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The Band Will Not Play Dixie

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A Novel of Suspense by

THEODORE BROWNE

THE BAND WILL NOT PLAY DIXIE

Exposition Press · New York

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FIRST EDITION

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The Band Will Not Play Dixie

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1

My arrival back in New York City was as unceremonious as had been my departure. There had been no one to see me off when I sailed for Europe; there was now, on my return, no one to greet me at the pier.

I commandeered the first cab I got to and instructed the driver to take me to the Booker T. Washington Hotel up in Harlem.

The swift newsreel of downtown Manhattan ended when we rounded Columbus Circle and came up Manhattan Avenue alongside Central Park. We stopped for a traffic signal at the intersection of 116th Street and Seventh Avenue.

I was in Harlem.

The Booker T. was a little farther up the avenue. A man, languishing with a pushbroom in the act of sweeping the sidewalk out front, noted our arrival and summoned a bellhop.

The bellhop made a show of hustling himself into action. I noticed a pretty young thing saunter out of the lobby behind him and wait to one side in the doorway. Meanwhile, he took my bags and I followed him inside, passing the pretty young thing who looked me up and down in a faceless, clinical fashion.

"Stick around," he told her in an undertone.

"I got plenty to do," she said impressively.

"Well, go 'head, then!" he sulked.

The girl laughed heartlessly. He looked back at her and rolled his eyes, indignant and restrained.

The lobby was small and unpretentious as hotel lobbies go. There was not a single potted palm or a green thing growing there.

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There was no attempt to make it other than a place to check in and check out. Except for a circular bench in the center that faced the elevator, there was no place to sit or lounge. The lobby had the surface cleanliness of having been swept and dusted cursorily. A short, wide hall led off into a dining room. A waiter was clearing a table near the entrance. I could hear people chatting softly and the sounds they made with knives and forks, but all this activity was out of sight and beyond the door.

The desk clerk, a waspish young man, who had a scrubbed-clean, cocoa-brown complexion and was prematurely bald in front, had got himself off to a bad start by trying to take care of me and the switchboard at the same time. To make matters worse, the bellhop baited him by banging the bell and calling attention to me.

"Will you *stop* it!" he shrieked.

"Where's Sandra?" the bellhop asked.

"How th'hell I know!" he snapped.

"Tha's what *she* here fuh. Not you."

"Well, *she's* not here and I got to answer this switchboard."

"Ain't yo job."

"Oh, go take a you-know-what for yourself!" He gave me a "Yes, I said it and I'll say it again!" look.

My aloofness did not soothe his wrath.

Finally, he untangled himself and came pouting to the desk and allowed me to register. He was coldly precise and efficient. I noticed the Phi Beta Kappa key. There was no doubt of his feeling superior to his job and to these cheap surroundings. I had noticed, too, the title on the jacket of the book he must have laid aside when the switchboard had interrupted his reading, *Racial Tensions—North and South*. I would have liked to have asked him about the book, only I was afraid he might resent my inquisitiveness.

The bellhop, I think out of respect for me, restrained a mighty nasty urge, having suffered himself to wait this long for me to register. As he had done with the girl, he retaliated by rolling his eyes indignantly as he hustled up my bags and routed me toward the elevator.

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"He gives you a good room," he conceded. "You has a good view from 309. It's overlooking the avenue."

We were inside the elevator, facing the door. As we were going up, I noticed that the clerk was now seated at a small table behind the desk, reading. He was over his anger. His face had the eager, painful absorption of a serious student.

The rest of the morning I unpacked and tried to homestead and take the edge of strangeness off the room.

By noon, I was relaxed—and hungry.

My visit to the cafeteria downstairs made me lose all recollection of French and British cuisine. It was southern fare: smoked hamhocks, mustard greens, cracklin' bread, buttermilk, and sweet potato pie. It gave me a good feeling.

I went under my own steam to the office of the *Harlem News Examiner* where I had no appointment to see its editor-in-chief Tazewell Odum. Before I set sail for America, I had cabled Taz, so I knew he was expecting me to bust in on him most any day now. He wouldn't expect me to do the formal thing of calling him on the phone and making an appointment to see him. "Like a white man woulda done," Taz would fuss and lay you out in his lovable, colored-folks way, talking a mile a minute. "No, sir! Niggers don't bother 'bout delicacy. Shucks! Nigger don't respect another nigger. Now, ain't that the truth? Tell you! You know that's the truth! I know my people. Chile! I know Aunt Hagar's chillun! I love my people, but I know'um. We got a lot to learn from white folks, now, I'm telling you. But, what you gonna teach Aunt Hagar's chillun? Can't learn'um nothing! I know'um!"

The *News Examiner* was in a three-storied, old brownstone building, which had been a high-class private residence some seventy-odd years ago, and, during the twenties, had deteriorated into a questionable rooming house for all manner of transients. The *News Examiner*, with its circulation, city, and advertising rooms, functioned much like any of the big metropolitan dailies downtown, though on a considerably smaller scale. The printing was handled by a job-printing concern outside.

Taz's office was off the city room. The door was open. Taz was

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talking on the phone. When he saw me, he gawked and grinned.

"Say, hold the phone. . . . 'Thello King!" I shook his left hand. He was holding the phone in his right. "'Thello, I sure am glad to see you, boy. You sure looking fine. Pull up that chair here and sit down. I'll be right with you, 'Thello. . . . Chivers? . . . Hello? . . . Lissen, here. I tell you what. I'll send Sandra—you know Sandra, my secretary—I'll send her out soon she gits back from lunch. I'll send her out and you give her all the details. How's that? Fine! Lovely! Solid!"

He turned to me. "'Thello, boy, you sure looking good. Nigger, how you manage to keep so chippie-looking, what I want to know, streamlined—and look at me? I borrowed your tux to wear to a formal once, remember?"

"Soft living," I laughed. "Too much fried chicken and pork chops."

Taz shook his head remorsefully. "Tha's a fact! I eat too damn much of what I oughtn't to eat. 'Thello, you ought to know Chivers Bousefield—the Urban-Welfare-League Bousefield? Just occurred to me."

"I ought to. He's been my brother-in-law for twenty years."

"Well, I'll be who-struck-John! S'if I don't know that! What th'hell is the matter with me, anyway? That was Chivers Bousefield I was just talking with on the phone. Does he know you're here?"

"Not yet."

"Mercedes know?"

I shook my head.

"Wha's all the mystery?"

"I want to surprise them."

"They giving a little party tonight, you know—or, don't you?"

I didn't, of course. "Is it formal?"

"Oh, no, no, no," Taz hastened to assure. "Nothing but a little get-together. Few of the 'intelligentsia' who like to gab about the race problem and that sort of thing, don't you know." Chuckling over his Briticism, Taz lapsed back into his own comfortable southern naturalness. "That's right up Chivers' alley!" he said.

He joked about my brother-in-law Chivers Bousefield who was

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a regional secretary of the National Urban Welfare League. Taz called the organization a talk-and-do-nothing outfit, claimed that all Chivers did was compile a lot of worthless statistics about the-Negro-this and the-Negro-that, making intricate charts of progress and decline. Said Taz, Chivers even had charts to show the increase over a five-year period in the number of Negro men who deserted their wives and children when the men lost their jobs. "'Thello, you know for yourself, Chivers's just trying to make his ownself look important! He ain't helping nobody solve nothing! Now, is he?"

Taz had a perverse streak in his make-up. He was happiest when he could make fun of something or somebody. He even made fun of his own pomposity, recalling how he had put on the dog when he and Gussie, his wife, attended a reception for the Mayor at one of the big hotels downtown, how he "carried it off" without the white folks so much as suspecting that he really felt out of place. With all his college training, his ability, and affluence in the newspaper field, Taz was still a big, corn-fed country boy, who could be counted upon to do anything that was expected of him, that is, providing it didn't jeopardize too many of the creature comforts he slavishly loved.

Yet, he could be nagging and unreasonable when he sought to get his own way. He began to upbraid me for quitting my job as foreign correspondent. I knew this was coming. I argued that anybody could report the stuff I was sending him. I told him that Biggy Danbridge, whom I had left in charge of the office over there, was just as capable as I to do that kind of jejune reporting.

When I said that, Taz rolled his big eyes at me and puffed angrily.

"What you talking 'bout, 'Thello? Biggy Danbridge ain't no writer. Why, that journalistic yardbird! What th'hell can *he* write! Read this——" He handed me the item Biggy had just cabled from London, then he sat primly upright, his fat hands gingerly astride his hips, waiting for me to peruse the evidence which would make me out a liar. Meanwhile, he fussed, "Mess he wrote 'bout some African Prince Toko-some-goddam-thing (I'm positive he ain't got his name spelled right either!) having a audience with the Queen.

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A nine-year-old child coulda reported better than that. Fool don't even say where it took place! Read it! Biggy ain't doing a thing over yonder but whoring! No explanation of what business the Prince was on. . . . How much you bet me Biggy was even there?"

"What you gonna do with this?" I capitulated.

I thought he was going to crush the cable with his big hands and pitch it into the wastebasket. No doubt he was tempted, but he restrained himself.

"Damn his ignorant soul to hell! And you give up your job to somebody like him!"

Knowing Taz, I knew he wasn't as outraged as he was then pretending to be. He loved this sort of thing, this pyrotechnical bitching.

"Biggy studied journalism at Columbia," I needled.

"Tha's the lie Biggy told you," Taz woofed. "You fool 'nough to believe that. The only thing Biggy studied in his life is a racing form! 'Thello, for an intelligent man, I declare, you can sure let people talk you into believing everything they tell you. Biggy went to Columbia! Biggy ain't went nowhere, you ask me. Ol' Biggy used to borrow books from the Public Library and carry them round under his arm—and pose!"

"You don't think he read them?"

"Read what!"

"He may have got the knowledge by osmosis," I suggested, with seeming innocence.

"Tha's the only way, too!"

"I only took his word about Columbia," I said.

Taz threw up his hands. "'Thello, please!" he entreated.

We both burst out laughing together.

Subsiding and feeling much better, Taz said, "I tell you, I'll guess up the missing information and stick the whole thing on page one. We got a picture of this Prince took some years ago when he was in Paris. Ain't nobody goin' to know the difference, nohow." He hastily scribbled a marginal note on the cable and laid it aside. He knocked the ashes from his pipe into the wastebasket, then burrowed the bowl inside his tobacco pouch. Several matches were expended during the lighting process. Belching a penumbral

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haze of sickly sweet smoke, Taz settled back comfortably, the chair creaking in protest. The weighty calm was indicative. All joking aside now.

"Now, I want you to tell a fool something," Taz resumed. "What th'hell you quit your job for? Wha's this all about, anyway? In your letter you went all round Robin Hood's barnyard to tell me you was quitting. Wha's behind all this? Wha's your real reason? Now, dispense with the double-talk. I want it straight. You don't have to be no diplomat with me. Anything I hate is for a writer to talk the way he writes!"

"You finished?"

"You got the floor."

"I'll let you in on a little secret. I'm going to write a book."

Taz looked fiercely at me. "Is that all?"

"What do you mean 'Is that all'? I have to gather material, which takes time. You know that."

"Ain't this a crime!" Taz caviled. "Hear you talk, you'd think you was writing a daily column! You coulda turned out half-dozen books. Why, your job don't take up that much of your time. Tell the truth, 'Thello. Now, does it? Own up to the truth."

"I have to be here to work on my book," I explained. "I have to consult with people like Solomon Morehouse and knock about the country and sort of find out first-hand what's going on."

"What sort of book is this you're writing, if I'm not being too personal? Do I understand you to say you're going to consult with Solomon Morehouse?"

I nodded. "The book's to be about him."

"Solomon Morehouse?" His tone was disparaging.

"Most significant Negro in America," I boosted. "Biggest race leader since Marcus Garvey. He's getting things done, boy."

"He's making a heap of sound and fury, if tha's what you mean," Taz said.

"What does surprise me is that you and your paper don't get solidly behind him. Hitch your wagon to his star, man. He's going places. All you do is knock the man. If you're not knocking him, you do something worse, which is ignore him."

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"The *Examiner* tries to be impartial. We don't kowtow and we don't ride on anybody's bandwagon."

"Impartiality often breeds contempt. You're either for him or you're against him. I think you're against him. Honest to goodness, the stuff you print about Morehouse, you think some white southern liberal was writing it."

"Awright, you! I'm goin' to tell you something. 'Thello, you messin' with dynamite. I'm warning you, because you're my friend and I hate to see you get in wrong. Solomon Morehouse is a very dangerous man. Oh, I admit he's done some good. We got seven Negro Congressmen, thanks mainly to his agitation. The Federation of Workers in Personal Service is now a great national organization——"

"And whoever dreamed it was possible to organize Negro women doing domestic service?" I pointed out.

"Yeah, I know. I know all that. He's done some good, but the harm he's done, in my opinion, far outweighs the good. I say he's dangerous. I say Solomon Morehouse is a dangerous spellbinder. He's one of them mass-hypnotists, much on the order of a Hitler. All right, you laugh. 'Tain't funny. Why, man, Solomon Morehouse has got Negroes stirred up to a point where they're liable to wreck themselves and the entire country 'long with them. You haven't seen it, but I have. You hear me? He's got these Negroes—not only here in New York City, but all throughout this here country—he got'em to a fever pitch of wild excitement. They gone crazy! Man, they ready for anything he tells'em. Why, Father Divine and Marcus Garvey never had the mass appeal as this conjuratin' nigger has. I'm here to tell you! I ain't exaggerating. I wouldn't lie. Why should I lie? . . . Lissen heah, it ain't just to the ignorant he appeals. He's got young college intellectuals waving his banners and out making fiery speeches on the street corners. You don't realize the discontent and overcrowding thas' here. Negro population alone has tripled inside three years! Yes, sir! Where they coming from?—every backwoods corner and hog wallow in the South. I tell you, 'Thello, they some bad niggers in Harlem now. You'll see when you've walked around a bit. Be careful where you go. Oh, my, they're bad! I got myself a police

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permit to tote a gun. Yeah! I'll use it too, I have to. These niggers ain't to be trifled with. They tush-hog. . . . New York just can't stand much more of this influx. Problem of finding jobs for them and feeding the hungry. Chivers Bousefield can tell you how they're taxing the welfare funds of the city. You ask him about it tonight. Get him to tell you. It's grim. It's frightening. You realize white folks have to work and eat, too. After all's said and done, they were here in this city when all these new niggers were down South picking cotton and grubbing 'taters. You know that. And, mind you, white folks here are beginning to take measures to protect their own interest. Do you blame them? These new niggers don't belong up here. Ain't no cotton to be picked up here. Then, why in tarnashun don't they stay down South where there's room and need for them? No, a goddam Hitler-minded nigger like Solomon Morehouse goes about agitating and urging a pack of ignorant black fools to leave home and migrate up here where they can vote for the things he tells them to vote for and nobody's going to lynch'em if they do. Same conditions you find in the other big cities, take like in Chicago, Philadelphia, in Detroit, in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Man, it's a dangerous, potential menace. White people are getting scared. It's getting out of hand. Something's gonna explode. Brother, I am worried."

I half laughed. Taz looked at me in helpless bewilderment, as if he questioned my sanity.

"Don't you see it, Taz? Can't you see he's playing for high stakes?" I said. "Sounds fantastic, but Morehouse is out to force the issue of a Negro state. You must know that, Taz."

"I see what he's up to. Sure, I see it," Taz cried. "It's the way this rabble-rouser is going about it that I don't like. This keeps up, us Negroes won't have any white friends left. They'll all turn against us."

"You mean, they'll be glad to get the Negroes off their hands and give them their own autonomous state, or whatever it is they want, just to be rid of us. And Morehouse certainly wants that to happen. Pressure the white folks, till they in turn pressure Congress to set up a Negro homeland!"

"All I say is: Lord, deliver me! I know Negroes. They'll get to

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fighting and squabbling 'mongst themselves, and then what? I know'em! They'll be wishing and shedding alligator tears to be back 'mongst the white folks, even if they do have to suffer little embarrassments of social inequality here and there!"

"Don't you have any faith in your own people?"

"Not that much faith! You wouldn't either, if you been living 'mongst your own kind long as I have. You got yourself a whole lot to relearn about your folks, 'Thello King. I don't trust any black fool with power to rule and govern. Liable to end up with another Henri Christophe."

"Christophe may have been a tyrant, but he licked the stuffings out of Napoleon."

"Yeah—over thousands of black bodies!"

"You might get a Toussaint L'Overture."

"'Thello, you gone crazy?"

"I'm excited, man! I can't just sit on my hands the way you are. Solomon Morehouse stirs my imagination. . . . Tell you what I'd like to do, Taz."

By now, thoroughly disgusted with me, Taz summoned his last faint ounce of patience. He became patronizing, like an elder who must make allowance for the irresponsibilities of youth. It was hard for him, but he tried. "Whas' that?" he asked gently.

"Do a whole series on Morehouse," I told him. "Journey up and down the country—South especially—see the effect Morehouse's ideas are having on folks. How many leaving the South. How many staying on. How the white folks are taking all this. My idea is to talk to the people who are behind Morehouse, as well as the ones against his movement. You see what I mean?"

I looked at Taz to get his nod of approval. I was so sure I had sold him, so sure that I began to feel good inside. But, no, Taz just sat there glumly and glared at me.

"How's about it, Daddy?" I pressured.

Taz puckered his flabby lips into a pig's snout and shook his massive head tiresomely. The gesture spoke for itself.

"How come?" I wailed.

"Not for this paper," he scowled. "The less said about Solomon Morehouse and anything connected with his program, the better."

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I was burned up. "The better for what?" I asked.

"The better for me, the better for you, the better for our race," he pontificated, keeping his voice soft but firm.

"Then you plan to ignore him?" I said.

"Far as the *Examiner* is concerned, there ain't, there never was, and never will be a Solomon Morehouse. Do I make myself clear?"

"What is this—a one-man conspiracy of silence?"

"Call it whatever you like. Don't take my word for it, 'Thello. I'm not even going so far as to say that there aren't some of our papers that'll continue to publicize Morehouse."

"You're hinting pretty loud that the biggest ones have already joined the boycott against him."

Taz dipped his head evasively, then came right back up with an arch grin rippling his mouth. He was cute and charming to watch.

"Well, sir, if you want to put it that way—yes. The white press and radio are both in on this, too. Jesus Christ, man! We have to do something! The country's already on the verge of another world war. Niggers'll wreck the country so we'll all be at the mercy of Communists. Get this straight, I'm not telling you not to write your book. I'm only trying to warn you that you may not find your way into print, so wha's the sense wasting your time on a subject which is taboo? 'Course, it's your funeral. If you persist in going ahead, well, tha's your black business!"

"All right, lard-head, but you won't get sore at me if I don't take your advice?"

"No. But you'll wish you had. You can have your old job back, anytime you feel that you've had your bellyful of that black messiah. I hope you puke your guts real soon, 'cause I know Biggy Danbridge'll never do on that overseas job."

I felt like a wayward, unregenerate son toward him.

"I'll see you and Gussie tonight at Sis's place."

"Okay, son."

"By the way, Taz, how can I contact Solomon Morehouse?"

"Well, I hear—I don't know if it's true—I hear he's out on the Coast right now. I hear he's a mighty sick man. All kinds of rumors flying around. I even hear tell he had a nervous breakdown. Went

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out there to take treatments and to rest up. I do know a friend of his runs a private sanitarium in Los Angeles. I telephoned his headquarters here and tried to check. They deny the rumor, so I don't know a thing. He may be dead, all I know."

"Wishful thinking?"

Taz grunted and stared me out of the room, giving a ludicrous imitation of a dark distemper.

I might have gone right by the headquarters of the Afro-American Improvement Association, if I hadn't collided with the prettiest black girl I'd ever laid eyes on. The impact of our collision might have sent her hurtling down the short flight of stairs leading to the office of the A.A.I.A., but for my grabbing and holding her. She was off balance, and so was I, but, clinging together, we somehow precariously managed to give each other just enough support to keep us both from toppling. It was funny. Anyone seeing us the way we were would think we were clasped in a passionate embrace and making a shameless spectacle of ourselves, carrying on in public in broad daylight!

The situation tickled us both. There was no possible way of my reckoning how long I must have held her. The way it looked, I didn't seem to want her free. Her eyes and face were breathtaking to watch. I couldn't get over her. "I am black but comely," I kept thinking of Solomon's description of his own blackness in the light of hers, " . . . as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon . . ." and, strangely, fancifully, of a rare black orchid, which I, for one, had never seen. I was beside myself, enraptured, and thinking she must be the quintessence of Africa's unique beauty. Seeing her, I don't see how any Negro male could be "color conscious" and exalt a "high yallar." Her color was the smooth, royal blackness of a full-ripened bing cherry. Her eyes were big and limpid and expressive, the lashes curled and heavy, and the pupils dark, fathomless in their transparency. The make-up, which she had the good taste to use sparingly, merely served to compliment the natural beauty of her perfect features, the pencil-thin eyebrows, the salmon-pink lips of her tiny mouth, the high cheekbones, tinted

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so lightly with rouge. Her hair had been dressed to a high gloss and ringed in an attractive halo. What a sweet, tiny black angel she would make, dressed in a white robe and equipped with wings to fly!

She artfully wriggled herself loose.

"Oh! I'm *terribly* sorry!" I said.

"I should look where I'm going," she said.

"I should look where I'm going!"

"My fault."

"I looked to read the sign——"

"Oh, that sign! You could pass this place a million times and wouldn't know it was here," she laughed. "You got to bend way down to see it."

And that was what she did to prove to me it was so. The cheeks of her small rump creased the thin dress she was wearing.

"This iron railing is in the way," I said.

"This thing!" She looked at it with an expression of long-suffering annoyance.

Then, I added, "I suppose it has to be here, or somebody'ud fall and crack his nut."

"We need a better place, all right, one up on the street, but there's no other place available. And we have to locate in Harlem. So . . . that's that!" She smiled and ran down the steps.

"Hey!" I called after her. She reached the bottom, turned, and looked up at me like a startled doe. "You work here?" I asked.

She bobbed her head as a little girl would do.

"Tell me—is Mr. Morehouse back?"

This time, she shook her head as a little girl would do.

"Could I talk with his secretary?"

She wiggled her index finger, beckoning me to come downstairs. I followed her through a busy front office, where a dozen or more men and women were too preoccupied with whatever they were doing to notice me, through a maze of desks, filing cabinets, and mimeographing machines, to a door with the sign PRIVATE painted in black on the frosted-glass portion. She opened the door, and when I was inside she closed it. She brought a chair from a cor-

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ner of the room and invited me to sit down, then she backed herself against the edge of Solomon Morehouse's desk, folded her arms, and regarded me quizzically.

"Secretary? You?"

"I'm Ravenna Snowden," she said.

"I'm——"

"You're Mr. King–Mr. Othello King, the writer."

"That's right. How did you know?"

"I had a hunch."

"It was a good one!"

"I could have been wrong, though. Biggy Danbridge wrote and told me that you might be coming in to see us. So—I've sort of been on the lookout for you."

"So, you know Biggy?"

"He used to go with my sister. She got tired of waiting for Biggy, so she just upped and married another fellow. What's Biggy doing over there?" She had the cutest way of hugging herself and giggling. I was no longer someone she was meeting for the first time. She could be her bubbling little self with me.

"I know! I know!" she squealed.

"He's running true to form," I grinned.

I'd say Ravenna was twenty-three. She couldn't have been much older. I think she'd always been a "little woman," from the day she started to walk. She'd been a rather pert and precocious "little woman," butting into older people's conversations, and being sharply admonished that "little children should be seen, but not heard."

