathering of their own were the girls' jilted playthings: rocking horses; menageries of puppets; their dollhouse period. Farthest back in the eaves, galleon-like under sagging sail-riggings of cobwebs and most of a decade of dust, rested his brassbound Harvard trunk handed down from his father and in which the old

man's mementoes were mixed with his. He hadn't known what else to do with his father's last effects.

Grunting, Wes went down in front of the trunk in an angled half-crouch. The accumulated grime and spider output made him hesitate; he had forgotten gloves. With mental apology to his daughters, he pulled on a sleeve puppet of a giraffe with coy eyelashes and batted away the cobwebs. Then he cautiously blew the dust off the trunk and lifted its lid.

His father's things were the top few strata of its holdings. Brittle mummy-brown scrapbooks; on the first page of the first one that came open, a Miles City newspaper account of the inception of the Montana Stockmen's Association in 1885. Wes could not help running his finger down the list of the men who possessed the prairie then: Granville Stuart, the bookish cattle king chosen as president; James Fergus, who had a county named after him; among the others, the invited ranch operators from just over the Dakota line, including one T. Roosevelt. Wes knew enough of the story; certain members of the cattlemen's <sup>card</sup> group had evolved immediately into vigilantes with pedigrees. Secret lynching crews--Stuart's Stranglers--had been set loose against suspected rustlers in the Missouri Breaks and across the eastern plains of Montana. He ran down the

founders' list again, even though he was as sure as anything can be. Notably missing was the name Williamson. *That was like him.* Whatever else might be said about his father, Warren Williamson had always had his own way of doing things in the Two Medicine country.

He stacked the scrapbooks aside, then with soldierly care lifted out the holstered horse pistol that young Lieutenant Warren Williamson had used with effect in the Union cavalry corps, and never after. It took Wes over for a moment, the antique pistolry of his father's war compared to the mammoth-calibre barrages of his own. *A peashooter like this to Big Bertha--there's progress for you.* He stuck the gun aside with the scrapbooks and dipped again into the trunk until he could reach what he was looking for. There, beneath it all, the box that he and Whit had long ago agreed they wanted off the ranch.

Surprisingly light but awkward to handle, at least the thing had a carry-string, as such boxes do; he wouldn't have to go there holding it in both hands like something that was about to spill. *Not that it's anything that will ever wash out, no matter how careful I am.* The box had risen, in his grasp, only to the brass-edged rim of the trunk, insecurely resting where the corners lipped together. Holding it there he stayed in the half-crouch, still deciding, bothered raw both

ways. There would have been a time when he'd have prayed, in such a position, to work out what to do; sought some justifying snippet of code in the holy accumulation of teachings, some overlooked affidavit of motive that would spell out whether to keep the silence or let this box speak its piece. But, in a wealth of confusion as unsortable as the attic around him, faith had entirely too many meanings in this situation. The word was as shifting as bits of alphabet shaken into a kaleidoscope: a twitch back or forth spun up a different color-stained letter of faith that one or another of them had put full belief into.

Wes drew a deciding sift of breath through his teeth. He hadn't become who he was by letting others put their spin on things. Lifting the box on up, already he was fashioning his route out past Merrinell for the evening. Benny Leonard's bout tonight; he would say Phil had happened onto ringside tickets. Lightweights usually went the full fifteen rounds, that would give him ample time. He could cover with details from the morning paper, if she showed curiosity. That wasn't likely.

He lugged the box downstairs and stashed it at the back of his closet, cleaned up and changed into clothes for the evening. The preliminary with Merrinell aside, the worst he faced now was killing time until dark. *It doesn't*

*stay killed, that's the problem. It lies around in us in piles until something like this fans air into it.*

It was full night when he emerged from the taxi, stood stock-still on the sidewalk to see if he was going through with this, then pushed off on his good leg and approached the door.

Quicker than he had figured, Susan was down from her quarters to answer his rap. 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 catch 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~~ Agency for the Blackfoot Reservation, *and* 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. He and Donald had had to fight her out of there to bring her to fresh pasture with the others. Now 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."

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

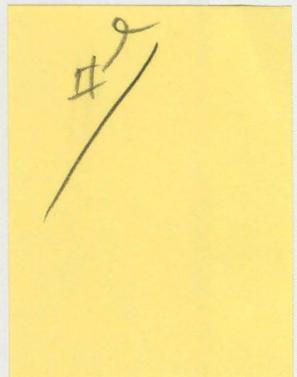
"One day he's going to have another think coming." Ninian rose in his saddle a little as if testing the air. "Just possibly today."