"I didn't know Biggy'd written to you," I said. "In fact, I didn't know that you two knew each other. I don't even recollect my talking with Biggy about Morehouse. It may have slipped out. I might have been thinking out loud, and he probably overheard me. I have that habit sometimes of thinking out loud. Maybe he could have got the idea from the clipping files I've kept on Morehouse and the Double-A.I.A."

"Well, he didn't say exactly what it was you wanted to find out. You know Biggy. He just says you're a friend of his, and if you should come in to see us to give you any information we

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might have. I assumed you might be wanting to do an article about the Double-A.I.A."

"Yes, that's partly it. I already know a great deal about the organization itself, you understand, but what I'm primarily interested in right now is Solomon Morehouse himself. I want the facts about him as a man, as a leader, well, a thorough briefing on his life and struggles." She was nodding her head to assure me that she understood my intentions perfectly. "You see, Miss Snowden, I wish to know as much about him as it is possible to know. Do you think he'll co-operate?"

"I think he will. I think he'll be glad to."

"Good! I'll be getting around and interviewing other people who've known him for some time. Anybody who's been in the limelight as long as he has, and accomplished all he has, must have made all sorts of enemies and friends. Naturally, I want his story from his own lips first. I'd like to get together with him as soon as possible. I understand he's out in California, 'least, I've been told he is."

"Yes . . . he is."

"When you expect him back?"

"I don't know, Mr. King. I really don't. Mr. Morehouse left on a speaking tour of the West Coast. That's far as I know."

Ravenna's open, butter-melting countenance was about the worst place for a lie to hide. It was a dead giveaway.

"Then, he's not ill?"

"Oh, no!"

"How long's he been gone?"

"How long?"

"Yes."

"Well . . . uh . . . Well, it's over a month, I would say. Oh, but that's nothing. He's away from the home office a good deal of the time, you know. He's traveling about the country, dropping in on the different branch offices. He's in great demand as a speaker. Of course, *our* newspapers haven't been giving Mr. Morehouse much publicity of late."

"So I've heard."

"Unless," she went on, with a tang of bitterness in her voice,

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"it's to belittle or to misrepresent what the Double-A.I.A.'s doing. Oh, they're great on ridiculing everything that has to do with us. They send their reporters out to cover all the mass meetings, but they won't write up a thing about us, unless something bad, like a fist fight, happens. Would you believe it, they won't even print the bulletins we send them, even though we offer to pay for the space? We have to get out all our own notices. They won't run our things. Won't sell us any space. They're terrible!"

I didn't realize that the door had been opened, until all at once I heard the thrashing sound of typewriters and mimeographing machines and noticed the abrupt batting of Ravenna's eyes. Turning in my chair, I looked up into the cold, fishy eyes of a jaundice-complexioned, short, and rather chesty man who, I would say, was in his middle fifties. His face looked as though he had shaved several days under the skin and scrubbed all the oil from his pores, it was so dry and tight. He had the calculating, cautious and, I thought, squeamish reserve of a professor of social science, or something that has to do with sizing up people objectively and cataloguing them according to type. His sandy red hair was close-cropped and slicked down on top with a sticky, mild-scented pomade, but was kinky about the sides where it had grown too long. I saw immediately that Ravenna put herself on guard. She may have suspected, as I did, that he had been outside the door for a time listening to what we'd been saying.

Ravenna, in a rather awkward fashion, introduced him to me as Haskell Sneed, legal adviser and director of research.

"Othello King of the *Harlem News Examiner*?" he queried. He seemed overly impressed. "Oh, yes! Did you just recently return from abroad?"

I smiled. "Just this morning."

Ravenna spoke up. "Mr. King would like to get in touch with Mr. Morehouse."

Haskell Sneed raked me with a piercingly cold glance, then slowly lowered his eyes, focusing them somewhere along my middle. He had to think for a moment, rubbing his small, daintily clean fingers along his nether lip.

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"Well—I—don't—know. . . . Morehouse is not—as Miss Snowden has probably told you—in the city—at the present time. Is this a matter of extreme urgency, Mr. King?"

"No, I suppose not," I compromised.

Ravenna again spoke up. "Mr. King is planning to do a book about Mr. Morehouse and the movement."

Haskell Sneed thereupon affected pleasurable surprise.

"Oh, I *see!* How interesting! Yes, yes, interesting. Will you tell me about it?" He was putting on. He didn't mean a word of it. The smile cracked the dry parchment of his face.

"Well, there's nothing much that I can tell you right now," I beamed back at him. "I'd like to do a personal story, a sort of biography and history combined. Of course, I'll have to see Mr. Morehouse and try and persuade him to give me a story about himself and how he started the union of Domestic Service Workers and the Afro-American Improvement Association, and all that. Also, I intend to do some research on my own, that is, outside the organization, getting about the country and finding out what the people think about all this and about Mr. Morehouse. I hope to interview hundreds of people, big fry and small fry everywhere, friends and foes. I intend to be *objective.*" I knew he would like that.

"By all means, objective. The facts must speak for themselves," he chirruped. "Well, well! I *think* I might be able to help you—in a general sort of way. . . ."

I knew he must be thinking of statistical outlines, surveys, maps, charts, and, of course, graphs. Ravenna evidently sensed that I was in for a long-winded discourse by Haskell Sneed, and she made up some excuse or other to leave the two of us alone. I spent two of the most trying hours of my life that afternoon in the company of this highly educated man.

All the while, he was deftly feeling me out and giving me the brush-off at the same time. I had a feeling, too, that he had already elected himself to write the book I had in mind, and that he was not going to give me the material I was seeking, unless, of course, I served him as ghost. Knowing that he would never risk committing himself by coming straight out and saying that was what he

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wanted, I left him in doubt as to whether or not I was going to suggest such a deal.

I had no such intention.

Had Tazewell Odum kept his big mouth shut, as I had asked him to do, my sister Mercedes would certainly not have expected me to show up at the little birthday party she was giving for Chivers.

"You stinker!" she greeted me. "Come right in here!"

I threw my arms around her and hugged her.

We were in the foyer off the living room. It was here she quickly alerted me about the party. She had invited only twelve.

"You know them all," she told me, rattling off their names as she took me out into the kitchen. "They're playing cards and gabbing. I know you're not interested in cards."

"Do you know I still can't tell one card from another!"

"It doesn't surprise me!" Mercedes had a way of shutting her eyes tight and shivering to give a prim touch to some transient displeasure. "Othello, you just have to be different and contrary! Antisocial! I think you're putting on."

She smiled, because she knew I was jesting, and it amused her. She never could take me seriously. She was my sister, a few years older than she would admit to anyone outside the family, and knew too much about me.

"Othello, you look wonderful!" she cried. Her eyes were intense as she looked me up and down. "To look at you now, you'd never believe I'd carried you in my arms. . . . Good Lord! What have you done to your hair? Oh! It used to be so silky and wavy. It's like bristle! Using water on your hair!" she scolded. Again, she shut her eyes tight and shivered. "You had such beautiful hair, till it's a shame. I always thought I should have had your hair, being a girl."

Dolly Whisonant swished into the kitchen and stopped dead in her tracks when she saw that Mercedes was not alone. She gulped and slapped both hands over her mouth. She was too embarrassed to recognize me.

To have fun, my sister pretended to be angry at Dolly for barging in on us. She got tickled at herself, however, and couldn't sustain the pose.

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I turned my head as Dolly peered suspiciously at me. Mercedes burst out laughing. Dolly let loose a yell. Everybody in the apartment must have heard her and wondered.

We hugged and kissed with savage glee.

"Othello! Othello! Oh! I can't get over you!"

Dolly was from home. She had lived across the street from us in Atlanta, Georgia. She was pathetically white, so pale she looked anemic, bony and angular, her small gray eyes set way back in her head. Her hair was auburn-colored, the grain as fine and soft-looking as the floss silk of dandelions. She was continually fingering it back off her ears. The one possible giveaway flaw in her physical whiteness was her wide-spreading mouth. She was pretty, however, with a prettiness her nickname "Doll Girl" implied.

We raised such a ruckus that we drew all the other guests out into the kitchen. It was an unpretentious way to be greeted and welcomed back. And I liked the folksiness of it all.

But Mercedes shooed us all back into the more appropriate setting of the living room. "My Lord! What'll my highbrow neighbors think?" she whispered in an aside to Dolly and me. "All of us whooping and hollering like Lenox Avenue darkies!"

Dolly had no escort that evening. I offered to see her safely home. Before accepting, she briefed me with the warning, "I live in Brooklyn, you know."

"I know."

"Troop Avenue."

"I don't care."

We took the subway.

"Taz got you sore, didn't he?" I said, as we headed for Brooklyn, siphoned through the labyrinthine underground of Manhattan.

Dolly was caustic. She was not, as yet, over her anger and resentment at Taz. "He always tries to make fun of somebody, the park ape! I can't stand him! I simply can't——!"

"Taz is all right. You pay attention to Taz!"

"He wanted to run down Krisna Deva, and he doesn't know her."

"He's full of hell."

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"All he knows is that she and Solomon Morehouse were together once," she prattled inflexibly. "Tazewell doesn't know what their relationship was to each other, outside of their business partnership, except from hearsay and gossip. I knew them both, but do you think I'd go gabbing what I know to Tazewell Odum? Why, he'd smear it all over his paper. He'd go to town to involve Morehouse in a big colored-folks mess. Othello, I'll be truthful, I don't like Solomon Morehouse, myself. I couldn't, not after the way he treated my friend Krisna. But that's nothing to do with him as a leader, you understand. I believe he is a truly sincere fighter for the race. I believe he's right. I only dislike him because of the way he treated the woman who loved him and helped him get where he is. . . ."

Without giving me a chance to explain my interest in Solomon Morehouse, Taz had pounced upon Dolly and figuratively backed her into a corner. "Tell me this, Dolly. What become of your girl friend, the crystal gazer, the one who used to tell fortunes? Tell me, didn't she and Morehouse team up together at one time? Sure, they did! Before Morehouse branched out to become a labor organizer. He and this woman ran the 'Temple of Tranquillity.' Whatever she called herself, I know that it wasn't her real name. She was no more a Hindu than I am. She was one dream of a woman, though. Looked just like a little doll in all that oriental getup. My, my! She was a cute chick."

"You must mean Krisna Deva," Dolly said leanly.

"Tha's her. Krisna Deva. Say, what all become of her, Dolly?" asked Taz, as though it really meant a lot to him, which I knew it didn't. It was a whim. He couldn't possibly be as interested in Krisna Deva as I was. Dolly happened just then to be looking at me. I think she sensed right away that I was extremely interested, that my interest in her friend was genuine, and that Taz's was not.

"Krisna went out to Chicago. Oh . . . some time ago," she told Taz in a manner that shut him up.

Doll Girl had been politely rude to Editor Tazewell Odum.

Anybody who has taken the Eighth Avenue subway from Manhattan to Brooklyn knows how difficult it is to talk and be heard. Dolly did the talking, bringing her eyes and hands into play, so,

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in this way, I was able to follow her, even when the words were dissipated, that is, up until the time the train made its underwater dash through the tube linking Manhattan to Brooklyn; then, it was impossible to hear or to think of anything, except the wonder and the terror of being below a river. I didn't hear or understand Dolly again until we were coming up out of the station where we got off.

Being an unpredictable person, she suddenly stopped me on the stairs and stared me into helpless confusion. I felt silly, with her saying nothing.

"Do you know," she asked, "do you know who Solomon Morehouse puts me in mind of?"

"No. Who would you say?"

"Of course, I really don't know if he has changed much, since the time I knew him. Well onto fifteen years, I reckon. Othello, do you know you look enough like him to be his twin brother?"

"His twin?"

"Except for the goatee," she said.

Going up the steps, she held onto my arm. "As I remember," she confided, "Solomon was very nice, very refined, and very soft-spoken. You know something, too, he came right out and told me that he loved Krisna. Came right out and said he needed her, that he'd asked her to come in with him to be his assistant and companion. I think that's how he put it. He said he could not marry Krisna, because he already had a wife and that he had no grounds to divorce her. He asked me did I think it was wrong for him and Krisna to live together as man and wife. I told him I didn't know. I wouldn't presume to judge in a case like that. Who was I to say? I said it was entirely up to him and Krisna. . . ."

As I think back to this ride to Brooklyn with Dolly, I wonder, even now, if Tazewell Odum didn't have something like this in mind when he brought up the subject of the affair between Krisna Deva and Solomon Morehouse? Taz would do a thing like that, and there wouldn't have to be a logical reason for his doing it. He was, in fact, the most illogical, inconsistent person I had ever known. He may have been mad at Dolly for keeping a secret from him, and, to get even, he sicked me on Dolly in order to wangle that secret out of her. Since he couldn't have it, then he'd see to

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it that it would not be hers exclusively. What he resented most was Dolly's integrity, her showing off and being so guarded and so close-mouthed. On the other hand, Taz may not have had any such motive as this at all; still, I wouldn't put it past him.

Anyway, it got me started. I'd found a source. I figured there must be scores of people like Dolly Whisonant in New York City, with choice bits of information, whom I could get to tell me what they knew about Solomon Morehouse. In this way I could get to know more about Solomon Morehouse than he would ever suspect was known about him. I could then present myself to him as someone not to be taken lightly. I'd have the goods on him, and, if he was the man I hoped he was, I believed he would co-operate with me, and might even get to like me and to trust me.

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Before I left Dolly Whisonant, she gave me some names of people she thought could help me. She kissed me and said it was for luck.

And luck it was, for I ran smack into Ravenna Snowden, as I was going down into the subway station. At first, I was not sure that it was Ravenna. On her part, there was no recognition at all. I was both perplexed and nettled by this at the same time. Either I had mistaken somebody else for her, I thought, or the girl was Ravenna, even though Ravenna appeared to have some reason for not wanting me to speak to her or even to recognize her. I looked again, because I wanted to make sure. And I saw she was crying, standing there on the bottom step, looking at nothing or nobody, as though she were in a daze, with tears streaming down her cheeks.

If this were something highly personal (and I matter-of-factly glanced around for the man in the case, but I saw no one who might reasonably be that man), I didn't wish to butt in. I didn't even know whether or not I had any right to ask her what was wrong. She might not want me to. Besides, what business was it of mine? For I did not really *know* her. I had only met her once, and that was strictly on business. She might like me just to pretend that I hadn't seen her and to go on about my affairs and to stay out of hers. I didn't know.

So, I did the cautious thing. I made like I didn't see her. I passed on through the turnstile and stood with my back to her, though right out where she could see me, and I could pretend I hadn't the faintest notion that she was anywhere near.

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There was no sign of a train. There was only a handful of people waiting on the platform. I doubted whether any of them had noticed Ravenna, or, if they had, felt the concern I had for her predicament.

When I looked again, a fellow was standing close up to Ravenna. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but he seemed to be quarreling with her in a spate of hard, cutting words. Presently, I saw Ravenna walk abruptly away from him, not bothering to wipe her eyes. She paid her own way through the turnstile. She nearly brushed me in passing, going up a ways to a point where the second or first car would stop. The young man waited back a while, then he sauntered through the turnstile, and stood with his evil eyes sardonically watching Ravenna as though he expected her to bring herself back to him, to repent and to make up. There was a vulgar arrogance and presumptuous coldness in the pose he struck. He seemed much too sure of himself.

Frankly, I didn't know what to make of these two young people. Just thinking about them made me feel old and out of step with the times. I wondered, for instance, how come a personable, intelligent girl like Ravenna would involve herself with a fellow who was so obviously inferior to her. To begin with, he was unattractive, willowy thin, and he looked tubercular. He was black, but his blackness had none of the velvet luster Ravenna's had. It was the coarse, ashen kind. Perhaps it was his worldliness and his fine instinct for clothes. In fact, he seemed all clothes, from head to toes. He looked sharp. Reeking with liquor, the sickening sweetness of hair pomade and cigarette smoke, he was sharp, and he knew it with all the certainty of his baleful arrogance.

Each of us boarded a different car. There were less than a dozen passengers in mine. I had a seat and the area around me all to myself. I stretched my tired legs, and, propping my right elbow up against the windowsill, I used my palm as a headrest. My tiredness seemed to come down on me all of a sudden. In the midst of thinking about Ravenna and her choice of a lover, I dozed off. The wear and tear of that first day back must have tuckered me out. I'd simply collapsed.

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I would have gone to the end of the line, then back to Brooklyn, if Ravenna hadn't shaken me back into consciousness.

"Wake up! Mr. King! Mr. King! Wake up——" I heard her baby voice, as I was rubbing the sleep from my eyes. "You get off here . . . 125th Street. . . . Hurry——"

"Oh! . . . Oh! . . ." I gasped, scrambling to my feet.

She had me by the arm, steering me out onto the crowded platform. I almost got my foot clawed by the twin doors.

"Are you all right?"

I looked at her foolishly and smiled. "Yes, yes. . . . Thanks."

"You ought to be careful. It's bad business sleeping like that on the train. You could be robbed, you know."

I sobered instantly and began feeling through my pockets.

Ravenna giggled. "You were lucky this time. I sat beside you all the way."

"From Brooklyn?"

"We got on at the same station."

"You don't say?" I pretended not to know.

"I saw you, but you didn't see me."

There was a bright smile on her face, and she was as cheerful as a lark. Much as I wanted to ask her about the boy friend, I did nothing of the sort. I let her believe in my ignorance of the incident in Brooklyn.

"Would you mind, Mr. King, seeing me home?" she asked. "It's so late, and I don't mind telling you, I'm afraid to walk down that street by myself."

"I'll be glad to," I said. "Certainly. . . ."

"It's only two blocks. I'm round the corner from 127th and Eighth Avenue," she informed me, as we set out for her home. "This Harlem's bad, especially round here. It isn't safe for a lone woman this hour of the night. I don't think it's so safe for a man either. These kids are awful, Mr. King. Oh, they are! They carry guns and knives. And I've seen them beat up a drunken guy and then roll him. No policeman in sight. There never is, when you want one. I think they're afraid. Then, who isn't? Everybody in Harlem is afraid—more or less. It's awful to live in Harlem. I guess you can take care of yourself, all right. You look it, anyway."

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"In a pinch," I laughed. "Of course, I don't go *looking* for trouble."

"Oh, Lord, you don't have to! Sometimes it looks for you. I was going to get a permit to carry a gun, but Ma put her foot down. Oh, she thinks it a sin. What! A gun? That's the devil's own handiwork! Ma claims that if you put yourself in God's hands, you can walk anywhere—out on a battlefield—and nothing won't harm you, she says. . . . I don't know. I'm not so religious as all that."

"What is your mother?"

"She's Holiness. If anybody's got that 'true religion,' my mother has!"

Ravenna had the tenderest respect for her mother's intolerance, though it must have been a thorn in her side, a source of conflict which they could never reconcile. Her mother fought hard to save her wayward soul and lost and lost and lost. Ravenna did not choose to be saved, that was all there was to it.

Even at the risk of being reproached by her mother for bringing a man into the house at two o'clock in the morning, Ravenna insisted that I come in for a while. "I don't go to work tomorrow. Today, I mean. Saturday."

She brought me into the front room and sweetly ordered me to sit down any old place. I backed into an outsized armchair and sat. Across the room from me was a wall of curtain, cutting us off from the rest of that railroad flat. I instinctively felt a presence behind that curtain, sternly disapproving my being there at this late hour. A grunt of sleepy annoyance prompted Ravenna to excuse herself and leave the room. A great deal of whispering went on behind the curtain. I couldn't make out what it was, though I was sure that it had to do with me, and that Ravenna was trying her hardest to explain me to her mother.

I heard Ravenna caution, "Ma, don't!"

"Lemme see——"

The mother cracked the curtain and peeped out at me.

"Now! You satisfied it's not Richard?"

"You didn't go to Brooklyn?"

"No. I went to a show downtown."

"Remember it's late."

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"Tomorrow's Saturday."

"You gonna help me clean dis house. Don't figger you gonna lay in bed all day."

"Yea . . . yea. . . ."

Ravenna reappeared, smiling impishly. She saw I needed an ashtray and quickly attended to that, then sat down. I offered her a cigarette.

"Not now," she refused politely. "How did you make out with Haskell Sneed?" she asked.

"You fooled me by not coming back," I chided. "What did you do that for?"

"You don't know Haskell Sneed like I know him, or you wouldn't ask why I faded out of the picture!"

"You knew what I was getting into, didn't you?"

"I knew you were trapped. I couldn't help you. He had you. I knew what he was going to tell you. He wasn't going to let you leave without his telling you. I bet he told you more about himself than he told you about Mr. Morehouse."

"He told me nothing about Morehouse that I didn't know already."

"I intended to see you afterward, only I couldn't let on in front of Haskell. Oh, brother! I wouldn't let on to anything in front of him. Promise me you won't let Haskell know I told you a thing. He's jealous and suspicious. I don't want him to know I've even talked with you. I mean that. You see, I've been with the organization a long time. I was only fifteen when Mr. Morehouse gave me my job. I've been more closely associated with him than Haskell has. A secretary gets to know the boss pretty well. You know that. Haskell Sneed will never get round to writing that book about Mr. Morehouse. He'll talk and talk about it, but he isn't going to write any book. He wouldn't know how to begin. And if he did, his book wouldn't be worth reading. I can bring you up to date. The rest you will know when it happens. I know all the people in his life, good and bad."

"Do you know where he's gone?"

She nodded.

"California?"

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She shook her head.

"Where is he, then?"

"That I can't tell you."

"Won't you?"

"Now, may I have one of your cigarettes, please?"

"Of course . . ."

I knew she would tell me. It was something she wanted me to share with her. For a selfish reason, perhaps. Because she was desperate and afraid and she had no one to turn to for the comfort or help she needed.

"Mr. Morehouse left here to go to Georgia. Where in Georgia, I don't know. I don't think he even knew himself where he was going. You see, he didn't plan this. He was forced to leave. At the point of a gun."

She stopped talking and was staring me straight in the eyes.

"You don't believe me, do you?" she asked, after a while.

"First he's in California; now it's Georgia. . . ."

"I was with him, I tell you, in his apartment. He was working on a speech he was going to deliver out in California, when in walked these three white men. Mr. Morehouse knew one of them. He was Senator Spruce Salters. You bound to have heard of him."

"He's behind the African Colonization Plan."

"That's him."

I was incredulous.

"You're fooling! What's this—a joke?" I said, laughing.

I saw she was angry at me. "This was no joke. Why would I joke about a man I love and respect as I do Mr. Morehouse? He's like a father to me. I tell you, I was right there with him when this thing happened. I was right there! Ol' Senator Salters even addressed Mr. Morehouse as "boy," and ordered Mr. Morehouse to come with him. Mr. Morehouse wanted to know where he was taking him and what this was all about. Ol' Senator Salters laughed, and said, 'Don't be scared, boy. We'll tell you all about it later. There ain't time to explain. I'm going to take you to meet some friends of the colored race.' . . . Mr. Morehouse said, 'Well,

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Senator, would you mind just telling me where we're going?' . . . The Senator told him they were driving all the way to Georgia in his private car to a conference with the Ku Klux Klan."

I still couldn't believe her. It didn't sound like a thing that could be true. It sounded like an hallucination—like the wild imaginings of a sick mind blowing its top. She was sick, this girl, mentally sick, I suspected. Maybe it was only a temporary thing, a state of mental aberration induced by marijuana. The limpid, glassy eyes told me nothing. They would not support my suspicions. They only seemed angered and hurt by my disbelief. They turned from me,

I watched the small, tragic nape of her neck, my thoughts wholly detached from her.

Incredible as the thing sounded to me, it set fire to my imagination. A race leader, whisked away to parts unknown, to meet in secret with the Ku Klux Klan! Think of that! My God! Could such a thing happen? I asked myself. What might any Negro and the Klan have in common to talk about? Was it to make some deal with Morehouse? We'll do this, provided you'll do that. Whatever it was, it certainly had to do with Negroes in the South. My speculations pyramided to dizzying heights. Perhaps the Klan will support his scheme for a Negro state, a buffer state in some no-man's land between the North and the South. Perhaps it was to win Morehouse's support of a compromise bill which Senator Salters had authored, a bill which would underwrite the exodus of Negroes from the South. Perhaps, I had misgivings, this was the making of the Great Betrayal—the Negro people being sold down the river, for somebody was forever selling the Negro short. . . .

"You say they forced Morehouse to leave with them?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied, turning her face towards me.

"Did you notify the police or the F.B.I.?"

"Senator Salters warned me not to. He told me I must keep my mouth shut, if I wanted Mr. Morehouse to stay alive. You're the only someone I dare to trust. I didn't tell Haskell Sneed or anybody. I told Haskell he'd left suddenly for California without explaining why. I don't think Haskell believes me, though."

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"How long ago this been?" I asked.

"Wednesday night. Three days almost. I should have had a wire or phone call by this time unless . . ."

"You don't know these southerners. They don't rush. They move slow. They are always going to do things their own way. I wouldn't want to be in the spot I think Morehouse is in. The hot air they can generate is enough to suffocate a man! I picture him sitting off to himself while they huddle together and talk about their friendship for the colored people. They always know what is best for us. Know us better than we know ourselves! They, the only people who understand us! What else can Morehouse do but sit there like a brass monkey and keep his thoughts to himself? By now, he's probably lost so much face that if he looked at himself in a mirror, he'd only see a speck. A cracker isn't going to grant a colored man but so much dignity, I don't care who he is."

"What do you think *we* ought to do?"

"I'm damned if I know, baby. Do nothing. What can you? I don't know of a thing we can do right now. We don't want to mess it up by butting in. Maybe, in another day or two, you'll be hearing something from him."

It didn't satisfy her. "I'm so scared! Honest to God!" Ravenna cried. She shivered and laughed uneasily. "I'm glad I have you, Mr. King. I'd be out of my mind if I didn't have you to turn to."

"How come you trust me so?" I asked her.

"I trust you?" she reiterated.

"Yes."

"Anybody'd trust you, just by looking at you."

"Ravenna?"

"Sir?"

"That'll never do, now."

"What'll never do, Mr. King?"

"All this formality."

"Oh. . . ."

"'Mistering' and 'siring'! You can call me Othello. I won't get mad, you hear?"

"Agreed! From now on: Othello. Okay?"

"Check!"

"What was it you started to ask me, Othello?"

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"Oh! . . . By the way, how old are you?"
"Twenty-one plus a few months."
"Which makes me old enough to be your daddy!"
"So what?"
"You suppose your mother would mind me taking you to dinner tonight? Think she'd approve of me?"
"Listen, I'm my own woman!"
She stared at me in a peculiarly intense fashion, her bosom heaving and her nostrils dilating slightly. In some way, I must have communicated my feelings for her, what I was ashamed to tell her about the something she aroused in me. The skin-tight dress barely concealed her nakedness. I struggled to exorcise the lewdness of my thinking, her young, firm nakedness, royal black and sweet, like a bing cherry, I thought. I slid my arm around the small of her back and drew her to me. She yielded candidly, throwing her head back and resting it at an angle, receptively. I brought my lips down to press tightly upon her own. She gave in to me, writhing ecstatically and moaning softly, then, abruptly, with an astonishing rudeness, she withdrew. And it was all over. So quickly.

Ravenna picked up my hat. I followed her sheepishly out into the hall. She opened the front door. We stood together out on the stoop for a time, neither of us saying a word. The sky was opening, for it was all of thirty minutes past four. Silhouettes passed by on their way to some place of work, footsteps being their only corporeal signs of identification, sounding hollow and disembodied. A milk truck jangled down the street without stopping anywhere.

"See you tonight what time?" Ravenna asked huskily. She tried to clear her throat.

"If six isn't too early," I said.

"No. Six is fine. I'll expect you. O-kay?"

"O-kay." I pressed her tiny hand. "Keep sweet!" I whispered.

"You, too!" she smiled.

The door clicked shut as I reached the sidewalk.

I called for Ravenna around six o'clock that evening. We went to a place she recommended—one of the better eating places in Harlem. It had a slick, papier-mâché pretense of opulence that

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gave you the queasy feeling that you were dining in somebody's ultra-modern bedroom.

From the looks of the people around me, they were Negroes who were in the money, or who wanted to give the impression they were, professional and business people and fourflushers who might be here today and gone tomorrow—back to any one of hundreds of greasy-spoon cafés in Harlem.

"You eat here regularly?" I asked Ravenna.

"Only when I'm flush, or somebody brings me here," she said. "Morehouse brings me here to have lunch sometimes."

"Hasn't your Mr. Morehouse got a girl friend—some kind of a lady friend?"

"I don't know."

"You'd think a man like him would have a lady friend."

"Have you?"

"I did have—over on the other side."

"She was white?"

"English girl. We weren't overserious. She had a husband. Naval officer. Away a lot. We just played around, had fun, that was all. . . ." I was embarrassed talking to Ravenna about a white girl. I knew better than to say more than I had said already, for I was afraid I might appear to boast or to sentimentalize. "Do you mean to tell me that there is no woman in Morehouse's life?"

"No. I didn't say that. What I said was, I didn't know."

"You're not telling, baby! You're the boss's secretary."

"There you go, thinking evil!" she laughed.

"I'm jealous."

"What's got into you!" she trilled.

"I thought I made it plain to you last night."

"You wouldn't fool me, now?" she said in a way to make me laugh and drop the subject for the time being.

She was agreeable company. She seemed to want me to enjoy being out with her. I could almost see her mind at work planning the evening for me. She seemed to know exactly what I wanted to do, where I wanted to go. We would stay in Harlem, see the stage show at the Apollo Theatre, then go to the Savoy Ballroom, she suggested.

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We abandoned ourselves to the evening and coasted along with the pleasures which came our way, the coarse, low pleasures of the burlesque show at the Apollo and the free-for-all dancing at the Savoy Ballroom.

The traffic on the dance floor was so heavy that we decided to give up dancing and to watch the crowd from the sanctuary of the sidelines.

"I don't know about you, Ravenna, but I can't compete with that gang," I complained, limping from the kick in the shins I'd received from a rhythm-happy foot. The girl who kicked me just looked over her shoulder at me, with no expression at all on her painted face, and said, "Send me the bill!"

We had left the dance floor, and I was keeping an eye out for a vacant table, when Ravenna stopped short, still holding to my arm, and I could feel her heart beating. All of a sudden she was panicky and strange. She took a deep breath and quickly told me, "Look, Othello, excuse me. I have to go. Excuse me. . . ." She backed away from me. The space between us immediately filled with couples passing to and from the dance floor. I stood with my mouth wide open, not knowing what to make of her behavior. I felt terribly foolish. I tried to see where she was going, without following her. I caught sight of her as she was about to go downstairs. I saw her with someone, though I couldn't make out who it was she was with. His back was toward me. She waited for him to join her on the stairs. She was nervous, frightened. He took his time going down the steps with her, his eyes leering with censure, his lips quivering with bated rage. It was the young fellow I had seen her with the night before in Brooklyn. He must have spotted us on the street and followed us here to the Savoy.

I had time to get good and mad. I must have cursed her out loud, for, just then, a hefty, volatile black woman brandished a soda-pop bottle in my face.

"Who you talkin' to?" she glowered.

"I wasn't talking to you!" I said, matching her anger with equal fury and defiance, and moved away from her.

All I could think of was that Ravenna was no good, that she had the veneer of a decent, wholesome young woman, but under-

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neath she was just a sex-ripened little strumpet, probably carrying on an illicit relationship with some other woman's husband. She was probably playing Morehouse, too, for a sucker, the way she would play me, if I were to get in deep with her. I got sick at my stomach from thinking the worst about her. My mind became a cesspit.

I came out into the street and moseyed for a time in front of the entrance, watching people going in and coming out and getting into cabs and driving off. I tried not to think. There was a bar and grill diagonally across the street. So I went there.

I immersed myself in the crowd of raucous, animated drinkers bivouacked around the bar. I came out into a partial clearing in the rear of the place, which was an enormous room honeycombed with semi-private booths. I found one that was empty and hid myself. A waitress spotted me in passing. She smiled hospitably and tossed her hips. I waited indifferently for her to come back. I didn't want to eat, but I ordered the fried chicken she recommended along with French-fries and coffee.

"Are you still stopping at the hotel?"

Surprised and quizzical, I looked her up and down. She knew I was wondering. An amused, impudent smile creased her pretty face.

"I don't forget a face—not a face like yours," she said.

"Mine isn't much to look at," I jibed, still wondering.

"I must have thought a lot of it to remember it. And I only saw you once, getting out a taxi and going by me into the Booker T. that morning. You passed right by me," she said.

Now I remembered her. "You were talking to Whosis—the bellhop?"

"Lester. Now, don't tell me you noticed *me!*"

"I sure did! Lester asked you to stick around."

"What did he say about me?"

"Nothing. I heard him ask you to stick around," I said.

"We don't mean a thing to each other. I just know him from coming in here. I don't have any steady. I think I'm better off that way, don't you?"

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"That depends on the company you keep," I said.

"I think you've got something there!" she tittered.

She was alerted by a couple who were preparing to leave. "I'll see you," she told me, and slid away.

She was busy, back and forth. If she looked my way at all, I didn't know it. She was hustling, driving herself, and shrewdly attending strictly to business, keeping an eye on everybody, apparently, except me. I finished eating and wanted my check and looked around to get her attention. I had a feeling that she was deliberately ignoring me. I started to get up and walk over to her, but she had vanished. I settled back, thinking to myself, After all, I'm not going anywhere, so I may as well . . . I took a cigarette from my pack, then placed the pack in front of me on the table. I was fishing about for matches, when a light flickered before my eyes. I squinted up into the waitress's face. Still holding the match, she shook loose a cigarette from my pack, lighted hers after mine was lit, then sat down across from me.

She had removed her apron. The black dress she was wearing was part of her uniform, but it looked no different from any dress a woman would wear in the street. On her, it made no difference anyway. Most anything, a shift or a cheap cotton housedress, would have looked good on her frame. She had hastily tidied up her face and hair.

With the cigarette she stretched back and relaxed.

"All through?" I asked.

She nodded, her eyes casually focusing at me. They had an open, searching look.

"Hungry?"

She shook her head, still regarding me.

"Drink?"

Again she shook her head.

"I'll get *you* something, if you like," she said. "I don't drink."

"No, never mind."

"Sure you do," she decided. "Be right back. What do you like? Scotch? Bourbon——?"

"You be the doctor," I said.

She was pleased, and winked at me.

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She came back with a highball.
"I made it up special for you," she said.
"What's in it?"
"Scotch, some Bourbon, a little ginger ale."
"What's your name, by the way?"
"Katherine."
"'Katherine Special,'" I said, naming the drink.
I sipped and tasted in the gingerly astute manner of a connoisseur, which I wasn't. Her cheeks rippled with dimply smiles. She reminded me of a little tomboy tickled by some mischief she had cooked up.

"Well, it ought to cheer you up," she said.

"Do I look like I need cheering up?" I asked.

"You sure do!" she came right back.

"I'm the worrying kind."

"I'll listen to your troubles. Might help me forget my own. Do you want me to listen?"

"To *my* troubles?"

"Sure!"

"I've got so many!"

"Women?"

"Good Lord, no!"

She looked incredulous.

"If I told you, you might laugh. You probably think I'm crazy."

"Nothing of the kind. You're not the crazy type. You're too intelligent and cultured. You're out of the ordinary. You like books and good music and good shows, things the average person couldn't appreciate. Am I right about you?"

"I have a little education. Not too much, not enough, I hope, to make me a fool. I'm not educated out of my race."

"Doesn't take much for some Negroes to be. The educated Negroes don't do anything to help the race. They try to get away from the race as fast as they can. I know the light ones don't stay in it. The black ones wouldn't either, if they could help it. I'm like you. I'm neither. We're *sepia*. We have to stay on this side."

"Do you mind it?"

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"What's the use?"

"We can't take a back seat. We can't just stand around and moan," I said.

"What do you think we ought to do?"

"I don't know. I think we'll have to do something. You're a serious girl, Katherine," I said, trying not to sound patronizing.

She frowned. "It's no good, though, to think too seriously about these things. You only make yourself unhappy. What can you do about it? What can you do? You and I want to do something to help our people. What can you and I do *alone?* We just have to go along, till this whole messy business of race and color straightens itself out, somehow. It isn't all the white man's fault. I can see that right up here in Harlem. White folks used to come up here and spend their money. Now they don't any more. They're afraid. Negroes acted so mean, insulting them and pushing them around. They wouldn't do that down South. Yet, they get here, they want to hit white people. You see them get on the subway and they're noisy and uncouth. They're drunk and falling over everybody. They embarrass others like us. These white people make up their minds that we're all like that. Take one loud-mouthed, drunken, common Negro, and he'll spoil it for a hundred that's decent and self-respecting. You know that's true. White people won't come up here any more. They're afraid of us. They don't like us in their places downtown. They'd like to keep us out of their places. I don't know what is going to become of Negroes——" She pressed back against the wall of the booth, her face rigid with helpless anger, staring hard at me, then she slumped forward comically, her elbows coming to rest on the table. She pouted, laughing at herself. "And I don't care two cents' worth!"

"Have a sip," I said, holding the half-emptied glass close to her curled lips.

"No," she said dreamily.

"I want you to," I said firmly.

"I can't take this stuff. If you lead me astray . . ." she babbled, as I tipped the brim, forcing a little into her mouth. She swallowed, coughed. "Oooooh! That burns!"

I drank the rest, while she recuperated and watched. I reached

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out across the table and took hold of her hand. Half rising, she leaned over and kissed me furtively, getting out of the booth at the same time.

I still held her hand as I got up.

"I won't be made love to in a common old ginmill!" she reproached.

"We don't have to stay here," I said.

"We're not. I'm going home."

"Can I come with you?"

"Would you like to come?"

"Providing . . . it's all right."

"What do you mean 'all right'?"

"You married?"

"No. And I'm not living with any joker. I got a room. My own private room, I'll have you know."

"With privileges?" I smiled.

"With privileges, too!" she smiled back. "Let's go out this side here. We'll short-cut out through this alleyway. And don't be afraid. I'm not going to roll you."

"You wouldn't get much if you did," I said.

The whangy huskiness of her soft laughter appealed to me. I followed behind her. The alley was pitch dark and reeked with the smell of turned garbage and nameless unpleasant odors. She stopped and ringed her arms around my neck. "I only want you," she said. "Will you love me?"

She pecked at my lips. My hands roved.

"Come on, let's go!" I said impatiently. "Away from this stink and smell!"

She laughed.

"Which goes to prove, I'd love you any old place!"

We walked for nearly a block through the alley. The house was on the corner. She conducted me through a labyrinthine passage, then up two flights of stairs to the apartment where she lived. She was quiet, so I took the hint. I followed her into the apartment and down a dark hallway, its somber quietness distracted by garrulous snoring and bedsprings giving under somebody's restless turning, behind the closed doors of the rooms on opposite sides. She guided

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me inside the sweetly scented room which belonged to her exclusively, closed the door, then turned on a blue-colored light which cloaked our shamelessness in something resembling a tropical twilight.

"We have to be a little quiet, lover. They're hard-working people. Both her and her old man get up early and go out to work. These others, well, they're like me. Night owls who sleep all day."

I sat down upon the edge of the bed and watched her as she removed her dress, kicked off her shoes, and slipped on a robe. She acquired some things she needed, then she left me, after giving me a peck, saying, "Lover, make yourself comfortable. Know what I mean?"

"All right, baby," I said. "Don't forget to come back."

I lit a cigarette and started peeling off my clothes. . . .

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3

There was no one in the lobby, except the night elevator man, who was sound asleep. Touched by his simple, earthly bliss and by the peace and quiet of the place, I did not bother to ring for the desk clerk. Instead, I got my own key and took the stairway up, without his knowing I was ever there. I could have walked off with the place and he'd never have known, I mused. As I was letting myself into my room, I could still hear his purring snores from below. "Wake up, man! Goddamit, man, wake up!" Grumbling, grumbling, assuaged by recognition. Thick, sleepy talk I could not cipher. The elevator gate closing. The ascent.

It was not quite day enough in my room. I switched on the light to see, and, seeing, I gasped, for, lying curled up on my bed, fully dressed, but in her stocking feet, asleep, was Ravenna Snowden. I stood for a long time at the foot of the bed looking down at her small, fragile form, trying to figure how, by what artifice, she had got into my room, how long she could have been here, and, naturally, of course, why she was here. It didn't occur to me to waken her and ask. But all the time I knew that I was merely stalling, that I was taking the time to speculate and to ready myself for whatever might come of this perplexing situation.

I was thinking, too, about the way she had run out on me, about the obnoxious young man with whom she had left the Savoy Ballroom. I burned. "You . . . you cheap, little, two-timing——" I raged inwardly.

I went to the window and raised it higher to let in some more fresh morning air. I needed to cool off physically as well as men-

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tally. There was a good breeze coming through. Its moisture was like an astringent to my face, cooling and relaxing.

I heard the bed give. She'd turned over and had wakened herself. She was aware suddenly of my being in the room. I wouldn't turn around. I wouldn't, until I was ready to. I pretended not to know that she was now sitting up and watching me as I continued to stare out of the window, as if something in the street were absorbing my attention. I heard and visualized every single move she made. She reached for her shoes and slipped them on. The edge of the bed creaked a little as her weight shifted in the process of getting her shoes on. Grunts of annoyance. The feet had swollen. The shoes must have pained a little. She might have borrowed my shoehorn, which was on the dresser. She might not have known that it was there. Such were the trivia of my thoughts as I feigned absorption in something elsewhere and irrelevant.

I began to feel, though, that she was on to me. She knew I heard her and knew she was awake, waiting only for me to acknowledge her. I think that she suspected that I was too embarrassed to turn around and have it out with her in some knock-down-drag-out Negro fashion, that I was sweating venom trying to think of what to say to her. Ravenna was a pretty bright girl.

I made a project of lighting one cigarette.

It was she who finally broke the ice. "May I, please, have one of your cigarettes?" she asked in a politely innocent tone. That was a trial balloon, I thought. In retaliation for my ignoring her so long.

I turned slowly, with reluctance, to face her. I felt my eyes contract from anger and resentment as I looked at her. Her lovely little face, with its painted and penciled quaintness, the subtle blending of crimson and black, artificial and yet beguiling, was unrepentant, brazen, and tense with pride.

My nastiness provoked me, and I threw first the pack of cigarettes, then the matches over to her. Her bosom undulated with a savage disdain. She made no attempt to catch them, instead, she allowed them to land on the floor at her feet. She didn't say anything. She stared at me coldly, until I came and picked them up and offered them to her as I should.

I was done for.

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Impotently, I hedged, "I didn't expect to find you here."

Ravenna extracted a cigarette, tossed the pack upon the bed, and lighted the cigarette. She inhaled too much smoke and had to cough it up. Her seizure of coughing gave me an advantage. I was able to compose myself. I went on talking.

"Naturally, I'm surprised to see you, after what happened last night," I said. "I recognized the fellow you left with, so I knew you wouldn't be back. I didn't bother to wait. I didn't do so bad after you left, you know? I still had a very nice time. One of the nicest times, I think, I've ever had." I meant to rub it in. I wanted to hurt her feelings. "By the way, how did you make out?"

"I was right here. I was waiting for you."

"You and *who else?*—your boy friend?"

"I've been here by myself. I didn't go any place with him. I went out into the street with him. That was all. I got into a cab and told him I was going home. Instead, I came here."

"I'm supposed to believe that?"

She shrugged. "Suit yourself," she said. "If you want to, you can ask the manager at the Savoy. I called up from here. I had the manager page you. He said you must have left. I sat here and waited, thinking you might come."

"You on the level?"

"Call up downstairs and ask Jerry what time I came here."

"I don't want to check on you. After all, you left me with the understanding you were coming right back. Instead of that, you meet some other joker and off you go with him. I saw the two of you leaving together. What am I supposed to think? How do you suppose I feel about that? You don't think I'm going to *understand* that kind of business, do you? Hell, no! What it looked like to me was you'd planned the whole thing—to ditch me to be with somebody you preferred to be with. I recognized the guy. Because I saw you two together in the station the other night in Brooklyn. I just didn't say anything about it to you. I didn't figure I knew you well enough to mention it. Was none of my business. I walked straight by you, while you were standing on the steps. You were crying. I pretended not to recognize you. I didn't know what the guy done to you to make you cry."

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She hung her head. Without looking at me, she rose and went to the dresser. She must have sighted the ashtray there. She crushed the remaining half of the cigarette in the tray.

"Lemme tell you, I was mad as the devil when I saw you leave with him. After showing you what I thought was a good time, to have you run out on me like you did. Why, I felt like a god-damned fool. Now, if you'd explained to me that you wanted to be with this guy, I wouldn't have liked it, but, still and all, I would have excused you. I know you can't always help a thing like that. I've been around. I'm not pretending to know what he is to you. That's not the point. The point is, he's the one you wanted to be with. I'm an outsider and a stranger. If he is your man, why not just own up to it? Tell a poor guy something, will you? Don't just leave him standing there."

She turned to face me, gesticulating.

"I didn't know what to do!" she cried. "I got scared when I saw him. I'm afraid of him. I was 'fraid he might do something. He's threatened to kill me and any man he catches me with. He's got an awful temper. He's evil. He'll cut you. I know that nigger. That's what he is—a low-down, evil, knife-totin' nigger, a mean, South Carolina geechee. He might have hurt you, that's what I was afraid of."

"How did you ever get mixed up with somebody like that? You —an intelligent, refined girl like you. I don't understand you, Ravenna. How could you have anything in common with that joker? Are you in love with him?"

"No! . . . I got so I despise him. I won't have anything to do with him any more. That's why he's so mad at me. He thinks I've got somebody else I'm going with. It isn't true, because I don't have anybody that I'm serious with, outside of you. And I'm nothing to you, you know that. I tried to explain to that ignoramus that you were going to write a book about Mr. Morehouse and that I was helping you gather material. It was a waste of breath! It didn't register the way I meant it. No, his dirty, evil mind must always twist everything around, must make it something bad." She smiled a little. It was a lighthearted, impish little smile which made me suspect that she was proud to have a man jealous of her, a man

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whose heart she could torture. "I admit, I did love him at first. I thought so, anyway. I guess I was just so desperate for somebody, and he came along."

"You mean to say you had to choose *him?*"

"I had to take what I could get."

"Oh, go 'way! There must be thousands of desirable young men in Harlem, with intelligence and refinement, from nice families and with a college education, for a girl like you to choose from. Where do you get off saying a thing like that?"

"Sure, there are a lot of them. I know that better than you. Oh, how well do I know! Do you want to know the truth? I'll tell you the truth. *I'm too black, that's why*. You savvy? They don't want a black girl. They want them, at least, your color. Lighter, if they can get them lighter. *They don't want no black girl*. They may be black themselves—black as the ace of spades—but they don't want any black children. They'll tell you that, too. A black girl has to take what she can get. She's lucky she can get a man, any man, that'll have her. All you colored men want light-skin women. What do you expect a black woman to do, just get off the face of the earth? Why can't you love us the same and equal as you love some high-yallar? Isn't black a beautiful color?"

Up to now, I'd had her on the defensive. It was the other way around now.