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 loftier, the Rockies already showed early snow, <sup>November's</sup> first bright ash of the dwindling year, the fourth these determined men had expended on the landclaims that drew them and theirs to

insert  
Nov.  
ref/ce

America. They used the uneven ground to advantage today, riding in 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 rifleshot 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 head off, 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 dab of 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. He panted raggedly, most of his breath knocked out when the ground came up and met him. When it seemed to him he had scrambled deep enough in the brush he flopped low, trying to clear his head. Bonus on these damnable cows or not, this wasn't anywhere in the bargain with Williamson, for a person to get the hell shot out of him like had just happened with Flannery. Where'd these sharpshooting fiends show up from? Opponents came and went, in soldier life, but surprise was forever the enemy. Dry-mouthed, and not liking the taste of that, Mose ever so slowly began to wriggle through the brush. 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 devils. He would have to deal with that as it came, if he just could ever find the damn--

There. He spotted the Springfield behind a thatch of willows about twice the length of his body away. 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 <sup>some</sup> it, but there was no choice.

some  
1

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. Nearby, Donald's victim lay toes-up, an 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."

*A'd say.*

*A'd say*

"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 that one into the beaver dams there, then do away with 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 funerals than he could count, but this occasion necessarily lacked holy words. Before starting on making the dead vanish to the extent that they would, 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 that wood gate of his. A bit of prairie glue"--a 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 deceit count as a charity? In this blooded instance, was she in a position to say it didn't?

Amid all that was <sup>raging</sup> 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, <sup>is it spring</sup> 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?'"

raging

and

"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, rinsing out your conscience or the Williamson family conscience, such as that might be? Or buying yourself forgiveness for being a Williamson, were you? 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 had your whack at them, in the 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, Susan, you can't get around that, 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, did he, and you didn't come scouting the woods for his voice that I know of." 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 gave 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 trifle 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 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 fetch 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

~~change~~  
change  
I have to  
see to.

I have to see to my piano. He already was on his way out to company that better befitted Carnegie Hall.  
his expression said.

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." cpd

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 sort of encouragement about the audience. *Right, J.J., just the usual riffraff 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

adjust: she  
said - ~~was~~  
was

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 <sup>he found that</sup> that he carried on him <sup>self</sup> put him in a calmer mood for  
 tonight. Plenty of company coming tonight, when it came to bearing wounds: the  
 shot-up 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  
<sup>reflect</sup>  
 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 of the  
 Armistice 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

he found  
that

reflect

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."

Cyd

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 <sup>y</sup> 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, none. It's going to work out."

As quickly as <sup>Monty & J.J.</sup> ~~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."

<sup>Beside Phil,</sup> 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

#

H x M  
M x J

Beside Phil,

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<sup>IP</sup>, 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."

<sup>J.J. himself was pantie,</sup>  
"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 <sup>Sauvies</sup> knows the music, that's what counts."

Philip

J.J. himself was pantie

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 <sup>through the doorway</sup> 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~~ <sup>I don't hear it</sup> noticeably being taken."

Wes.  
doorway

cyd

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. *↳ figured something would give if it could stay dug in*  
~~Who ever knew he can lie as fast as a horse can trot, when~~  
*hard enough here. Never thought it would be him*  
*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." Expressions, masked as they were, in the semi-circle there at center stage, spoke a good deal more in Wes's direction than Vandiver's words. Stage door Johnny. Over-age schoolboy with a crush. Lothario with more money than sense. Phil's face simply said, bye-bye, old friend.

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."

5 Page Door  
Johnny  
mitter

"...It is in gatherings such as this that the man of war--man in his armor, in his uniform of whatever color--must change his stripes and be created anew, in the magnificent pinto skin we form when all our human hues are displayed together." As Wes stepped away to a thunder of handclaps, he had to concede that even the applause sounded better in Carnegie Hall.

He stayed just offstage <sup>now that his part in the evening was over.</sup> after he concluded his speech. He ached like fury from standing so long on the hard flooring but he kept to his carefully planted stance there and watched Susan <sup>radiantly</sup> speak her piece about <sup>The</sup> Harlem, <sup>collection</sup> <sup>to perfection</sup> endured Tammany next, and as Vandiver began making his pitch for Bonds of Peace, he knew he could delay no longer and moved off to the hallway and stairwell that would take him to his seat up in the box circle.

He <sup>stepped with care</sup> went into the darkened box. Nodded a series of apology <sup>ies</sup> 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

now that  
his part  
was over  
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facing a bit away from Merrinell, which he figured he may as well grow 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 with her active history of suspicion 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 <sup>immediate</sup> 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, were the veterans clutching 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

*immediate*

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 whispered as she slid it into his hand, backstage, *before she went out to speak her piece*. 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, flipped 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 <sup>perform</sup> 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 <sup>this evening - this particular hall</sup> 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 <sup>peer</sup>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

peer

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 and the Sunday-clothed, the war-stricken and the spared, the shadowlike faces and the pale, raptly in place out there in the levels of the night as if each in a seat assigned in some dark-held circle of a heaven or a hell, Wes's own as usual custom-made.