"You can't accuse me of any color prejudice," I said. "I won't have it, Ravenna. Because I'm not. I never was prejudiced against black people. I think it's silly for any Negro to prefer one color to another. Beauty comes in black as well as brown or some lighter shade. Take you, for instance. Baby, they don't come any prettier than you, I don't care a hoot what color they are. You're beautiful . . . luscious. You're——" I came toward her as I was telling her. "Honey, do you hear what I'm saying? You are a beautiful girl, Ravenna."

She warily turned away her gaze and, not looking up, she asked, "Are you just saying that?"

"I mean that. I wish you were mine."

"You men are funny," she said.

"If you were mine, I'd really show you."

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"Show me how?"

"I'd love the living daylights out of you! Sweetheart, you'd get the full treatment!"

"I'm gonna do a tailspin!"

"You won't for me."

"How do you know?"

"I just do!"

"What about this girl last night?"

"What about your guy?" I parried.

"You think I love that fellow, don't you?"

"I'm not sure what I think. Maybe it's better I don't think at all about him. I don't want to think the wrong thing. Let's forget him. What do you say?"

"Am I on probation?"

"You darn right, you are! You break your probation, I'm gonna break your pretty little neck! You understand?"

I cupped her narrow cheeks in the palms of my hands. She kissed them.

"Please, get some sleep," she admonished. "I'll be going, now. Because there may be a telegram from Mr. Morehouse waiting at home for me. If there isn't, then he might phone. Oh, I'd go to the police, only I'm afraid to! They warned me not to. Othello, couldn't the F.B.I. investigate without someone knowing?"

"You got me, honey. I'm always afraid of a leak, a slip-up, or something like that. You can't underestimate an old bastard like Senator Salters. They're all white folks together. You can't tell. He might fit with somebody in the F.B.I."

"Would you think they'd try to harm him?"

"I think he's safe as long as he agrees to do whatever they want him to do," I said. "If Morehouse acts smart, he'll agree to anything—anything to get 'way from down there. I know I would. I wouldn't argue with no Georgia cracker on his home ground. You couldn't win. They'd lynch Morehouse as quick as they would any other Negro. They've, maybe, already lynched him. Maybe they came and got him to take him down there and do 'way with him. Why should a Ku-Kluxer like old Senator Salters bother to negotiate with a Negro? Take him South to talk business? Does

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it sound plausible to you? Not to me, it doesn't. I think they set a trap for Morehouse, and I don't think he's coming out of it alive. For all we know, the man may be dead."

"No, no, they promised not to harm him! They promised!" she shrilled at me.

"I'd put no stock in any promise Salters made. Trust him like I would a rattlesnake! What's a nigger's life to him? You think he'd balk at killing Morehouse? Like hell he would! He come on back to Washington and brag to his friends how he took care of that biggety nigger leader in good old Dixieland style!"

She turned her back to me. I thought she was going to cry. The mirror reflected her taut, troubled face. She did not look at herself. She looked at nothing, seemingly, that the naked eye could see.

I was watching her. Why didn't I go to her? There seemed a great void between us that seemed wholly unnecessary, that puzzled and irked me.

"What's the matter?" I asked sharply.

"Solomon Morehouse is my father. Does that tell you?" she asked.

From behind her, I wrapped myself like a cloak around her. We watched each other in the mirror.

"They haven't killed him," she said. "He isn't dead. I'd feel it, if a thing like that happened to him. I'd know, if my own father was dead. Despite anything they may've done to him, he's alive, and I know he's alive."

I gentled and babied her. "You're right, honey. I don't know for sure what those folks are up to, but I'm gonna make it my business to find out. I don't want anything to happen to your father. And I don't want you to be unhappy, you hear? You go on home. I'll see you later. Round five?"

"All right," she said.

After Ravenna left me, I took a hot bath, then stretched myself out upon the bed. I shut my eyes and schemed to relax the muscles in my wearied body, but it didn't work. I lay as one in a trance, yet all I could do was to simulate sleep, for I was wide

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awake, thinking about Solomon Morehouse and reflecting upon all that had been told me thus far or that I had read about him, and from all this I tried to visualize a man of flesh and blood, the man who Ravenna said was her father. Yet, I was soon convinced that no amount of thinking could ever bring him alive to me. If I was really to know what Solomon Morehouse was like, then, at any cost, even if it meant discomfort or danger, I must do as I had originally planned. I must go to him direct, see him, talk with him, and become his friend and companion.

But where—where would I look? Where would I find him? I asked. My guess was that wherever Senator Salters was at this moment, Solomon Morehouse was likely there or close by. If I could locate the present whereabouts of the Senator from Georgia, I would know where to look for Solomon Morehouse.

So, immediately, I put through a telephone call to the Senator's residence in Washington, only to be told by his secretary what I expected to be told, that the Senator had left the city several days ago. I told the secretary that it was a matter of the utmost importance that I contact the Senator. His secretary thought that he might be reached at his home in Ruffins Croft, Georgia. On second thought, he lied, for he had told me something he ought not to have told me, he didn't think the Senator had gone South. He sounded frightened and, in desperation, insisted that I tell him what the nature of my business was. I politely declined and hung up.

The next call I made was to Ruffins Croft in Georgia. I asked to speak to Senator Spruce Salters.

A soggy, unctuous voice, which sounded as if it were burped out of a beer-and-whiskey-logged belly, said, "Hullo?"

"Is the Senator there?" I tried to give to my voice a terse, snobbish officiousness.

"Who is this calling?" he asked cautiously.

"I am not at liberty to say, except that this is official business, and it's very urgent. I can talk only to Senator Salters," I insisted.

Just then, I heard another voice which I knew intuitively was that of Senator Salters, though I had never before heard his voice. It had the boneheaded bluster and pompousness of one used to swinging his weight and authority around and making his sub-

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ordinates cringe. He demanded to know who the party was that was calling him. The man whispered that it was somebody calling from New York, that the party wouldn't give his name, but that he claimed he wanted to speak directly to the Senator on official business.

"Gimme it heah," the Senator said rashly. "I'll talk to him." The "Hello?" was deceptively softened.

"Senator?"

"Speaking."

"I'm a reporter."

"Reporter? I thought you said you was some official of the United States government? What you mean by calling me heah? What is it you want?"

"Simply this, Senator. I want you to tell me where Solomon Morehouse is."

"Solomon who?" he hedged.

"Solomon Morehouse," I enunciated.

I waited. There was no sound, so I knew he hadn't hung up the receiver. It occurred to me that the Senator was instructing his man to get to another phone and have the operator trace my call. I was almost dead sure.

"It won't be necessary for you to trace my call, Senator. My name is Othello King and I am calling from my room at the Booker T. Washington Hotel in New York—in Harlem, that is."

He tore out at me angrily. "I don't know nothing 'bout any Solomon Morehouse. I never hear tell of any nigger by this name."

"Oh?" I said sweetly. "How is it, then, you know he's a Negro?"

"Why, uh—why, uh——"

"Is it coincidence?"

"I don't know and I don't care! The name suggests a nigger to me. It's a nigger name. Now, see heah, you've wasted 'nough o' my time. I'm a busy man. . . ."

"Don't hand me that!" I cut in quickly, for fear he'd hang up. "You forced Solomon Morehouse at gun-point to accompany you South for some kind of secret meeting with the Ku Klux Klan. You're holding him a prisoner. I demand to know why you're holding this man against his will."

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"Why, uh—why, uh, I've never heah tell of anything so preposterously ridiculous, so, so reckless and irresponsible in all my life! You're barking up the wrong tree. Must be that nigger gin or them there reefers you niggers in Harlem smoke which would induce you to make such fantastic insinuations."

"Kidnaping, Senator, is a federal crime."

"Now, you hold on. I'm gonna tell you something. You listen to me. If this Solomon Morehouse means anything to you, then I advise you to keep your damned mouth shut! So far, nothing is happened to him, *so far.*"

The receiver went dead. I returned the phone to its cradle. My hand, as I looked at it, was sweaty and trembling. I sat down upon the edge of the bed, rubbing my forehead and my eyes with my fingertips abstractedly, then I went backward with a thud, the upper half of me lying flat on my back across the bed. I tried to think. I tried to wonder whether I had made a dreadful mistake by calling Senator Salters, whether, by so doing, I had jeopardized the life of the man I wanted to save. But I fell asleep.

My phone was ringing. It might have been ringing for I don't know how long. I was so drugged with sleep, my whole body seemed paralyzed. I seemed to know what was happening, but I was powerless to respond. I knew I was having a nightmare, that I must will myself awake. Release was sudden. I sprang up to a sitting position, groggily, the ringing shocking me into the realization that I was awake.

I grasped the phone and muttered into it, "Yes. . . . Who is it?"

"Ravenna . . . Ravenna . . ." She sounded so far away. There must be something the matter with the phone, I thought, or my hearing had gone bad. "Othello—is that you?"

"Yes! . . . You woke me up out of a deep sleep. Say, what time is it? You were going to call me at five."

I was leisurely, and still groggy, and she was talking ahead of me. I couldn't understand what it was she was telling me.

"What was that again?" I asked. Finally, I did make out what it was she was telling me. I was to come over to her father's apartment. It was apartment 5-C, the fifth floor of the same building where the association's offices were. As I was assuring her that I

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would be right over, she hung up. I was going to ask her whether she had already eaten; if she had, then I would catch a quick snack on my way over there, for my stomach was empty and growling.

I got up, dressed, and shaved. A strange, disturbing presentiment came over me while I was shaving. It had to do with Ravenna, the way her voice had sounded over the phone and my inability to catch the whole of what she was saying. I was trying to figure out whether she had sounded nervous and excited. I began to wonder if something was wrong, if she had some bad news to tell me, and didn't wish to talk about it over the phone. Perhaps, it was all my imagination, I told myself; still it didn't assuage the uneasiness I felt, adding to the vexation in the pit of my stomach.

Still, I was in no hurry. I just didn't feel like hurrying.

In spite of myself, my disinclination to rush and stopping to have pie and coffee in the restaurant downstairs, the time that it took me to reach the apartment where Ravenna was waiting, was little more than half an hour. Ravenna had not called me at five o'clock as she had promised. It was after seven when my phone rang and I had wakened. It was a quarter to eight when I reached the apartment.

I pressed the door buzzer, at once hearing the alarm within, and waited, expecting any moment the response and the opening of the door to admit me. After making what I considered was a reasonable allowance for the delay, I attacked the buzzer with a vengeance. Still, no response. I then, on a rude impulse, tried the door, and was surprised when it yielded. In fact, not a little unnerved, thinking I might have committed an unlawful act, a moral wrong, to say the least. Ravenna must have stepped out, I told myself, hoping to throttle the license of my thoughts. I entered noiselessly, alerting my ears for some audible sign of life within. A short, narrow hallway bisected the apartment. The lights were on in every one of its five rooms. Suddenly, I became aware of talking, though the voices sounded too patly modulated to come from any other source than a television show.

I called to Ravenna repeatedly, but got no answer. An enervating fright dogged each step I took toward the room at the end of the hall, the room from which the voices came.

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It was Solomon Morehouse's study. On the other side of the room, opposite from where I stood in the doorway, I saw the televised images of the people whose voices I heard down the hall. The bottom half of one of the windows was raised flush with the upper, the drapes winnowing outward through the opening.

As if I knew for sure Ravenna was there, I called to her softly, "Ravenna? . . ." and stepped inside. And, sure enough, she was there. When I looked down, I saw her lying at my feet. Immediately, I gathered her up in my arms and hustled her into an adjoining bedroom, thinking she must have fainted. I laid her on the bed, foolishly calling to her and asking her what had happened. It was when I slid my hand from under her back that I realized she was dead. The cuff of my white shirt and the sleeve of the tan-colored jacket I wore were both stained with her blood.

I was so choked with pity I burst into tears. "Oh, my God! Oh, God!" I cried. I don't remember how long I was there, or what I thought or did while there. It was sometime later that I found myself back in Morehouse's study, looking out of the window and down upon a narrow, carefully tended, brick-paved backyard.

In the dusk, I saw the body of a man slumped over the low iron picket fence which enclosed the rear of the premises. It was as limp and lifeless as a giant-sized rag doll which it resembled. The size of the man, the clothes . . . I did not have to see his face to know who he was. "That crazy lunatic!" I thought in a rage of pitiless revulsion at his impalement. "Damn fool! What a mess! What a awful mess!"

A mess I've got myself in! The thought shocked me into a cold sweat. I don't want to get mixed up in this, I worried. It may not even look like what I think it is, may not have happened the way I think it happened. It could be many things, angles the police could never guess at, the sinister shadow of Senator Salters which hung over Ravenna, over Solomon Morehouse, yes, and over me!

This thing had the plausibility of murder and suicide. To a policeman, a Negro going berserk and shooting his girl friend, then committing suicide by leaping from a five-story window. I remembered Ravenna saying that her boy friend was a knife-toter. He would have stabbed her. You could not expect the police to know

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that. Negroes do shoot one another and commit suicide, too. But this particular Negro was a bad actor, and a bad-acting Negro is more likely to knife than shoot, and a bad-acting Negro rarely takes his own life. Such was my befuddlement. I couldn't believe the suicide. Not *him!* He would beat it away from New York and lose himself in the black ghetto of another metropolis, say, Chicago or Los Angeles, take up with some other woman, and live quietly unnoted, and perhaps never get into trouble again. There never is a big 'miration made over one Negro killing another Negro. There never is. The white newspapers ignore such trivia. And Negro newspapers give it a merely routine reporting. It's all forgotten so soon. Lynchings, scandals, and society make much better reading in Negro papers than commonplace murder.

Befuddled though I was, I was not going to call the police and get mixed up in this—whatever it was! I got out.

"You're leaving us, Mr. King!"
"Yes . . . I'll be leaving here. . . ."
"Not for good, we hope."
"I don't think so."
"Well . . . when you come back this way——"
"I hope you'll have a room for me."
"We most certainly shall! You just wire us when you're coming. We'll take care of your reservation, all right."
"Thank you."
"The man came for your luggage, while you were out."
"Yes, I know. . . . Your key. Here it is. I'm all set with you?"
"Yes, sir. You're all paid up."
"I guess that's all!"
"Hope you have a nice trip, Mr. King."
"Thank you. Take care, now!"
"'Bye!"

I was hoping that he wouldn't notice the lady's overnight bag I was carrying, but notice it he did and it was all he could do to contain his curiosity. I had borrowed this from Katherine with no intention of ever returning it. She knew I wouldn't, since the thing wasn't worth over two ninety-eight, though I had asked to borrow it.

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I had spent the night with Katherine. I left in the morning, returned to the hotel, and packed my things, then I went out and hired a fellow Katherine had recommended to deliver my belongings to the place where she lived. Her landlady allowed me to use the storage space in the basement allotted for their apartment. My things were to remain there until I returned from the trip I was going to take.

I didn't tell Katherine where I was going or when I was coming back. With a stoic reserve, she refrained from asking. I felt an obligation to tell her, but I just couldn't bring myself to do so. She was intelligent, and I figured she must realize that I had a really good reason for keeping this business to myself. She trusted me. Why? I may never know. Even on such short acquaintance, she trusted me.

Katherine hadn't been particularly surprised when I showed up at her apartment the evening before.

Her landlady, Mrs. Fortune, a bespectacled, work-hardened woman well along in her sixties, met me at the door. She had a ready smile and she managed without appearing rude to keep me on the other side of her threshold until Katherine came to vouch for me.

Katherine made us acquainted, and Mrs. Fortune was pleased to meet me. Smiling, she awkwardly back-shuffled and returned to whatever she was doing at the time I rang the bell.

Katherine looked scrubbed and glistening clean, as though she had just hopped out of a tub of warm suds, hastily covered her nakedness with a wrap-around cotton housedress, and rushed out to identify me. Her hair was pinned up and rimmed with a turban of cotton toweling. The dampness of her body showed through the dress which adhered to her suggestively. As she walked ahead of me into the brightness of her room, she suddenly became aware of the cloth's transparency, looked at me, and laughed ashamedly.

"Oh, dear! I ain't got a thing on! I heard you, I came running!"

"You look all right," I said.

"No, I don't! You turn your head, while I get some clothes on and fix myself up."

I sat down upon the edge of the bed, pretended to keep my

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eyes respectfully aloof, while she primped in front of the oval mirror of her dressing table. She went at it with the swiftness and deliberateness of a quick-change artist, talking a blue streak.

Her chattiness and gaiety began to irritate me. I began to wonder why I had come here to her right after the terrible experience I had just undergone. Why hadn't I gone to my sister's instead and talked with her and Chivers, since I didn't want to be alone, since I wanted somebody to tell my troubles to, somebody I had a right to trust. Not a stranger. Katherine, for all her attraction and promise, was, after all, a stranger, a girl I had met in a cheap bar and grill a little over twenty-four hours—a night and day—ago. I come to her for solace, after so shattering an ordeal as the one I just came through!

Katherine! Katherine! What right have you to matter so much —to be in my path—to cheapen my tragedy? Who the hell are you!

I only half listened to what she was saying to me. It didn't matter. She was unworthy, yet I felt I needed the asylum of her room, her innocent protection, to clear my head.

I knew I was acting strangely, knowing she was bound to notice. When she did, she took me quite by surprise, confronted me with a perplexed, pained stare.

"What is it, sugar? Tell me. Is something the matter?" she asked.

She was tender, solicitous. She sat down beside me on the bed and took my hand in hers.

I didn't answer. I only looked at her.

"I do wish you would tell me, Othello, but, if you rather not, for some reason you have, you don't have to. I won't feel bad." She continued right on talking in her soothing, amiable manner. I knew she was not just putting on, either. "I'm awfully glad you came by, Othello, to see me. I been at home all day. Oh, I washed and I ironed, I got this room cleaned up. I'm not a good housekeeper. This place sure needed it! It was a rat's nest! I'm glad you didn't see what it looked like the other night! I turned on the *colored* light, you remember? I see other women how they keep such a good house. Lazy, no-count me! I curl up in bed with a good book to read, and I'm done for the rest of the day, till time for

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me to go to work! Poor Sister Fortune just shakes her head at me. I'm not a good woman. Mama didn't teach me right. She shouldn't have stood for my laziness. I got a older sister——"

"Did I surprise you tonight by coming here?"

"Well, yes and no."

"I think you're lying! You knew perfectly well I was coming back."

"Not *perfectly* well," she laughed softly. "I sure had a *feeling* you would."

"You wanted me to?"

"Yes! . . . yes!"

I kissed her hungrily. Momentarily, I completely forgot my despondency. The moment was soon over and gone.

"Katie," I said, "I've had a terrible shock this evening—just before I came here. Only a short while ago. I came straight here to you. Instinct, I guess. I wish I could tell you about it, Katie, darling. I'd rather not, right now. It's no concern to you anyway."

She looked hurt. "It is, Othello, since it affects you."

"I don't mean it that way, honey. I mean it's something I'm not clear about myself, that I have to clear up all by myself first before I can say anything. I've got to try and save a man's life—a very important man." I wanted to stop here and say no more. It was the earnestness I saw in her eyes that compelled me to go on talking. I can tell her, I decided, but I will not mention any names. "I've got to act at once. It may be too late to do anything, but I've got to try. So, I'm taking a train out of here tomorrow. I'm going South and try and save him from being lynched, if I can."

Katherine sat rigidly still listening to me.

I was relaxed now. I was settled down and it was more easy for me to talk. "I came from his apartment only a short while ago. I went to keep an appointment I'd made with his daughter. I was too late. I didn't find her alive. Somebody'd been there and murdered both her and her boy friend. I found the two of them. Thing was made to look like a murder and suicide, like her boy friend killed her and then committed suicide. But I know it wasn't like that at all. It wasn't him. It was somebody working for the Ku Klux Klan. I know it all may sound incredible to you, but the girl's father

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happens to be the most powerful and most influential Negro in the country, maybe anywhere in the world. There are a lot of angles to this thing, but this is what happened. Several days ago, a party of white southerners came here to see him. They want him to endorse their back-to-Africa movement for American Negroes. Years ago, it was Bilbo and some others had the same idea, but they didn't get anywhere with it. Now it's being revived, and, with race tension what it is, they hope to sell the idea to the government, provided they get the backing of Negro leadership. They got the man they wanted. They forced him into a waiting car and drove off with him to Georgia. Down there they figure they can persuade him to change his mind and do as he is told. His daughter was there when they came and got him. They warned her to keep quiet about it or else. Tonight was the "or else." It was for her. This terribly foolish thing I did! I'm to blame for what happened to that poor kid. I'm the one she confided in. What do I do but get on the phone and contact this southern Senator—he's the ringleader—who's holding her father at his estate in Georgia. I tricked him into admitting that her father was there. He threatened me. I guess he got busy and phoned a syndicate here to get rid of both me and the girl. Apparently, the killers mistook her boy friend for me. The boy wasn't supposed to be there. I was. They even had her phone me at the hotel and ask me to come right over. I took my time, because I didn't think it was as urgent as she said it was. The boy must have gone to the apartment looking for her and got there about the time I was expected. I think what happened was, they shot the girl, the boy was knocked unconscious by a blow on the head, then they heaved his body out of the window, to make it look like he had murdered the girl, then jumped to his own death."

I showed Katherine the bloodstains on my coat sleeve, and she winced.

"Nobody saw me enter or leave," I said. "No. There wasn't a soul around. I met no one, either in the hall or on the stairs, when I came and when I left there."

"Can you be absolutely sure, Othello?" Katherine besieged me.

"I'm positive," I assured her.

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"Thank God!" she sighed.

"They'll have no way of knowing that I'm mixed up in this. The police don't know a thing about the kidnaping. As I said, the thing was made to *look* like a murder and a suicide. For the cops, that's enough."

"What if you left your fingerprints?"

"They wouldn't check a thing like that, not when it's an open-and-shut case. Somebody—the janitor of the building, likely—will discover the boy's body down inside the court and call the police. They'll go through the building till they find the apartment with the window wide open and the girl. It will tie up."

I was greatly relieved for having told all this to Katherine. It came my turn to comfort her.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. She got up. She opened the door of a clothes closet and delved into it until she found what she was after. She came toward me with a bottle in her hand. "I got this for you, *specially*," she said, keeping her voice low. The seal had not been broken. She handed it to me. "I've got a couple of glasses here. I'll have to get the water for your chaser from the faucet in the bathroom. Don't want the landlady to get suspicious. No drinking allowed! Miss Fortune don't mind us having company in our rooms, but she draws the line on drinking. . . . Oh, goodness gracious!" she exclaimed suddenly.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I forgot to scrub out the bathtub! Miss Fortune have a fit, she sees that!" She picked up the glasses and ran. I heard her leather heels clomping vexedly down the hall.

Breaking the seal, I uncorked the bottle and took a swig, smacking my lips to aid its passage. It was warm and comforting. I set the bottle upon the little table beside the bed. I took off my coat, I loosened my tie and collar, I took off my shoes, I then stretched out on the bed and relaxed. My mind was too active for me to be tired. Besides, after having slept through the day, I was ready to stay up the rest of the night.

Katherine came back. She was strange and distant and looked downcast. She poured me a drink and handed it to me without saying a word. She sat down upon the edge of the bed, her hands

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cupped around the glass of water. Her neck was lissomely curved, her shoulders narrow and rounded. Her mane of coarse black hair had a natural waviness and luster that spared her the nuisance of beauty parlors or home permanents. It fell down around the shoulders, parting at the nape of the neck, as she crouched forward, her wrists balanced on her knees.

"Cat got your tongue?" I wheedled.

She wouldn't answer.

I reached up and lay hold of her neck from behind and stroked it, roughing up her hair a bit.

"What are you so glum about *now*? Come on, sugar, talk to me. Tell Daddy."

"I wish you wouldn't go off down there," she said.

"Down South?"

She fussed, "It's just not the place for you to go to. Any colored person that has any sense has already left there or plans to leave soon as he can. I'm *from* there, and, believe you me, I'm gonna *stay* from down there! No amount of money and no amount of inducements, either, could tempt me ever to go back. Damn the South and all the rebels in it! I wish they'd drop umteen of those bombs on the South and blow every cracker to kingdom come! I do! Them crackers think more of their prejudice than they do of dying and going to hell. They'd draw the color line in heaven, if God let them. I think of all the strife now in the world, Russia and this country threatening each other with total annihilation, and these die-hard southerners not willing to admit our people to first-class citizenship! White supremacy means more to them than even the saving of their miserable hides. Othello, you don't *know* the South. Sugar, you don't know what's happening down there. They can do anything to you. You be a fool to go."

"I know what to expect," I said. "I'm not going there expecting anything to be any different from the way it's always been. Remember, I came from there, too. In Europe, even, I never got completely away from southerners and the prejudices they always left behind them. You know, it's like a virus that infects everybody that breathes the air it has contaminated. There isn't a place in the world where a southern white man or woman has been be-

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fore us, where we can hide and not be reminded of our Negro origin, our inferior status and color difference. The whole world knows the worst about us. We got to face up to what we are, start from there, and make the most of the lie and the truth. I'm not going back to Europe. I'll never allow myself to get sidetracked ever again. Over there it's hard to see the forest for the trees. Not so here. Our trees have been burned to the ground by the fires of hate and callousness. I can't afford to take the broad view any more. From here on out, I look at the world strictly from the narrow, selfish viewpoint of race. How can a white man expect me to think the way he thinks about the world, when I have to live in the meanest slums, work at the lowliest jobs, and remain socially unacceptable to him? No, we've got to go our own way, like it or not. Think in terms of our own selves."

"Othello, don't make that trip," she pleaded softly. "Leave whoever he is down there. You stay here with me. Love *me!* Let the race go to hell!" . . . She sprawled sideways across my chest, her eyes gleaming with a furious passion, she brought her lips down to peck away at mine, then she kissed me for a long time, pressing with all her might. The kissing ended with a smack. Up she spiraled, and, in a jiffy, she was on her feet, standing over me, looking down and laughing like a madwoman.

"Reach in my coat pocket," I said, "and hand me my cigarettes."

"O-kay!"

She got them for me, then stood by and watched me light up.

"I want one, too!" she mimicked a little girl. "I want the one you're smoking."

"You'll catch my germs."

"I like your germs," she said as I put the cigarette in her mouth. She got an ashtray from the windowsill. She sat beside me again, and we shared the one tray between us.

"Honey, you're not lying to me, now, are you? I believe all that you've told me. You wouldn't let me believe a lie, now, would you?" She was in dead earnest.

"No, kid. I've told you what the good Lord loves—the truth about this thing that happened tonight, about the man I have to help, if I can get to where he is. If I get there in time to help."

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"Do he mean more to you than *us*?"
"I don't know."
"Would you risk your life for me?"
"Right now I would!"
She laughed. "I *wonder!*"
"Katie, did you ever hear of Solomon Morehouse?" I asked.
"I think he's crazy, don't you?"
"Why do you think he's crazy?"

"Well, stirring up all this mess about a 'Negro state,' which he *ain't* gonna get. There's enough friction between Negroes and white people as it is without him making the thing any worse. And that's what he's doing. Just stirring up more trouble. I wish he'd shut up. I know our race is a problem. So what! Haven't we always been a problem? Let the white folks worry about it. It's their problem, anyway. It's up to them to solve it. Did we ask to come here?"

"The white folks want to send us back to Africa," I said.

"That old Senator Salters of Georgia is behind that," she said angrily. "Isn't he the one who's trying to get that bill passed?"

"He's sold a lot of people in the North and in the South the idea."

"They'll never pass a bill like that, would they, Othello?"

"Not if we Negroes are united to fight it."

"You mean like Solomon Morehouse want us to be?"

"United, we hold the balance of power in any major election. That's what has happened already. Morehouse can deliver the Negro vote. A lot is going on, baby, the public doesn't know about. Like my friend I told you about who was kidnaped by the Ku Klux Klan. The South is licked on the Negro issue, and they know it. They'll either have to secede from the Union and fight a second Civil War, or give up enough land from several of their own states to form a 'Negro state.' My guess is that they will chip in the land, unless they can persuade my friend to sell out to them. I don't think they will. There never has been a race leader like Solomon Morehouse!"

"Was it *him? Him?*" she gasped.

"Yes! . . . YES!" I said brusquely, angered because I had told my secret.

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I attempted to get up, but she restrained me.

"Katie, I swear to God, you open your mouth about this, I'll kill you!" I said.

"You mean it, too!" she chided.

"I do so mean it!" I threatened.

She pecked at my mouth with a sensuous monotony.

"And I mean for you to come back to *me!*" she murmured.

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An hour before the train was due to leave, I called at the "Advance Pullman Reservations" window in the great terminal to pick up my travel ticket. The agent looked surprised and trapped, as I matter-of-factly rolled off my name and the address which corresponded with the one I had given over the phone—my sister's Riverside Drive address.

His face and ears reddened. He stuffed his fist in his mouth and gnawed his knuckles, while he stared at me in helpless indignation. An incandescent, speechless anger silently rebuked me for the deception which I had perpetrated.

Frigidly, he made out the multiple folds of "New York, N.Y., to Atlanta, Ga.," gathered them into a single folded piece, and slid them into an envelope. With automatic swiftness, he counted the bills I had already slid under the opening in the cage, returning both my change and the ticket truculently, his eyes murky with anger. He resented being afraid that he might be called down for his indiscretion in selling a Negro accommodations on a Pullman going below the Mason-Dixon Line. He hated me for the probable mess into which I could get him, should one of the white passengers object to riding and sleeping in the same car with a *nigger*. Knowing this, I could not enjoy the malice of my triumph. I didn't laugh in his face. Rather, I looked him coldly, civilly in the eye, quietly gathered up what I had coming to me, taking my own good time, and then I sauntered off to the waiting room.

There I sat down for a time to wait. I was disconsolate, thinking about what I had just done, how I had outsmarted this white

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man, how I had impugned a policy of lying and denial to a person of my color. I think he knew why I despised him for what he would have done to me, had he known beforehand who had made the reservation. I had dared him to refuse me. I had dared him so that he had to pretend that my color was of no concern to him, thereby making himself out to be a liar and a coward. . . .

So ran my thoughts, full of hate and self-pity. I, too, was less than myself. The feeling was nothing new. It was, rather, a too frequent feeling, something that happened over and over again, day in and day out, a feeling I should be used to and have learned to live with, as one learns to live with a game leg or a damaged heart.

"Is this my car?" I inquired of the Pullman porter.

"Is you a ticket?" he demanded huffily, attitudinizing the surprise of a man who has been rudely accosted.

He needn't have asked, had he looked down and seen the ticket I held out to him. I stuck it in his face. He recovered, fussily adjusted his spectacles, then took the ticket and carefully scrutinized it. He made a grinding noise with his teeth, his mouth moving as he read. Two white women came toward us. He thrust the ticket into my hand and beckoned to me with his thumb. "Go 'head!" he growled. And to the white woman's "George, is this our car?" he sprightly responded, "Yes, Ma'am!", grinning all over himself.

"Delighted fuh you to be our guest!" he charmed, and helped them up.

"You'll take *care* of us, Uncle?"

"Yes, Ma'am! I sho'ly will dat!"

I got all this as I was entering the vestibule of the car. I was putting my bag up in the overhead rack, when they passed.

"Isn't he the old darkey we had comin' up?"

"Honey, I couldn't say."

"I *think* it's him."

"That could be. I don't pay any much attention to darkies, so . . ."

The laughter rippled softly, primly, and genteelly. I turned and caught the eyes of one of them. A sharp, cutting stare. Drips of honey turned vinegary. She whispered something to the other. I feigned indifference. Their seats were at a distance from me. I

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hoped this might make them forget about me. The car began to fill, and soon I was orphaned among a crowd of unconcerned whites.

There was an immense activity, as there always is, just prior to the time of departure of a train. The restlessness of the people who have come to see somebody off. The anxiety felt for time running out. The sameness of all the small talk that goes on at this time, repeated promises and admonitions, and pantomimes at the windowpanes.

The conductor, a stoop-shouldered, middle-aged giant, footsied through the car. His red, homely face had a pleasant, vacant expression. He conferred for a moment with the porter. Whatever it was they had to talk about, he spoke with a drawl as thickly southern as was the porter's. The porter, on his guard, was politely deferential, addressing the white man as "Cap." The conductor said "All right, boy" and went on to the next car. . . . Hucksters of magazines, confectioneries, soft drinks, and sandwiches hustled through. Now and then a dining-car man in starched white linen hot-footed through.

And, finally, "BOARD!" The jerk comes like a tidal wave. Then, the countermovement of being carried forward. The train pulls out of the station.

I could relax now, because there was something to see beside the people around me. The train was out in the open now. I watched from the window. I watched for a long time, my thoughts lost in some meaningless abstraction. The passengers seemed content to ignore me. The two elderly ladies had long dismissed me from their interest as though I no longer was there to look at and gall them. Only the porter seemed to be painfully mindful of my presence. I would happen to look up and see him crane his neck out through the draped opening of the men's washroom to see what I was doing. When he pussy-footed past, it was the same furtive stare of disapproval and curiosity. When he was summoned to serve someone, he was all smiles, until he glanced at me. Then his stony displeasure would show. I tried to retaliate, but he never looked when I was prepared to snub him.

He managed to be very busy when I came into the washroom.

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When I returned from the diner that evening, most of the beds, including my own, had been made down.

A Negro is sensitive to the change which comes over the whites once they are below the Mason-Dixon Line. They instantly take over. They make it clear to any non-white that they are the supreme rulers here, that they are a law unto themselves. The line is sharply drawn, as restrictive as a chalk marking upon a stage set, so that each actor definitely knows his place. There is no margin for mistakes. One becomes increasingly aware that accents are arrogantly and chauvinistically southern. When I went to the diner the following morning for breakfast, I was intercepted at the entrance by the white steward. He was tactfully polite, though absolute. A place had to be found for me, and when I was seated a partial curtain was drawn.

It was at the end of the car to one side of the door. The table could accommodate four people, though I was alone for the time I was there. I could see the people across the aisle from me all the way up to where the steward stood busily doubling as cashier and usher. I saw him summon one of the waiters and dispatch him to my table. The waiter showed up, his bottom lip hanging churlishly.

"I ain't supposed to work dis table. Steward knows dat. I has to make a trip special all de way down here, when I supposed to be up front," he grumbled. "He signed dat Tomin' nigger Charlie Givens to my table, so I could come down here. I does all de work of servin'. He collect them people's tips! How you lak dat? Dey 'bout done through dey eatin'. . . . Yessuh!" he changed the subject "—what you goin' have fuh breakfast?"

He kept looking up ahead at Charlie, his loose lips puckered with malice.

As he bent over to check off the order form, another waiter bumped him deliberately. "Git yo' fat ass out de aisle, Papa!" he soft-pedaled. "Let dis fine lady by."

The lady was seated at the table across the aisle from me. She shared the table with a middle-aged couple and their little grandson. The waiter held the chair, sliding it under her with a sleight-of-hand deftness as she sat down.

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Whatever was the expression on my face as I watched the woman who was being seated, it must have alarmed the waiter attending me. He sidled up to me, and blocking my view and nudging me, asked in a muffled, confidential tone, "Is you the same mind with me?" He pretended to be writing on the order form, bending low so as to talk intimately. "I noticed her yesdiddy, she was here to dinner. She's one of our people passin' fuh white. I kin tell, cain't you?"

"I know that girl," I said.

"Uh-huh," he stalled, shifting his eyes with mysterious fascination.

"I was going to speak to her."

"Uh-uh!" he cautioned.

"But I know her! Known her all my life!"

"Don't make no diffunce! She don't want you to know her. All intents and purpose, she's white to these heah white folks. Be awright up North to speak. You in the South now, brother! Take a fool's advice. Don't open yo' mouth to her. Pretend lak you ain't interested. She understands. You in *Rome*, remember."

"I guess you're right," I said.

"You an idea where she's goin'?"

"Atlanta, I guess."

"Be awright where she's known."

"I had no idea she was on this train!"

The waiter chuckled. It broke the tension we both felt.

"Will dat git it?" He pitched his voice loud enough to be overheard, which was his intention.

"I think so."

"How you wish dem eggs?"

"Sunny-side up."

Dolly Whisonant joined the family of three and exchanged surface courtesies while the four of them ate their meals. Dolly never once looked directly at me. Nor did I expect her to. She was as white-looking and white-acting as they were. As a white person, she could not be expected to show any concern for my ostracism. She was supposed to take that as a matter of course. If she represented herself to be a northerner even, she would not be so foolhardy

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or so ill-mannered as to risk offending a southerner by making an issue of race segregation.

Oddly enough, I found myself admiring Dolly's flawless performance in the role of a white woman, the way she wisely steered the conversation along the line of inconsequential generalities, such as the weather, the trip, the food. The husband was quite taken with this charming and vivacious Yankee lady, the wife uneasily affable, while the little boy was too centered in himself and his grandparents to like anybody else. . . .

I was filling a dixie cup with water, when the door was pushed back all the way and the porter entered huffing and puffing with his arms and hands full of luggage, followed by Dolly Whisonant.

On seeing me, she haughtily rigged her head to thwart any impulse I might have had to engage her in conversation. It proved a wise thing for her to do, for, for that split second, I forgot that we were not supposed to belong to the same race. Pressing my back against the wall, I gave her room enough to pass me without touching her.

As I was passing the private drawing room which had been assigned to her, I overheard the porter telling her, "Yes, ma'am, dey has to shift the passengers in yo' car to the others, 'count of dey has to take her off to repair the damage the fire caused in the wirin'. Anyway, you be much mo' comfortable and private in dis drawing room all to yosef, yes, ma'am."

"Thank you, porter."

"Oh—thank you, ma'am! Thank you very much!"

She had given him a tip, and he was backing out and bowing, as I made my way back to my seat.

He leaned over me, as I sat down, and whispered confidentially, "Gimme whole sawbuck! Man, she sho has class!" He chuckled and left me without lingering to hear what I had to say.

After dinner that evening, I went to the club car for a drink. The bar had just opened. There were only two others there besides myself and the attendant. The two men were busy at a game of whisk, their highballs untouched beside them on the table. They didn't even notice me.

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I asked the attendant behind the bar, "No law against serving me a drink, is there?"

He was a fellow about my own age and my shade of ginger-snap brown. He was a hustler, shrewd, poker-faced. He moved fast and with precision. He looked at me insolently for a while, then gave me a knowing wink. He laughed with his shoulders, mirthlessly.

"You much right here as anybody else," he said.

"I eat my dinner behind a curtain," I told him.

"I know. They do the same thing in this club car, wasn't for the fact that very seldom any colored people come in here. See, another thing, it's mostly all men that come in here. That makes a difference. White men don't like you close up to their women."

"White women do come here, don't they?"

"Some do. Usually pickups—some broad on the make. There's one now," he indicated with an expressionless stare. "Last night she come here with a different guy. Got pissy-assed drunk."

She was a giggly, undulating charmer. She was cloying and affectedly girlish for a woman of her perjured years. The man and she were laughing about the jouncing they were getting as they made their way unhandily through the car. Each tried to help the other and failed.

"God!" she shrieked. "I'm sittin' down!"

"Not here!" he protested.

"Here is good enough!"

"No!"

"Be a good boy!"

"You really want me to be a good boy?"

"I do."

"On one condition—"

"Horace! Not with these people round!"

"Oommmmmmm!"

"Horace! You behave yourself!" she tittered shrilly.

"You're my sugar!"

"Oh, stop it! Horace! Now, you sit down 'fore you fall flat on your face!"

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"That's what you think!"

"Horace—are you *drunk?*"

"No! But, doggone, I'm gonna be, 'fore the night's out! You gonna git drunk with me!"

"I don't get drunk."

"That's what you think!"

"Honest! . . . I declare, I don't know what I'm gonna do with you!"

"I know what I'm gonna do with you!"

"What you gonna do with poor little old me?"

"I'm gonna give you the lovinest time of your life!"

"Horace!" She hit at him across the table, prettily, not unmindful that others were present. He roared with obscene laughter. "Dare you say such a thing! It's not nice."

"I fixed it with the nigger——"

"Shhhh!" she reproached, then looked up at the attendant who had gone over to their table and was waiting with unobtrusive aplomb. "The boy wants to take your order, Horace."

"Yes, sir. What will you and the lady have?" asked the attendant.

"I want a double-header of some whiskey and some plain water."

"And the lady?"

"An old-fashioned, I'll have. And I wants a heap of ice in it, too, you hear?"

She talked fast, spontaneously, in a voice husky and arresting and all of a piece, having to stop from time to time to clear her throat and swallow her Adam's apple. Garrulously friendly, as was the man, she was out to have fun.

As the attendant got busy filling other orders, I moved away from the bar, went and sat down in one of the lounge chairs off to myself, leisurely sipped my Tom Collins, and smoked. I was a distance away from the couple. As the tables near them were being taken, the woman lowered her voice, leaning over the table to talk more intimately.

With this repudiation of their own notoriety, I lost all interest in them. I became concerned about myself, the great loneliness and ostracism I must endure, while I observed that the chairs about

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me were unoccupied, although there were people standing. I understood only too well the reason: they did not wish to sit down beside a colored man, or even to sit near one, so they stood.

I tried thinking about the strategy I would use to cope with Senator Salters. I decided that I couldn't just barge right in on him and say that I was the Negro reporter who had threatened him over the phone. Perhaps my best subterfuge would be to pose as some woebegone, humble servant of the colored people of Atlanta, who had been delegated by them to ascertain from the Senator the whereabouts of Solomon Morehouse, as they had been informed that Solomon Morehouse was here with the Senator. I would assure him that we wished to keep the whole affair out of the colored papers and would exact a sworn statement from Morehouse that he would say nothing about this episode. Our only concern was for his release and return to New York. . . .

It was difficult, if not well-nigh impossible, for me to sit here and pretend to be unaffected by the elliptical hostility reflected by upturned noses and cold stares.

"Will you allow me to buy you a drink?"

I looked up, startled, because I wasn't sure if the man who sat down beside me had addressed me or had spoken to somebody else. He immediately sensed my confusion, smiled, removing the cigar from his mouth, and said, "I thought you wouldn't object to joining me in a lil' friendly drink."

"Not at all," I said, embarrassed and uncertain.

He signaled to the attendant. "Two of the same, boy," he ordered. His voice was loud, and they were all staring at us—at me in particular, it seemed. He turned to me. "You gotta drink my drink. If it's good 'nough for me, it's good 'nough for you. Now, how 'bout that?"

I noted his half-empty glass. "Mint julep," I said.

"I'm a Kentucky boy. Boy, you cain't git me to drink nothing else! Was you ever in Kentucky?"

"I never was there."

"Now, how 'bout that?" he said.

He was young, a strapping six-footer, who must have weighed

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around two hundred and thirty-odd pounds. He looked overheated and stuffed in the smartly styled double-breasted suit. His face was so massive as to make his eyes appear smaller than they were. They were merry, fugitive eyes. He sat ponderously, his legs wide apart, having hiked his pants legs so that the cuffs were above the garter buckle, showing the whey-colored whiteness of his skin. His stomach seemed to rest upon his meaty thighs, like a bullfrog's, distending with each breath he took. The full head of straight blond hair was scrupulously groomed, parted on one side.

I seemed either to amuse him or to intrigue him, for he kept smiling as he looked interchangeably at me and at the cigar which he apparently relished, as if thinking of something to talk about.

"Say, you by chance a *British* subject? Jamaican nigra?" he asked.

"Not me. Native son," I smiled.

"I'm goin' by your accent," he explained. "You don't talk way a nigra from these parts would talk. Then, I take it, you from the North?"

He picked at a fleck of tobacco which had stuck to his lip, annoying him, till, finally, he sucked it into his mouth and spat it out.

I was going to be honest with him and admit that I was from Georgia, but he spoke again before I could answer.

"You must be, or you wouldn't be in here with all these white folks," he chortled. "The darkies observe decorum damn sight more than us white folks do. They as much opposed to social equality as we are. You suppose a southern darkey dare set foot in here? He would, in a pig's ass! They don't do them things, boy. They know they place. My old nigger mammy, may God rest her sweet, *white* soul!—stricter than hell 'bout darkies stayin' in they place. You damn tootin' she was!" Watching me closely, he hastened to add, obligingly, "Now, don't get me wrong. Myself, I'm liberal 'bout such things. I took my Master's in journalism at Columbia University. I've not a thing 'ginst northern nigras. Boy! Say, I've some swell times up there in Harlem. I sure did, boy! You know wha's a fact? I never bothered a *white* woman whole time I'm in New York! When I wanted a lay, I'd shoot on up to Harlem and pick myself up a good-lookin' ol' high-yallar gal. I would! Doggone!"

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He became confidential, leaning closer to tell me, "Colored or white never did make any difference to me. I'm not goin' lie. I sooner sleep with a nigger gal as with any other kind!"

He punched my knee and laughed, and I could have punched him, too, right in his big fat, juicy mouth! The realization of where I was and of being completely and hopelessly at his mercy and having to swallow his every insult made my anger the more intense. He was goading me, to see how much I could take, enjoying his cruel prerogative to humiliate without fear. My only recourse, the sensible one, was for me to try and get him off the subject.

"You studied journalism," I said.

"Uh-huh."

"Reporter?"

"Uh-huh."

I could see that he did not want to discuss anything like this with me.

"Atlanta paper?" I persisted.

"Uh-huh."

He looked toward the bar and muttered half to himself, "Boy slow as hell with that there order!"

"Been at it long?"

"Whassit? You say something?"

"I asked how long you'd been reporting," I said.

He sighed deeply. He fidgeted and kept his head down as he told me, "Nigh onto three years, I reckon, 'bout that. Oh, I got tired o' sittin' on my fanny writin' copy. I like to be up and round. They wanted me to do editorials, but I said uh-uh."

I watched him. He was hesitant and shy now that he got to talking about himself on a serious plane.

"Is it all legwork you do?"

"Naw. I write my own stuff. Have my own byline. . . . You a newspaper reporter yourself?"

"I was—up until recently."

"What happened?"

"I wanted to look around—down through this part of the country. My boss said all right, but you'll have to do it on your own.

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I just got back from Europe. I was away fifteen years. I'm sorta browsing."

He was listening to me with his mouth wide open, his hands clutching his kneecaps.

The attendant brought us our drinks, managing to make his intrusion so inconspicuous that I don't believe the white man even noticed him.

"Have you anything special in mind?" he queried.

"They tell me it's changed a lot down here," I said.

"Like what, for instance?" He reached for his drink, without looking, as if it had been there all along. He sipped and smacked his lips.

"These mass migrations of Negroes to the North. I'd like to find out what's behind it all. There is a reason."

"There's a reason, all right, but I should think you could find that out from the ones tha's already migrated and settled in the North. You know it as well as I do, they're the lowest and commonest in your race. They're that shiftless and that no-good sort, them ones who don't wanna work to make a livin'. So, they go up North where the relief boards'll take care of them. The best of the nigras remain right here. There's no nigra problem in the South today. Nigra who behaves himself and stays in his place gets along all right. Don't let anybody tell you different. Nigras got nothing to worry 'bout, so long as they behave themselves. Most of the trouble we have is with these outsiders who come down here and they try to tell us how to run things. These Communist bastards and your own lying papers, they the ones that stir up most the trouble. You know that. Now, that there fellar Morehouse, that nigger he's doing the colored folks a lot of harm, boy. The Klan's been burning a lot of crosses lately in the colored sections in and round Atlanta and warning the colored folks 'ginst any foolishness like this thing that Morehouse fellar is calling for. I tell you, it's bad—bad for your people. The South won't stand for that."

I hadn't touched my drink. When I noticed him looking at it, I picked it up and held it, only for a while, then I set it back down.

"Suppose it's true that the big interests in this country have bought up the pledges of nearly all your southern Senators and

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representatives to support this bill which would create a Negro state?"

The question nicked him where it hurt. It took a great deal of effort for him to pretend that it didn't.

"I've heard something like that was up," he admitted dismally. "There's a possibility this might be true. They may make some such deal. The North is finding out what the South has had to put up with. The nigra is what ruined the South. The North is afraid the same is goin' happen to them. They got the money to do something about it. They have us 'cross a barrel. And money talks in this country. Money can buy anything. It won't surprise me any if these goddam Yankees get their way. You cain't hold out 'ginst big money. But I'll say this, they put through a measure like this nigger state thing, they gonna have to send troops down here to enforce it! The South just ain't gonna stand for it!"

"What about the other alternative?" I asked.

He looked at me, puzzled. "What alternative is that?"

"The one which Senator Salters has."

"Oh, that! In my opinion, I think it would be a damn good thing for the nigger, if we colonized them in Africa, provided a good enough place is found that would also be suitable for us to have some air bases. Can always use good air bases, if they're strategically located. The United States could help you folks organize a government, maybe subsidize you-all until you was able to do for yourselves. I think it would work out all right. Don't see how come not. I think it would be a charitable thing for us white people to do for the nigger. You people all got the wrong idea 'bout Senator Salters. The Senator don't hate nigras. He knows this country is a white man's country and it's always gonna be a white man's country. He honest and truly wants to give the nigger a chance to rise up in the world and amount to something. Look at the darkies in Haiti. They had to do it all by themselves. Now, you folks will have American capital and know-how to go into Africa and help you out. I wish you had Senator Salters to talk to you and he could explain his program——"

"Would it be possible?" I cut in. "Look, you've given me an idea," I said, as though I were going to erupt from an overcharge of enthusiasm. "I wonder could I get to see Senator Salters?"

"See him?"

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"Yes. Interview him."
"Interview him how?"
"Ask him questions, of course."
"Kind of questions?"
"Get him to discuss that colonization program."
"What you want the interview—for your paper?"
"Yes."
"You know they goin' print it?"
"I think so."
"You *think* so."
"Yes!"
"You *know?*"
"I don't guarantee . . . "
"Well, I happen to know that your papers never print the truth about anything Senator Salters says. They butcher up his speeches he makes on the floor of the Senate and they quote him out of context. They make him out to be some devil."
"I don't think that's done deliberately. They just don't like what he says. Negroes don't like his back-to-Africa program."
"That's what I mean. They don't like it."
"But it does make good copy."
"I suppose it does. I read the nigger papers. I know 'bout the lies you folks print, way you love to run down white people."
I smiled. "You haven't answered my question."
"What question is that?"
"The interview."
He regarded me skeptically and half smiled. He stuck the burned-out cigar in his mouth, patted his enormous chest until he was able to locate his pencil. He scribbled the address of Senator Spruce Salters on the back of his calling card, handed it to me. "It's twenty-two miles out from Atlanta. Bus passes right by there. You ask the driver to drop you off. Tell the Senator I sent you. My name's on this side."
"Flood Norfleet," I read aloud.
"That would be *Mister* Flood Norfleet when you present yourself to the Senator." He grinned and gave me a gentle poke in the ribs. "Don't forget the title, boy. Down here you must remember to

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address a white man by title. Tha's some good advice to follow. I'm just passin' it 'long to you, understand."

The woman got up from the table. She walked straddle-legged toward us, clutching her handbag with both hands and fearfully trying to balance. Flood Norfleet watched her with an immobile expression. I saw him stretch his leg across the woman's path. She tripped, landing in my lap. I instinctively grabbed hold of her and lifted her to her feet. It seemed that everyone in the car was watching me when I looked around. As I was trying to steady her, the woman pushed me in the stomach and nearly knocked the wind out of me.

"Get your black hands off me, nigger!" she sneered.

She looked around at everyone in the car.

"I was only trying to help you," I said coldly.

The man who was with her came up. "What he do?" he demanded the woman tell him.

The car seesawed, and he foundered and fell helplessly into Norfleet's arms, swearing at the bumpiness of the road. Norfleet heaved him to one side, the motion of the car hurling him back against the window. He caught himself and held firmly. Still the drunken bully, he barked, "Nigger, did you put your hand on this—this lady?"

"Shut your dadblamed mouth!" Norfleet told him. "Don't, I'll shove my fist in it!"

Then he took me by the arm and pushed me through the crowd. I didn't like what he was doing—it was excessive and uncalled for—but I could think of little else then but to get out of that car. At the door, he said, "You better go to your own car and stay there."

I had a feeling that he was laughing at me, as though it was all some kind of a joke, a brutish, practical joke he had played on me. I felt that, when I was gone, he would let the other men in on the joke and they would all laugh about how truly frightened that *coon* was!

Norfleet knew that woman. I could tell by the way they had looked at each other. He nodded to her to continue on to the ladies' room the instant she had reprimanded me. Her response was fuzzy and hesitant. She had had too much to drink, perhaps. He gave her

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a withering stare. She meekly backed away, turned, and disappeared when she reached the end of the car.

The aisle of green curtains was dimly lighted. It was a lonely place from which the eerie sounds of snores and fitful turnings seeped through the curtained walls, from either side, as one passed. The train rocked. It was hard to balance. I caught at the curtains with misgivings, the space being so narrow my shoulders brushed the sides of the upper berths.

I came to my own, a lower, at the far end of the car. After taking off my shoes, I got in, turned on the light inside, and drew the curtains. I peeled off my clothes and wriggled into my pajamas, bruising my head and elbows in the process.

I waited till I was out of that cubbyhole before I put on my bathrobe. I stepped barefooted into my shoes and went inside the washroom.

The porter, Horse Beasley, was there. He had been up to something. His face sweated with guilt. He had heard my approach and, thinking that I might be the conductor, or somebody who would be mean enough to turn him in, he had quickly hidden the evidence under the leather seat which served for his bed. What he didn't know was that his evidence was being atomized with each breath he exhaled.

The fact that Horse Beasley drank was no surprise to me. What did surprise me was the change that had come over him. I was fooled. I wasn't even going to speak to him, unless it was on some matter that pertained to his duties as a porter. He had made it perfectly clear to me, overtly and by insolent innuendo, that he did not approve of me either as a person or as a passenger. I'd already accepted his hostility, attributing it to his ignorance as well as to his lack of race feeling. I'd labeled him an odious old handkerchiefhead whom I was not going to allow to get the better of me.

His attitude had caused me a great deal of pain, my being a lone Negro in a car full of unfriendly white people who regarded me as an intruder. He should have shown a concern for me, a compassion, because he alone understood what I was going through. I hated him for his apathy more than I hated the whites for their scorn.

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Beasley knew how I felt about him. I made a point of getting my feeling across to him. And he knew what I was thinking when I came into the washroom and found him sitting there alone. I coldly resented and spurned his ingratiating smile, though this was the first time he had smiled at me, the way he looked at me, unashamedly begging me to bury the hatchet, putting the matter entirely up to me, as though the "misunderstanding" had been entirely my own fault, not his. Now he wanted to make up. He had the gall to be indulging and patronizing, to extend the glad hand of fellowship!

It was the wrong time. I was in no mood to forgive and forget. What had occurred to me in the club car had demeaned my spirit. I hated the whole human race for my outrage—the white race in particular. Now, this despising Negro waits until he's drunk and we are alone together—out of sight and sound of white folks—and behind the white folks' back, he tries to make up to me for his moral cowardice and denial!

I didn't have to smell the whiskey in order to tell that he had been drinking. His eyes popped with a glassy brightness. He was fidgety and alert from the overstimulation. The porter's cap was set back from his forehead, sweat oozing from the oily surface and dribbling off his chin, and not seeming to faze him in the least.

He studied me avidly, and, with obnoxious, cunning slyness, seeing through my wavering indifference. He waited until I was brushing my teeth before he said a word.

My back was turned to him, though I could see him in the mirror about to speak to me.

His voice had a sugary, wooing, almost feminine softness. It reminded you of all the sweet-talk that had ever been mouthed to you, the wheedling flattery that had made you so susceptible, that had persuaded you against your will and better judgment, seduced you in a moment of weakness when your guard was down.

"Who, now . . . now, jes who is it that you puts me in mind of?" he contemplated out loud. "All de evenin', whilst I'm makin' down my beds, I been puzzlin' my head 'bout dat. De resemblance. Seem lak to me, I see a pitcher o' you, or, maybe, I has seen you somewhere befo'." He stopped, as though to ponder more deeply. He was

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trying to see around me to look into the mirror to catch my eye. "Is you a older brother?"

"No," was my answer.

"As I recollect, this man was older, stockier build," he continued as though he hadn't heard me, "but he sho resembled you, awright, his manner and everything!"

I persuaded myself, or rather he persuaded me, to be nice. It then occurred to me that he might have seen Solomon Morehouse whom I'm supposed to resemble.

"How long ago was it you saw this person?" I asked.

He reflected. "It mus've be—a year ago."

"Couldn've been me, then, if it was that long ago."

"No?" His curiosity was appealing.

"A year ago I was overseas."

He smacked his lips in surprise. "Oh! You don't tell me!"

"I was living in Paris," I said with dazzling aplomb.

"Paris, France?"

"Yes."

He looked at me even more curiously, then he asked, "Is you in some special line?"

"I'm a newspaper reporter."

"Reporter! You don't tell me!" He smacked his lips with a little gasp. "Is you a long time at that?"

"My first week back in this country. Spent fifteen years on the other side. I almost forgot what this country was like. Doesn't seem to have changed much, though."

He was wistful for a moment, looking into fancied space. "Lordy, me! I wonder if I could stay 'way from dis country as long as dat? I really do wonder!"

"You could, you had to."

"Who? Me? . . . Man, I git so homesick—" He chuckled and said, "Shucks, man!"

"You get homesick, all right. Yes, you do think of home," I agreed, recalling the many, many spells of homesickness blues I'd had to fight off.

"Homesick fuh what?" he growled. "What is we to git homesick

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'bout? Don't dem Eu'pean people treat you lak you dey equal? De colored man, dey tell me, over in dem foreign countries is treated lak he is somebody. Ain't all dis jimcrow. You walk down dat famous street in Paris——"

"Champs Elysées?" I guessed.

He giggled childishly, imaging a great make-believe, "Oh, yeah! Das' de one! The—well, anyway, you walk down de street with yo' white lady on yo' arm, ain't nobody goin' bother you." He slapped and rubbed his knees, laughing rougishly. "And *you* git sick fuh home? I cain't believe it!"

I was through with my birdbath. My resistance was down and I had overcome my dislike for him. He wanted me to have a drink with him, first taking the precaution of going to the opening to make certain that no one might walk in on us, then returning and lifting up the seat where he had hidden the bottle.

He offered me the bottle. I declined it tactfully, shaking my head with a smile. "No, thanks. I've had my quota," I said.

He kept insisting. "Go 'head, man. Dis Kentucky Bourbon," he purred, and, to assure me that there was nothing wrong with it, he turned the bottle up to his lips and drank. His mouth too full to speak, he held the bottle out for me, insisting impatiently, frowning, while he masticated the strong liquid. Some of it drooled down the corners of his thickly fleshed mouth, making a nasty, repulsive mess. He wiped it with the heel of his free hand.

I steadfastly refused. "I've had enough to drink for one evening."

He acquiesced, secreting the bottle in its hiding place again.

"Guy make me a present o' dis," he confided. He sat back down, reclined his head against the wall and ogled up at the ceiling. A stupid, beatific smile played up and down his face, as if what he was thinking was highly amusing to him. "Sonuvagun!" he exclaimed. "Seal, it weren't even broken!" He didn't seem to care whether I was interested or not. He just wanted to talk and somebody to listen. His big, knotted hands lay relaxed and crisscrossed upon his paunch, sticking up like spikes. When he chuckled, his whole midsection rippled.

"My mind ain't on no likker," he luxuriated, pursing his lips

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and smiling and shifting his body languidly. "I does without it when I has to. Oh, I can exercise will power when I has to! I was goin' wait till we git into Atlanta, then I have myself a ball. I allus do. I seldom drinks on duty. I git written up once fuh dat. But me and dis conductor, us gits 'long fine. Georgia cracker, too, but he's A-1. I has to hand it to him. He can be a mean sonuvawhore sometimes, but he never write you up. (I knock on wood!) I be runnin' with him nigh unto six years now. We lak dat!" He stuck his forefinger and the index finger together. "I goin' say 'bout dis guy who gimme de pint——" He fumbled inside his pocket. "Look at dis!" he bade me, and waved a ten-dollar bill. "You see what dat is? Same guy who gimme dat pint o' Bourbon!"

"Really took care of you!" I said, trying to appear impressed, because I knew he wished to impress me.

He burped. He nodded. He ogled and winked profanely. "I'm takin' keer o' him! I de one takin' de risks. He git caught wid dat broad, who dey gonna hold responsible?"

"That *is* risky," I agreed.

He was thoughtful and grim. "I knows I'm takin' an awful chance," he said, sounding remorseful and repentant, though he wasn't anything of the sort. He only sounded so. "But, lemme tell you, you gotta take chances, 'specially, if you's out to make a fast buck. Dey don't buy me off cheap, though. I has to have good inducements 'fore I 'commodates 'em dat way. When dey broach me, I say, How much is hit worth to you? Dey don't grease my palm jest right, den dey don't git no 'commodations. Dey don't lak hit, well, I tells'um dey can see de conductor. Tell him yo' troubles! Ask him what you ask me!"

The while he talked, he made the coveted bill into a small fold and slipped it way down into a bottom pocket of his vest.

I began to ease away toward the opening.

"I'm turning in," I said.

He looked surprised. "Wha's yo hurry?" He hoisted his watch from a vest pocket and studied it absently.

"What time we due in Atlanta?" I asked.

"We ain't due till round noon some time."

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"I gotta get a night's sleep. Feel lousy tomorrow, I don't."

"Big deal on?" he was insinuating, giving me a wink implying that he understood.

"Yeah, yeah," I smiled, leaving him to speculate in any way he chose. I knew it would not be flattering by the way he sized me up.

As I crawled into my berth, I heard the door at the other end of the car click shut. Alerted, Horse Beasley beat it out of the washroom and swiftly tiptoed down the padded aisle. I was tempted to peep. Instead, I listened. They must have used a sign language, for I heard no voices—only the sound of someone getting into a berth. A little later, I heard Beasley come back past where I was and re-enter the washroom. I listened while he made down his bed. In a matter of several minutes he was serenading me with his querulous snores.

Even this could not keep me awake for long. Sleep came down. My mind fought it, and I was conscious of my body's helplessness. Flood Norfleet tried to gouge my eyes out with his fat thumbs. I fought him off. I flailed him savagely with a paling I had ripped from a fence. But I couldn't hurt him. So, I ran, stumbling, clawing my way through a thickish tangle of briers and burrs which tore my clothes to shreds. After much slipping and sliding, I finally made it to the summit of a high precipice, only to be trapped there between the fiendish Norfleet and the moat below full of slithering, frothy-mouthed crocodiles drooling for my flesh. . . .

Without the consolation of a hairbreadth rescue from this limbo, I awoke.

I sat sleepily and disturbed in the washroom, smoking.

Horse Beasley purred and slobbered undisturbed, dead to the world of trains and travel and the wear-and-tear of hustling to make a dollar. The run-down battery of his body was slowly, and without his knowing it, being recharged by the magic power of this hard sleep. Neither knowing nor caring. Sleep was sleep. Beasley was not the type to think of sleep as a facet of God's grace. He was not the pious, the true believer. He slept like any other two-footed animal would, making noises.

There was no point in waking him. I let him alone. I wasn't that hard up for company! I was hoping he wouldn't wake up while I was there.

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I had had that awful nightmare. I was depressed.

So much so that I didn't even bother to look up when the man entered. I saw only the slender bare feet, the grimy calloused toes clawing the carpet, as they picked their way toward the toilet. The door banged back and forth the while he was there, for he didn't bother to draw the latch. When he came back out, I saw it was the companion of the woman I had had the trouble with in the club car. He looked pretty well done in. He was groggy and had to hold to something to steady himself. He stared at me out of bloodshot eyes. He was remembering me as best he could. He was going to say something to me, but he changed his mind or forgot what he was going to say.

He listed drunkenly, a sorry sight in his rumpled BVD's. I waited for what I thought was the inevitable, but, oddly, he overcame whatever was the urge. His mouth twisted into a patronizing grin, and, looking at Beasley, he said, "Thas' a good ole boy there. He's white as any white man!"

I wouldn't comment. I tried to smile, but I couldn't quite make it. I withdrew into myself and waited placidly for him to leave.

There was nothing to hold him, no earthly reason for him to stay. When I looked his way again, he was gone.

I took a final drag off my cigarette, dropped it into the spittoon, then got up and left.

"White trash!" my indignation rankled.

I thought I had left the light on inside my berth. In fact, I was sure I had left it on and had drawn the curtains so as to shut in the glare and not annoy or attract the attention of anyone else. I conceded I could be wrong. But the light being out worried me. The moment my hands were at the curtains, something told me not to open them, to go back to the washroom and just remain there, indefinitely.

I don't know why.

It seemed foolish for me to do a thing like that. Anyway, I was not going to allow my own imagination to make me do something foolish. Fool nigger! I mocked, contemptuous of my fears, as I recalled the night-creeping, jungle terror of "Emperor Jones."

I yanked the curtains open. A pair of green eyes watched spectrally from the cavern of the berth. I stood aghast and enthralled, the

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impact of fear over with and gone. I was not afraid. I just didn't know what to make of this! Then, a hand reached out into the subdued light and took mine. A soft, small hand belonging, I knew, to a woman. It was a white hand.

The voice that accompanied this gesture was soft-spoken only because it had to be. It didn't want anyone but me to hear. It meant what it said, and I knew I had to obey its command. The disembodied woman had me.

"Come on. Git in."

I did. She got up close to the window and propped on her side to make room for me. We were still close together. The lower parts of our bodies pressed against each other.

"Gimme cigarette," she said.

I upped one from the opening in the pack. She felt in the dark for it. "You want to see who I is, you light it for me."

I struck a match. My hand was shaking. She took hold of my wrist and brought her face up under the light. She sensed my astonishment which amused her perversely. A smile stuck in her mouth. Then, she blew out the light with a gust of smoke.

"Satisfied?"

"You know you can get me in serious trouble here?"

"You gonna start that!" she sulked.

"You know what the score is," I said.

"Don't I! . . . S'awful! . . . Really, really awful! I hate to think. . . . Pa'll kill you, he find us two together. He do to you what he done to James Lee. Poor James Lee—that boy! . . . Do you know James Lee? Well, James Lee and me, we had a secret place in the field we always go to. And, one day, ole Pa sneaked up on us. The ole hawk, he caught us both! There I was naked as when I come into the world. I ain't have on a stitch! I take off my dress and I'm naked. I never could git James Lee to take his clothes off. James Lee just wouldn't."

Slowly, dreamlike she babbled, as though she were falling off to sleep. I took from her the cigarette and mashed out its fire on the windowsill. "Pa'll kill you for this, he find us," she murmured. "I'm 'fraid of him. James Lee, you let Pa catch you doin' it to me! . . . Oh, James Lee! James Lee, I don't care! They can say all they want to say 'bout us. Goddam them! I'm gonna go up North. I'm gonna

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send for you to come. Black as you are, James Lee, black as my shoes. . . . Do you have to shoot him? Please, don't fault him. Fault me!" She passed out.

I shook her. It did no good. Her body went limp as though the life had gone out of her. I was frightened. What if she were dead? I put my cheek to her face. Yes, I reassured myself, she is all right. The bosom of her dress exuded a highly scented fragrance of lilac perfume. Its sticky sweetness blended foully with the whiskey vapors breathed through her nostrils. She would be like this until morning, perhaps, until she came to.

She couldn't be moved. I had no place to take her. To move her anywhere might involve too great a risk—of being discovered with her in my arms. Outcries and accusations: "Nigger carrying around a white woman in his arms! . . . What's wrong with her? . . . Wrong? . . . You can see he drugged her with knockout drops! He ravished her! . . . Take him! Take him! Take him!" . . . I have to leave her here in my berth, I thought. Got to dress myself quick. Off this train before the night is over!

Oh, the mess I'm in! I cried.

Watching both ends of the car and dressing like mad, I peeped in at Beasley to see if he was still asleep. I certainly didn't want him to know. It was unlikely that he would believe my version of what had happened. He would only believe what any white man would, that I had taken advantage of a drunken white woman and she had passed out on me. In other words, I had run true to form and raped her.

What I didn't bother to put on I stuffed into the overnight bag. I tiptoed to the farther end of the car, purposely to get away from Beasley. I didn't dare chance the door near the men's room, for fear the noise or the gush of air might waken him.

I had trouble with the door. It was a job to pull open. I had to twist and yank and yank at the knob. In my concentrated fumbling, I didn't hear the door of the compartment to my left open. It was a hand touching my elbow that wheeled me around, startled and panic-stricken. The violence of which I was capable in that instant was aborted when I saw it was Doll Girl—Dolly Whisonant.

The fright in her eyes said she knew I was in trouble. Not ques-

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tioning, she whisked me inside the tiny compartment and latched the door.

We sat on the bed. I told her the story.

"I saw her when I came out to get a drink of water," Doll Girl said.

"I was in the washroom at the time," I said. "I was having a smoke. I get back to my berth and she was there inside. I told you the rest."

Then, Doll Girl seemed to dismiss the whole incident, as though it were all over and past. She clicked open her cigarette case and made me take one of her English Ovals, popping the lighter with a nonchalance that set me on edge. I wondered if she expected me to sit here and chat, the meanwhile my life depending on the highly probable chance discovery of that white woman lying up in my berth. Suppose she was to come to and she was to start screaming that a nigger raped her? Oh, mercy! . . . Me sitting here puffing an English Oval, answering Doll Girl's untimely queries about my being on this train and where I'm going and what for!

Knowing I was the biggest fool that ever lived, I made the most of my claim. I even told her about Ravenna Snowden, how I had found her lying on the floor in Solomon Morehouse's apartment dead, about the murder of her boy friend which was made to look like a suicide. I blabbed to her about Katherine. She stopped me there.

"I think you love that girl," she accused.

"Love her? I just met her," I said disinterestedly.

"Maybe so, but I know by the way you mention her."

Doll Girl vexed me. To pick a time like this to speak of *love!*

"Look," I said, "I'm getting off this train."

We both got to our feet at the same time.

"You crazy mad?" she cried.

I dropped my cigarette on the floor and mashed it under my feet. She did the same to hers.

"What do you expect me to do? You think I'm gonna stay here? She comes to, she'll swear to God I raped her. Who, outside of you, is going to believe me?"

She thought quickly, biting hard on the joint of her thumb.

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"I know what!" she exclaimed. "You go on up and into the front coach where our folks sit. You stay there. Nobody bother you there. They all sleeping. They think you been there the whole night long."

"Suppose they find her and then come looking for me?"

I was way ahead of her. Panic came into her face. She was at a loss now to know what to tell me.

"Oh! Good God, Othello!" She sat back down, agonized and afraid. "If you do get off now, where will you go?" she managed to ask.

"I'm going on through with what I planned to do," I said.

"Go to that Senator's place?"

"I can find a way to get there, I'm going."

"That part I don't like. No, 'Thello. No!"

"I got to make sure if Morehouse is still alive. My guess is they got him a prisoner somewhere. Most likely at this place."

"I can't see you getting yourself mixed up with these crackers down here. You been away. You don't know. You can't mess up with these people. It's not like it used to be. It's much worse. Getting worse more and more. You think I'd ever come down here, weren't for Mama and Dad? I'm lucky I can pass. They ever found out I was passing, they'd throw me off this train. And they much harder on a Negro man than they would be on a Negro woman. That you do know."

"I got this far."

"You're a fool! And you're disgusting!"

"Doll Girl, you just don't understand. You don't at all!"

"Tell me I don't understand! I understand enough to mind my own business when I'm down here! Brother, you asking for trouble. You sure Lord get it! Don't listen to me, you hard-headed coon!"

"I know the kind of people I'm dealing with, don't worry."

"I hope you do. They look like people, but they don't always act the way they look."

"They can be *had*."

"Oh, you think so? When and if you find Solomon Morehouse—and he's alive—just for fun, you ask him if he thinks the South can be had!"

I looked at her "whiteness" and hated her for being so white.

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"What difference it make to you anyway?"

"It don't make a total of that much difference to me!" she declared, describing the tip of her index finger. "Maybe I'm a whole lot selfish, but I just don't care. I never did much care."

"Then why don't you quit the race altogether and marry a white man?"

"Because I'm a fool, tha's why," she said calmly, as if she had waited for me, or anyone else, to ask such a question. "Because I know I just never could be happy. I could never forget some things. I'd always be sneaking back and taking a peep to see what was going on, afraid I miss something tha's too good. I be bound to give myself away. As it is, I have a dickens of a time trying to *act* white. How can I lie to you! I care. Trouble is I care too much. Just too much for my own good."

"You're almost as crazy as I am. Not quite," I said.

"Almost," she sighed. A smile barely brushed her cheeks and was gone. I thought she was going to cry.

"I know where to reach you."

"We still at the same old place."

"I'll see you in a day or two, honey. Hear? . . . No. Stay where you are——" I stepped between Doll Girl and the door and put her hands behind her and kissed her. "Nothing, nothing is going to happen to me," I promised her, with as much assurance as I could simulate. "I'll be all right. I'll see you."

I was strictly on my own, left to my own devices. Out on the platform, I methodically executed the escape which I had already planned. I pinned the heavy outside door back against the wall. I had to grip the railings with both hands, straddle the trap, while employing my right foot to get it up and back against the door. It was like a roaring wind tunnel inside the vestibule. The wind lashed and bloated my clothing. I held tightly to the railings, sliding my hands along them, as I made my way down the steps. My face stung from the vicious pelting of cinders and gravel sucked up from the roadbed.

There was no point, I told myself, in waiting. There was no likelihood the train would slow down. I looked for some sign of a highway—electric lights along the road or a light flashed by a passing

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automobile. There seemed nothing beyond the unending, lithographic monochrome of trees and the dismal, nightmarish decor of a swamp at night. I crouched low, hugging the vertical handle bar and bucking the onrushing wind, until, simian-style, I hopped free into space.

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I landed on hands and knees, out of breath, but unhurt. I got up just as the last car trundled past. In the desolate, eerie darkness I watched after the red taillight until I could no longer see it.

I lit a cigarette, then held the lighted match above the face of my wrist watch to see what time it was—3:23 A.M. The damp chill in the air seemed to penetrate through to the marrow of my bones. This was a mean climate. I thought of how insufferably hot this place would be along toward noon. I was aching cold in every member of my body. I was not going to sit here and wait for it to get light. A man could freeze to death. The overnight bag which I had dropped a few yards behind me I recovered, then I set out down the railroad track, keeping inside the rails and walking as fast as caution would allow.

My head hummed with the indecipherable code-miming of millions of invisible crickets and the dry-throated croaking of frogs. I went along for some time, when, suddenly, the light of an automobile flashed across my path. I had reached a grade crossing.

I jumped back to avoid being run over. My panic was unwarranted, because the driver had seen me, had already slowed down and come to a stop just before the inclination of the crossing.

No other thought came into my mind but that it was somebody who was offering me a ride, so I came quickly around to take advantage. The door was already swung open and waiting for me to hop in.

"No sense to walkin', when you kin ride!" The voice was young and worldly. Though I could not make out his features in the dark,

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I knew straight off that he was colored. I got in beside my benefactor, quickly closing the door to block out the cold.

He could tell by the way I stuttered out my thanks that I was cold. "Daggone near so to freezin'!" he said. "An' heah 'tis summer! Sun come out, you burn up. Git so hot an' sticky!"

"You not lyin' either!" I managed to laugh.

The heavy car picked up speed in a hurry. In no time he had her doing eighty-five. I got to thinking what would happen if this thing ever had a blowout. The fellow must have sensed my thoughts.

"Say, Daddy, don't be nervous o' me speedin'. Wish I has a dollar for every time I been over dese ole back roads! I has to make time. Thas' why Um givin' her the gas. Man, y'oughta be with me when hit gits all wet an' slippery! After a good rain! I wrecked mo' friggin' cars lak dat! Sho a wonder I ain't dead! Um goin' turn now. Um goin' up thoo dem woods. Den Um stoppin' to pick up some stuff."

The car shimmied and crawled straight up a steep wooded hill. The driver, crouching over the wheel in a jackknife position, kept his eyes peeled on the ticklish road ahead. I could feel his one-pointed tension as he sucked his breath at each calculated obstacle he overcame. The road suddenly leveled and I knew that we had reached a plateau. The driver sank back, relaxed his steering.

Beneath a tree two white men stood waiting. As the car drew up, the big one sauntered recklessly into its path, as the driver stopped it within a foot of the big fellow's waist.

"What in hell keep you?" the man asked churlishly.

The driver sank the window on his side, and the big fellow leaned forward with his two big elbows crammed inside the frame.

The driver just chuckled, parted his thighs, and began rubbing his groin sensually.

"What keep me?" He begged the question, as though to make conversation.

"Damn you! Been off somewheres whackin' the bushes!"

"I be damned! You know I ain't have no time atall to mysef dis evenin'? I swear!"

"Earl——" The other fellow came up to the side I was on. "You know that lil' ole high-yallar gal who minds them Stiles Bullock younguns?"

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"Uh-huh. I sho do."

"She de new one he got. Ain't dat right, Wardie?"

Wardie, the driver, chuckled bashfully, pulling at his groin.

"If'n you gits huh in trouble, boy, ole Stiles Bullock goin' sho Lawd make you marry huh. 'Fact, I'm damn sho he do dat, too!" warned the big fellow named Earl. "Stiles preaches church. Fornication is something ole Stiles ain' goin' stand fer!"

The other one was named Boone. "I 'vise you better keep dat big ole thing o' yourns way from huh, Wardie. Earl, no kiddin', you ever see dat thing o' Wardie's?"

Wardie bust out laughing. "Yall sho love to kid me!"

"You bring my seegars, Wardie?"

"An' my Sweet Caporals?"

"I has 'um heah. . . ." Wardie reached over and took from the back seat the box of cigars and the carton of cigarettes and passed them to the men. As he was doing this, he said seriously, "I tell yall what did keep me tonight. Was havin' to take care ole Senator. Miss Vergie have me dress him an' den I has to drive him way home. I gits him home, den I has to undress him an' put him to bed lak he was a baby."

"De ole whoremaster!" laughed Boone.

"I doggone waste mo time a-tryin' jes so to git him to leave from Miss Vergie's!" Wardie moaned.

"Which one o' Miss Vergie's gals dat ole juicy-mouth stuck on now?" Earl asked.

"I don't know rightfully, Mistuh Earl. He don't care which'un she gives him, seemingly."

"Fuggin' ole bastard!"

"I hopes he stays way from Clarine. I'd marry dat one, if Miss Vergie ever lemme take huh outta there," Boone said wistfully.

"I never marry no friggin' whore," said Earl, while lighting one of the cigars.

"Doggone, she ain't one whore I sho marry to!"

"She make you a good wife, Mistuh Boone," Wardie consoled.

"I know they allus say dat dem fast gals, when dey reforms, make you de best wife."

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I took no part in the conversation. I knew by the way the two of them eyed me from time to time that they were waiting for Wardie to explain my being with him. Wardie finally told them that I was a friend that he had brought along to keep him company. He told them that I was from Atlanta, but that I had kinfolks who lived in Butler City. They wanted to know who my people were, and Wardie, thinking quickly, told them I was related to Cramer Bell, whoever he was. The men were satisfied and asked me how ole Cramer Bell was getting along. I said he was fine and chipper.

Wardie nudged me as he slid out of the car. I got out on my side. I helped him raise the seat in back where he stored gallon jugs of moonshine whiskey. Earl, the big fellow, took a pint bottle from the hip pocket of his overalls and gave it to Wardie. "You an' him kill dis whilst you-all drivin' back. Is you two boys hongrey any?"

"No, suh, we's awright, Mistuh Earl. We jes thirsty an' dis'll take care dat." Wardie nudged me and laughed.

"If you is hongrey, jes say so. I git de 'oman rassel you up some breakfus."

"No thank you, Mistuh Earl." Wardie handed Big Earl the envelope he took from an inside pocket. It was fat with bills. "Miss Vergie gimme dis fuh you."

"O-kay, boy."

Wardie and I got back into the car, and Wardie started the motor.

"I see yall next week," he said.

"Membuh what I tell you, Wardie," said Boone laughing.

"Wha's dat, Mistuh Boone?"

"Don't gi' dat gal too much meat!"

"You see ole Senator Salters agin, you tell him fuh me dat he better haul ass on back to Washington. He fuggin' round an' we 'bout to have 'nother Civil War on our hands!" Big Earl was looking at me mean and hard. "Look heah, boy—" he said to me "—you ain't mixed up wif some dem 'Lanta niggers who advocatin' fuh de South to turn over a whole new state to dem?"

Before I could reply negatively, as I was surely going to do, Wardie quickly answered to Earl's satisfaction. "Who? Him! He

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ain't even done hear o' sich a thing! He worsen me 'bout tail! Das' all on his mind! Niggers is sho crazy to think dat radical stuff!"

I was glad to get away. So was Wardie.

"Some mean bastards, dese ole back-country peckerwoods! I manage wif'um, 'cause I doan't do or say nothin' das' apt to rile dem. I talks little an' I keerful what I say. Ain't goin' ketch me driving thoo heah in de day—not de broad, open daytime—unless Um drivin' wif white people in de back seat. Dey see me in a car lak dis, an' by mysef, dey shoot dis thing full o' holes lak a sieve, liable to kill me to boot!"

Wardie was young, quite young, and he liked to talk. It was apparent by his loose, racy talk that he had been more exposed to what passes for experience than a lot of men twice his age. He drove, he told me, for a rich sportin' woman, who ran a dicty sportin' house in Butler City and another one in Atlanta. All he did was drive. He said boastfully, "I takes de Madame wheresomeevuh she wishes to go. Twice a week me an' huh goes to huh house in Atlanta. She checks up on huh business there an do's huh bankin' an' shoppin' round. 'Cose, I has to stick right wif huh, 'cause she won't lemme outta huh sight when we goes to Atlanta. She know what I do. I find mysef one o' my own girls. Man, she do hate dat! She threatened to kill me once; an' twas ovuh a colored girl I was goin' wif in Atlanta. Don't she have de police pick me up where me an' dis chick was at? Dey only brung me into the stationhouse an' turnt me ovuh to huh, an' dat was all dey was to hit—till she gits me home! She sho was some mad! I loved huh up an' tole huh, 'Baby, I some sorry whut I done,' an' I make a promise to huh I ain' goin' do hit no mo. 'Twon't happen agin, I say. She say awright. I really put de thing on huh dat night. I made huh moan an' sigh. When us finish, damn if dat evil woman don't reach unduh huh pillow an' pull out dat lil' ole pistol o' huh's an' she pints dat thing right at my temple, an' she say, 'You sweet-lovin' yaller bastard, I a good mind to blow yo' brains out!' I awmust pissed de bed! Scared? I was one scared nigger! I keeps my presence o' mind. I copped a plea. I said, 'Baby, if you do's 'way wif me, who gonna love you de way yo sweet papa Wardie do?' Dat hit huh lak a ton o' bricks! Damn she don't break down an'

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weep all ovuh me! I gi'n huh some mo' lovin'. . . . I be huh man since I was goin' on eighteen. Um goin' on twenty-three now."

"How old is she?" I asked.

"She old enough, dough she don't look hit. I stick to huh, 'cause I knows I never will have hit as good as I has hit right now. I don't have to hit a lick. She takes keer o' me an' I allus has plenty o' spendin' money. My great weakness is I laks a lil' stray bootie now an' then wif some one o' my own kind. She knows hit too. Man, do she git mad! She goin' kill me one o' these days! You read 'bout me!"

I listened, vaguely believing, vaguely discounting the glib-flowing, unprompted confessions. In transit, we took turns sampling the bottle of moonshine. It was strong, raw stuff. I could only wet my mouth with it. It choked me to get it down. But I was cold and it heated my blood and made me feel good. Wardie gulped and belched it as though it were no stronger than soda pop. The effect on him was far from hidden. He grew more voluble and, yet, he seemed now to drive with greater care and precision than before. He was thoroughly pleased with himself. He purred with satisfaction over his power, his power over Miss Vergie in the clandestine sanctuary of her bedroom, an affair that no one outside of Tannie, the cook, knew about, and Tannie just giggled and joked about it only to him—in private. The power which he felt behind the wheel of this enormous car pleased him no end. He thought he had everything. It was everything he needed or really cared about. All this, and, once in a while, a stray piece of bootie from some of his own kind. What more could a man ask for? He was pleased with himself, this Wardie was. Smug and pleased. A big shot.

"What kinda racket is you in?" he asked me.

I told him that I was a newspaper reporter, and, since he had befriended me and could probably help me further, I gave him the story of the kidnaping and murder and the train episode straight.

He drove the car way over to the side of the road and stopped.

"Wait, now," he said, tipping his hat back from his forehead. "Does you membuh me tellin' dem two white fellows I took keer de Senator?"

"Sure, I do," I said.

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"You know who twus dis Senator?"

"I did wonder," I said perfunctorily.

"Dat was him! Um a sonavabitch! Dat were Senator Salters hissef, man! His estate where he lives ain't fuh from Butler City. Now, wait a minute. I membuh somethin'. Dis could be a clue to whut you aftuh knowin' concernin' dis man you speak of—de colored leader. I do believes ole Senator have dat man deir awright. I doesn't know fuh certain, you understand? Um jus' surmisin' frum some de things he say to me. I thunk he outten his head way him talkin', 'cause he pretty well likkered up when I took him home yurly dis mornin'. He keep tellin' me not to worry 'bout a thing, 'cause him an' his boys took keer de nigger who causin' all de trouble in dis country."

"He said that?" I prodded.

"De man who hoped me wif him at de house tell him to shet his damn mouth. I dunno dis man, but he a guest deir at de Senator's. He didn't shet ole Senator up, dough. He keeps on blabbin'. I 'tended lak I a total blank to all he say. Um dumb. Don't know nuffin'. Das' what I wonts'um to think! So, I jus went on hopin' him undress. Man stay right deir. Ole Senator wonted to punch him in de mouth fuh tellin' him to shet up. Git real riled. I helt him till he cooled down. Ole bastard fight de drap o' de hat, ole as he is! Say to me, 'Boy, if I wus obuh deir in Sovie Russia, I be head o' de secret police.' 'Would you, sho nuff?' I asked him. De other man gimme a nasty look. He didn't lak me speakin' up. Ole Senator den say, 'Um fuh makin' de Ku Klux Klan de secret police heah in de United States. Us awready is de secret police, ain't us, George?' Das dis othuh dude. 'We out to git you, we git you! If a nigger gits too smart, we knows how to git de smartness outta him! We don't have to lay a hand on him. We work on his head, till he snap a cord in his brain. He ain't no mo good aftuh we git thoo wif him!' Den, dis George say to me, 'You go 'long 'bout yo business, boy.' 'Um talkin' to dis nigger!' Senator yelled to him. 'Um tellin' him somethin' fuh his own good an' pertection.' Ole Senator glared at me an' pinted his finger. 'Nigger, long as you live, don't you evuh try to outsmart a white man. You cain't win. We git thoo wif you, you won't even know yo right

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name! You won't nevuh be de same aftuh!' . . . I didn't much like dat kinds o' talk, specially de way he said hit. Man, I sho wus glad to git away frum deir! I ain' goin' lie."

Wardie folded his hands upon his lap and was silent for a long while. Darkness was lifting from the sky and I saw in his face the pain of what he must be thinking.

"Lord!" I wailed. "I wonder what all they have done to that poor man? They must have done something or Salters wouldn't have spoken the way he did. Maybe his conscience was bothering him."

"I dunno," Wardie muttered. "Um only hearsay."

"I wonder if a man like him has a conscience?"

"I dunno. . . ."

I asked him, "There any colored folks out there working for Salters?"

"No, man," Wardie was quick to reply. "He nevuh hire no colored to work fuh him. Furthermo', I don't know any o' our folks who wont to go work fuh him. If he brung dis friend o' yourns to his place, he mussa brung him in de daid o' night, so's nobody see him."

"I wonder could he still be in that house?"

"Um begin to wonder mysef," Wardie said vaguely.

"Only one way to find out. That's go there."

"I guess we bettuh ease on way frum heah fo' we's seen," he said, and started the car. "I git back, I goin' see whut I kin find out. I git Miss Vergie 'lone by huhsef I pick huh. I pick huh sho as hell!"

The car bounded forward and tore up the dirt road. Wardie had her wide open. The assurance and smugness returned to his face as he steadied the speeding car. He was again pleased with himself.

The Butler City to which we came was not, as the name would imply, a real city. It was like so many hundreds of small towns all over America which seem to exist all by and for themselves and which nobody, except a person who came from there, ever heard about. Seeing a town like this, a visitor would wonder what its people do for a living. Lights were on in kitchens and bathrooms of most of the small homes we drove past. Then we came to a section where the homes were bigger and farther apart from each other and with-

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drawn for reasons of privacy and distinction from the street. We went up into one of the driveways and around the side of a particular house.

A small black face peeped out at us from behind the curtains at the kitchen window. She stayed there and watched, sipping a cup of coffee and smoking a cigarette. I was helping Wardie with the jugs of whiskey which we took to the cellar.

I asked Wardie, "Who's that at the window?"

"Tannie," he said. "She up 'fore any de chickens is up—evvy livin' mornin'."

Tannie's short gray hair was plaited and pinned down skin-tight in little mounds of pigtails. Whatever her age was, she didn't look it. It was the gray hair which made you associate age at all with her, for you would never guess how old Tannie was by her action and spirit. Soaking wet she wouldn't weigh over ninety pounds. She stood about five feet tall.

Tannie looked me up and down when we came into the kitchen, her lips peeled back in a full grin that was all buck teeth and purple gums. You would have thought that she had known me all her life. She acted and looked like a person who was used to any and all kinds of people under any and all kinds of circumstances, when they were at their best, when they were at their worst. She had seen them. All her life she had been around people who didn't mind her seeing them do things which they wouldn't want their relatives or friends to know about.

She choked the cigarette which she had all but consumed, allowing the live ashes to fall to the floor. I said, "Good morning!" She just looked at me and grinned.

"Ol' lady, whut you got to eat?" Wardie asked bluntly.

"Us ain't run no boardin'house, you know!" Tannie retorted.

Wardie put his arms around her neck lovingly and pressed her head against his chest, cooing, "Whut you got good fuh Daddy?"

Tannie pulled away reluctantly. She loved the make-believe seduction. "Dis man won't wif you, I sho tell you somethin', you rascal you!"

"Say, man——" Wardie beckoned to me. "I wonts you to meet de

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sweetest lil' ole pint-sized 'oman in de state o' Georgia! Tannie, meet a frien' o' mine——"

Tannie grinned to acknowledge my "Glad to know you." Neither she nor Wardie was interested in my name. Wardie had given me no opportunity to tell him.

"Whut you got on yo hip?" she asked Wardie.

"Huh?" he asked absently, as though he hadn't heard.

"Ain't you brung me somethin' to wake up on?"

"Heah. . . ." Wardie said, giving her the half we had left. She took it eagerly. "Don't say I nevuh gi' you nothin'."

She tipped the bottle to her lips and had a generous mouthful.

"I sho needed dis! Chile, dem mens was entertainin' heah las' night, dey drunk up evvything was heah, an' et up evvything, too! I ain't got no chops y'all kin have. All is heah is bacon an' eggs, y'all wonts dat."

"Gimme dat, den, 'cause I sho is famished."

Wardie sat down gloomily, beckoned me to sit at the other end of the table, while Tannie prepared our breakfast.

The talk between her and Wardie was mostly banter and mostly alluding to people and places about which I knew nothing. They were great "company" to each other, being the only colored in the house. They gabbed about the girls and their male following, the big spenders and the cheapskates.

There was a kindly, vacant earnestness in Wardie's doll face and big dark eyes. It was the face of a girl, soft and light brown, the straight nose and thin lips shaded by a delicately trimmed mustache that did not, as he wished it to, give him a look of maturity. His skin was marred only by what looked like pin scratches that had left white scars on his forehead and down the sides of his face and neck.

"Wardie, don't you waste too long ovuh dat coffee."

"Um goin' play Mistuh Big today."

"Who you tellin'?"

"Shoe fits . . ."

"Don't fit my feet."

"Um goin' do nuffin' all day."

"Bes' you do!"

"Dat be a hint?"

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"Take hit any way you laks."
"You sho is signifyin', Short Stuff."
"Big things allus comes in lil' package!"
"Um goin' 'vestigate one dese days an' see."
"I heah 'bout you."
"Heah whut?"
"I swear to God, I nevuh let you kill me!"
"Come heah——"

"Wardie! You go way frum heah! You common thing!"

"Jes wonna show you, das' all."

"I has no curiosity."

"She showin' off in front o' you," Wardie winked at me.

"Mistuh, is you evuh see sich a common niggar as dis one?" said Tannie. She gave Wardie a withering leer. "You lak some ole stud horse!"

The two of them fell into spasms of rollicking laughter.

"Wardie," she whispered obliquely, "I ain't no foolin'. You better git gwan up stairs. Miss Vergie wonts yuh."

"Whut fuh?"

"Don't ask me!"

"She wake?"

"She up 'fore me dis mornin'."

Wardie looked somber. "She mus' heah me drive up."

"She tell me to gi' you a good breakfus, den you is to come upstairs. Well, I done did my share. Gwan! Git!"

Wardie turned to me apologetically. "I see if I kin find out 'bout dat party you is interested in. I see you shortly. Tannie and you chew de rag whilst Um gone."

"Tell us how long you be?" Tannie tittered.

"I tell you nuffin'!" said Wardie. "An' you keep 'way frum dat keyhole! I goin' tell Miss Vergie on you!"

"I ain't peep at you-all no sich thing."
"I know you park outside dat door."
"You a popeyed lie!"
Wardie went off hee-heeing with laughter.
"He don't know hit fuh sho," Tannie snickered devilishly, con-

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fiding to me. "He signifyin' up a breeze, chile! He don't know de haf whut I knows! I sees'um jus' as good! An' me allus pretending I don't know a solitary thing! I knows 'nough to hang dat nigger Wardie!" She stopped her laughing suddenly. She looked me up and down in a way that made me suspect she didn't trust me. "I has 'tirely too much mouth," she confessed. "I bettuh hush." She went about her chores, studiously keeping her back to me to avoid speaking any more. She finished in the kitchen, then moved to another part of the house, within sound distance, for I could hear her singing snatches of Baptist hymns in a queasy, soft-pitched soprano voice, the while I sat at the table and chain-smoked cigarettes and waited for Wardie.

Some time later—I think for reasons of caution to get me out of the kitchen in case someone came—Tannie took me to Wardie's room in the basement, where she told me that I could clean up and lie down if I felt like it till Wardie came. She had the room next door to Wardie's. I gave her two dollars. She thanked me effusively and invited me to just help myself to the radio and do as I pleased. She had to see after the girls; she excused herself.

Wardie's bed was more sat on than laid on. On the table beside the bed were a grimy deck of playing cards and an overloaded saucer of charred cigarette butts and ashes. I shaved and freshened myself in the washroom which Tannie and Wardie shared in common, then I stretched out upon the bed.

I fell asleep.

Wardie savagely shook me awake.

"Man! Man! Wake up!" I heard him say. "Come on, 'cause we has to leave heah."

He sounded strident and cross.

"Les' go—les' go—les' go!" he chanted.

I sat up and dug the sleep from my eyes.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"You has de time right on you. Wake up, man!"

I looked at my wrist watch foolishly.

"Forget I have this on."

Wardie was only wryly amused. "Whudda yuh say?" he nagged.

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"I'm all set," I said to appease him. I just had to tie my shoelaces, button my shirt collar, and choke my tie, which I did as I followed him through the passageway, then out into the backyard, where the car stood parked the way we left it.

Wardie slid in under the wheel. I got in from the opposite side. Wardie said nothing until we were far out on the road.

"Um mad as a sonavabitch!" he confessed. "Pay me no mind, Daddy. Um jes mad. Bitch sleep wid you, den she turn round, treat you lak you some common dog—some ole alley dog!"

I said nothing. I was attentive, though I didn't look at him.

He mistook my silence for anger, thinking he might have hurt my feelings. "You all right?" he asked.

"Fine," I said.

This reassured him. "Um goin' take you out to dat place—'less you is change yo' mind 'bout goin'?"

"I haven't changed my mind," I said.

"I didn't know but whut you may'uv."

"I still want to go out there."

"You do?"

"I've got this far."

"Um goin' right by deir. But I tell yuh, I cain't wait fuh you. I has to be somewhere, das' why. I has dis errand to run."

"That's all right, Wardie."

"Whut 'bout you comin' back?"

"I won't be coming back here to Butler City, I don't think."

"You sho you wonts me to drap you off at de Salters estate? You really sho, now?"

"Why? You think I'll get in trouble by going there?"

"I dunno. I dunno whut I think. Dey goin' think hit strange you walkin' up to dey door. I know de minds o' dese evil white folks. How you goin' 'front dem? Is you thought out somethin' to say to dem?"

"I'll say I represent the colored people of Atlanta. And I'll say that we are concerned for the welfare of Solomon Morehouse, since we learned from reliable sources that he came here to confer with Senator Salters."

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Wardie nodded mechanically. I could tell that he didn't think much of my ruse.

"Well, Um goin' let you off up yonduh where you see dat big ole tree," Wardie said with an exasperated sigh. "You see de house when you git deir. Hit sets back off de road a lil' ways."

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The approach to the house was a winding lane, bordered with magnolia and dogwood trees. The house itself was an aged, two-storied, white stucco-covered brick edifice with a wide, narrow portico and balcony half hidden behind four fluted Doric columns and ivy trellises.

Two massive bloodhounds slithered through the dwarf boxwoods lining the driveway and flanked me on both sides, nuzzling me about the legs and thighs, as I approached the piazza of the old manse. Then, having satisfied whatever curiosity they had about me, the two graceless brutes cut loose and ran ahead of me, leaped to the piazza, and crouched there waiting, growling their inexplicable hatred. They defied me to come an inch closer. I waited at the bottom of the steps, hoping that someone in the house would hear them and come out.

I heard a voice inside say, "Well, go see who it is." The big screen door was flung wide open. It bounded back against Flood Norfleet as he stepped outside the doorway. He kicked at the dogs and shooed them off, as he held the door open. They ambled away, crestfallen.

"Mus'uv skeered hell outta you, didn't they?" he said.

"They sure did," I said.

"Good thing you didn't come up them steps!"

"I guess it was a good thing I didn't."

"I seen'um jump a nigger who broke from the county jail and hid out here in the woods. Poor devil was suffering so, why, we had to shoot him."

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"The Senator home?" I asked. When he didn't answer, I said, "Is it all right for me to come through the front way, or should I go around the back? I'm remembering some of your advice."

"Come on up," he invited.

"You think it's all right."

"I reckon so. I'm not narrow like some. I do make allowances."

He grinned and put out his hand. I gave him mine. He gripped it viciously. I knew that he was trying to hurt me, though I gave no inkling of the pain he was inflicting. "I looked to see you in the dining car this morning."

"I didn't go there," I said, trying to work my hand free, but he held it.

He appeared a much bigger man than I had taken him to be when I sat beside him in the club car. He was well over six feet and weighed all of two-fifty. I knew I was no match for him. My only defense was that I was under no illusions as to what he might do to me.

"You didn't git off that train in Atlanta," he said.

"Sure I did," I said.

"You're a damn liar!"

He tried to snap my arm—and he would have, had I pulled away—but I gave in to him and kicked him as hard as I could in the shins. It hurt him. He cursed and jabbed his knee into my groin. Before I could straighten up, he yanked me past him into the hallway. I fell flat on my stomach. The fall knocked the wind out of me. I tried to rise and couldn't. I stayed there with him standing over me, completely helpless.

"What in hell's goin' on heah?" The voice came from the other end of the hall.

"I got him," Flood Norfleet said.

"Got who?"

"That's him there. The nigger I told you 'bout, Senator."

"Oh, the one Vergie telephoned me 'bout? She said a nigger was up at her house askin' bout Morehouse. She got her boy to bring him out here."

"What you 'tend to do with him? Writes for a newspaper, you know."

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"Is he all right? . . . What you do to him?"

Norfleet stuck his foot under my stomach and tried to raise me. I caught hold of the banister of the staircase and tried to raise myself.

"Lil' outta breath, that's 'bout all. He tripped and lost his balance," Norfleet said.

Getting to my feet, I saw the Senator for the first time. The sharp, green eyes regarded me with happy, diabolical cunning. He was a wiry, nervous little man. He kept backing away daintily, as though he were afraid my nearness might contaminate him. Slivers of dingy gray hair kept falling down around his temples to annoy him, and he was continually scooping the unruly strands back in place with his fingers.

"Say something!" he commanded me.

"What do you want me to say?" I asked.

"Aha!" he exclaimed. "It was you, you black bastard, who called me on the phone from New York! Thought you could scare me, didn't you? What? Did you think you had me? Hah? Boy, I got to hand it to you. For a nigger, you sho has a lotta nerve to come down here! I think you a durned fool, myself, to come down here. Boy, you sho got yourself in a mess!"

"Don't you wish, now, you'd stayed in Harlem?" Norfleet snickered.

The Senator started to laugh, then abruptly he changed his mind.

He waved to Norfleet. "Git him inside here."

"You gonna give him that interview?"

"Call it what you like."

He went down the hall and we followed him, Norfleet just a step behind me. "He ain't foolin' 'bout that interview, 'cause one thing he sure loves to talk!" Norfleet said.

The room we entered had the austerity of a strictly private study. The walls were serrated with shelves of books which must have come with the purchase of this old mansion, kept there for no other reason except that the shelves had been designed for them.

The Senator back-hopped upon the desk and sat there swinging his legs out and under like a small boy. A third man was present and a woman was there also, the woman, I recognized immediately, being the one who had been on the train—the woman from whom I

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had fled. There she was, as sober and pristine looking as a minister's wife! I might not have recognized her so easily. It was the way she avoided my stare that gave her away. She sat poised serenely in a big leather-upholstered chair, while the man seemed to be favoring his blubbery weight by remaining in a prone position on the sofa, his eyes grazing the lofty ceiling. He didn't so much as look at me. He knew who was there and was content to just listen. Norfleet locked the door and wandered off to a corner of the room and slouched lazily in another armchair.

They did not intend for me to sit. The Senator and Norfleet exchanged sly, amused glances between themselves. They were going to have a little fun with me. I pretended not to notice. I could do nothing but play possum and wait for the showdown. The Senator, however, was in no hurry.

I suspect they were rather disappointed because they could not enjoy my helplessness as much as they had anticipated. They knew that I was under no illusions. And I knew that behind the façade of amusement was a sinister purpose. I knew that they were people who would stop at nothing, that I might not leave this place alive, yet the terror of my knowing was not enough to frighten me. They saw this, and I sensed their warped hatred of me and of all that I represented to them.

"Tell me you come all the way down here just to interview me," the Senator marveled, as though my presence intrigued him, flattered him.

"I didn't come just to interview you, Senator," I corrected him.

He glared at me in mock surprise. "Why, I thought you wanted to ask me what my views and opinions concerning the nigger race. I thought you wanted to git from me some statement for your paper. That's what I thought you after."

"I think the colored people are better acquainted with your views, Senator, than you give them credit for being," I said.

"No, they are not!" He smacked the desk, bounced to his feet, and leered at me.

"What makes you think so?" I asked calmly. I didn't back away from him. He was right up in my face. Finally, I had to back away to keep from being spattered.

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He ranted, "I see what you black sons o' bitches print in your dirty yellow papers about me! Oh, the dirty, filthy lies you tell! No! You won't print the truth about the great efforts the South is making to assist your people. No! Instead, your papers malign the only true friends the nigger ever had. It's smart alecks like you that's brung your race to the brink of disaster. I've toiled long hours through the night and day trying to get the Republicans and the Democrats of both Houses to git behind my African Colonization proposal, but radical, subversive nigger organizations like that Afro-American Improvement Association used the most cowardly tactics ever employed by any lobbyists to blaspheme and low-rate the good and honorable intentions of me and my southern colleagues!"

"What good intentions?" I asked hotly. "Where do you get your idea from that American Negroes wish to colonize in Africa?"

"Why shouldn't any self-respecting black man be proud to return to his homeland, with the support and backing of the United States government, build up his own country, and have his own flag? Now I ask you?"

"Because it's too late for that, and you know it is. It should have been done a hundred years ago right after the Emancipation. The only ties we have with Africa now is color. And, thanks to you southern gentlemen, even that is almost wiped out!"

Suddenly, as though he had gone crazy, the Senator tore into me, screaming obscenities and kicking and hacking me with his fists. I grabbed hold of his neck and tripped him. I kept squeezing his neck as he kicked and gasped for breath, then something came crashing down upon my skull with the thud of a pile-driver. I was invisible, the room, the people, everything dissolved, and me with them.

Hours had elapsed. In the abysmal darkness I couldn't see who it was that was with me. I knew the voice that spoke to me. It sounded, for a time, far off and charged with a gentle urgency. It was a whisper. I felt the warm moisture of his breath upon my ear. "Les' go—les' go!"

"That you, Wardie?" I asked.

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"Hush up and don't make no sound. You come on. You hold tight to me. . . ." He spoke to somebody else, "How's it out?"

"Ain' nuthin'. . . . Set?"

"We right behind you. . . ."

The earth buckled under my feet. I clutched at branches, fumbling, skidding, and crawling. I held on. I didn't know where I was being taken. I was pushed and shoved and hustled through the pitch blackness.

It ended abruptly.

"This him?"

I leaned back against a tree. Instinctively, I rolled my head from side to side along the bark and this motion seemed to lessen the throbbing. Slowly, the voices in the dark began to take form. The voices were pitched low and excited.

"I figger dis goin' happen. Membuh I go to you an' say?"

"I knowed right off dem Ku Klux git who dey want."

"Where we goin' take him?"

"You done yo work, Wardie. You better git back to town. We know what to do."

"I thinks dey parade, awright, An', mayhaps, dey burn some crosses. But I don't reckon dey gwine be no lynchin' lak dey's expectin'."

"You git back to town, Wardie. You don't know a blessed thing, understand?"

"I nevuh knows nothin'. You know me!"

Wardie came over to me, a ghostly figure—a figment of night. He patted me gently and spoke softly to me. "You in good keep. You jes follow whut dey tells you, an' you gits safe-conduct 'way frum heah. Ask dem 'bout yo friend—de big race man. I think dey know."

Wardie left quickly. He drove away without the lights on. His car was just a black glob in the moonlight speeding away.

The fellow they called "Josh" had walked out to the road with Wardie and seen him off, then he came back to where I was. Though I could not make out his features in the dark, he appeared to be of medium build and young like Wardie. He seemed alert and precise and carried himself with a certain military swagger. He seemed to be

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the "head man" of this outfit of eight men. His voice had a deep, hollow resonance as though he had a heavy cold.

"Do you feel all right now?" he asked.

"I'll be all right," I said.

"What they do to you up there?"

"They were pretty rough. I got banged over the head with something."

"Wardie said you were out like a light when he found you down in the cellar."

"I didn't know where I was when Wardie came."

"Where they have you first?"

"They had me in the Senator's study."

"Who-all was there?"

I told him. He guessed who the third man and the woman were. "Hoagy Shibe is the fat guy. The woman, she's his wife. They all work for the Senator. They up in Washington, D.C., most of the time."

"This Norfleet fellow, what about him?" I asked.

"Him?" he grunted angrily. "He's a gunman."

"Told me he was a newspaperman."

"He's that, too, but he's a mean killer."

"Sure lucky for me you fellows came."

"We mostly took care of the dogs."

"The dogs——?"

"Two big ole bloodhounds. Didn't you see them?"

"I saw them and I hope never to see them again!"

He laughed softly. "They no trouble now. Like I said, we took care of them." He clicked his tongue and made a quick, throat-slitting motion with his forefinger.

"What were they going to do with me, you think?"

"They were going to take you into Butler City and lynch you."

"Why Butler City?"

"The Ku Klux got the city tonight. They'll be burning crosses all over the place. A lynching would go good with that, since they're putting on this demonstration for the colored people's benefit. You walked right into a trap all laid out for you—all pretty and waiting. . . ." He seemed to be listening, his voice down low, trailing off

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into a faint whisper. ". . . Like the little ole fly that walked into the parlor of the ole cunning Mister Spider."

He froze, then he raised his arm slowly and snapped his fingers. The men noiselessly alerted themselves, spreading out. They came by us slowly, cautiously. Josh pushed me down to a squatting position at the base of the tree. "Stay here," he whispered, as he melted into the thickness.

There was a burst of gunfire which lasted no longer than a second, followed, a moment later, by three single shots spaced seconds apart.

It sounded a long ways off. The thickness of the woods may have muffled the noise. I could now hear only the cracking of dry branches. They had gone way back into the woods and were there a long time. I stretched my legs and waited and tried to speculate as to what they might be doing.

They came out of the woods from the opposite direction from which they had gone.

I got up and went to meet them. By now, my eyes had got used to the darkness, so that I could move about without stumbling over chunks of dead branches and pine cones or bumping into trees. For the first time, I noticed that there were two large automobiles parked there.

"Is it all right to smoke?" I asked Josh.

"Why not!" he said.

"Have one?"

"No thanks. I got a cigar."

"How about the other boys?"

"You hang onto your cigarettes. You go passin' em around, you won't have none."

The fellows laughed. "He shore right, man!" said one of them.

"Les' move out!" Josh ordered.

I got into one of the cars and sat between Josh and the driver, a big fellow who smelled pungently of pine resin and body musk. He was a solemn fellow. He didn't talk. He responded, when Josh gave instructions, with an acquiescing nod. He was wholly preoccupied with driving. The three men in the back seat talked in sluggish snatches of mumbled animation.

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Our car led off. The other car had trouble starting. It finally caught up with us when we had advanced about a mile down the road. I heard it chugging behind us.

Josh sat sidewise, one arm across the ridge of the seat, the elbow of the other nudged through the window opening at his right, smoking a cigar.

"We don't do much talking when we're out like this," he told me. "Most talking we do is when we're making our plans. We got a job to do, like the one tonight, we go ahead, decide on what we goin' to do and how we goin' to do it, and then we go ahead and pull it off. We don't let nobody in on what we do. That's why we sent Wardie back to town. Wardie don't know nothing. He can't git himself in no trouble, can't git us in no trouble. You didn't see us doing anything, did you?"

"No. I heard the shooting," I said.

"You know what the shooting was about?"

"No."

"What else you hear?"

"You fellows moving around."

"We only wanted one. Three came, so we had to take care of three. It was you they were after. You know now. You know who-all was the three?"

"Flood Norfleet?"

"Uh-huh."

"The big fat guy?"

"Hoagy Shibe."

I hesitated. What I was thinking seemed incredible to me. "Not Salters? Not him?" A reckless, foolish-sounding question, I thought. I was flabbergasted when Josh nodded and said simply:

"Yes, we did. We even got the Grand Dragon. Flood Norfleet was our man, though. He's the one we really wanted—wanted bad. We had to get him for shooting to death Preacher's oldest boy. That's Preacher here driving this car. That shooting happened several months ago, so you see how long we waited. They been killing a lot of our folks and the Law won't bother to prosecute them, so, in self-defense, a group of us got ourselves together to do something about it. So far, we done all right. Nobody talks. They go out look-

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ing for the missing. The missing yet to turn up. Nobody goes digging in quicksand. That's all they is back up in there–quicksand."

"Back there, you mean? In the swamp?"

His calm and geniality amazed me. "You got to really know where you going in that swamp. White folks stay away from there. They're afraid of that quicksand, like I told you. We got our whiskey stills way back up in there. Nobody bothers us. Nobody. White folks wonder about us. Let'um wonder! We do all right down here. You gotta have nerve, that's all. We boys all saw combat in the war. You not the same after you be in combat. You see so much. You see too much. You don't have too much good feeling after that. You don't take no stuff off nobody. We got to play it a lil' different down here. You can't fight back out in the open, 'cause you not only harm yourself, you likely to harm a whole lot of innocent people. You can't be hotheaded. Gotta play it cool. And bide your time. We got a nickname we give ourselves. We call ourselves "The Spider Gang." Outside of us, there's nobody else who knows about the Spiders. I got no wife. But, if I had one, she wouldn't know. Rest of these fellows is all married, but their wives don't know. They hear tell of things happening–like these three men tonight. They're going to be missed and folks are going to wonder and speculate whatever become of them. And nobody's going to know. We have to pretend to wonder like they do!"

"Did Wardie tell you I was a reporter?" I asked.

"He tell me that."

"Tell you what I'm doing down here?"

"Said you was looking for somebody. I think he told me all you said. You didn't say who the man was."

"I didn't want to say. I didn't know Wardie. I was being cautious, you understand. I'm looking for Solomon Morehouse."

"Morehouse?" he reiterated with surprise. "Is he really the one you're looking for?"

"Then you know him?"

"By reputation. I never saw him in person. Seen pictures of him."

"You suppose you would recognize him if you saw him?"

"Some people don't look like their pictures," he said.

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"I know that."

"Them people kidnaped him, you say, and they were holding him up yonder at the Senator's place?"

"I know it to be a fact. They took him there. Whether he's there still, I don't know."

"Just a minute——" Josh had Preacher stop the car. "Biddy," he said to one of the men in the back seat, "go back there and change places with Ewell. Tell him I want to talk to him."

"He goin' ride wid you-all?" said Biddy.

"You and him swap cars, 'cause I want to talk to him," Josh explained. "Get Ewell to tell you about some old fellow he saw about a day or so ago," he prompted me, as Ewell got inside the car to join us. "Ewell, our friend here would be glad if you tell him about that stranger you meet up with the other night when you was hauling that lumber out to Cantey Crossing."

Ewell was a voice that spoke to me in the dark, for I couldn't see him. He sat directly behind me, between the other two men, in the back seat. And I was wedged between Josh and Preacher in front, so that I was unable to turn round. But he leaned forward and talked close to my ear. Bronchitis had all but snuffed out his voice. It must have been an ordeal for him to articulate.

"Been a dark night, chances is I nevuh woulda notice de man, him being way ovuh t'othuh side de road, walkin' long slow, payin' no 'tention to nothin', draggin' long lak somebody in a complete daze. I kinda frightened first. I drove up 'longside o' him an' he nevuh so much as turn round to 'knowledge I'm there. I thought hit mighty funny and peculiar, so somethin' tell me to 'quire if he was sick an' if I could hope him. I awready 'tracted his 'tention, when I called out to him, an' he'd stopped. So, I den 'quired if he sick an' in trouble an' if I could do anything to hope him, I'd do hit, I says. He was pleasant an' nice. Didn't seem upset or nothin'. He thanked me an' he say how glad he was to meet somebody. He tell me he been travelin' afoot fuh some time. He didn't jes recollect where he'd been at, but he wanted to git back to Chicago, so he wanted to know if he was goin' in de right direction to git deir. He spoke very good English, lak a man dat is mos' highly eddicated, but ain't jes quite right in de

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head, you know whut I mean. I tole him he nevuh git to Chicago by walkin'. I say, 'Brothuh, you has to go by train to Chicago.' You know, he thought he was way out in de suburbs o' Chicago? He didn't b'lieve hit when I tole him where he was. No' could he, fuh de life o' him, make out how he git way down heah in Georgia. He say he would pay me whutevuh I charge, if I git him to de railroad station, so he could git de train goin' to Chicago. I tole him dat dey wus no train whut goes dis time o' night, but he could stay de night at my house an' in de mornin' I'd take him to de depot in Butler City an' he catch a train out from deir. I wusn't aimin' to charge him nothin', but, in de mornin' aftuh he has breakfus' wif me an' de missus, bless if he don't hand my missus a whole twenty-dollar bill! Have plenty money on him. I notice de clothes he have on wus real high class, 'ceptin' dey look lak he slept in them and git them all wrinkled an' soiled up."

At this point, I asked, "Did you notice any marks or bruises on him—like on his face and head? Did he look like he'd been beaten up, I mean?"

"Nothin' dat I noticed, 'ceptin' he sho needed a shave awful bad an', lak I said, his clothes wus all mussed up. Not raggedy. Jes mussed up. I offer him my razor to shave, but he said he wanted his beard to grow back, 'cause he felt naked widout his Vandyke beard."

"Did he tell you his name?"

"King Solomon. But I think he mus meant 'Solomon King.' I don't think he rightly knowed who he wus. He so mixed up an' confused. Whut you call dem people who fuhgit who dey is an' dey memory is all blank?"

"Amnesia victim."

"Das' whut I think he wus."

"He say whom he was going to see in Chicago?"

"He said his wife lived deir, but he don't even know his wife's name! I asked him. He tried to think who huh name is an' he jes couldn't. Den I asked do he know de address where she lives. He didn't know. Now, I know muhsef—an' I ain't nevuh wus deir—dis Chicago is a terrible big place. Now, how he goin' find a wife he don't know huh name, don't know where she lives at? I reason all

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dis out to him, but he says he knows where to go. He says she will be in de temple . . . de temple o' somethin'. . . . He did call its name. . . ."

"Was it 'The Temple of Tranquillity'?" I asked eagerly.

"Dat sho do sound lak whut he called hit."

"You took him to the station?"

"Yessuh, I did."

"He bought his ticket?"

"I'm right deir when he pay de man in de ticket window."

"He had money enough?"

"Sho did."

"Did he have a wallet?"

"I ain't see none, if he had. He jes reached in his pants pocket where he keep his money."

"No papers or anything to identify himself?"

"I do remembuh he went thoo all his pockets when we back at de house to search fuh 'dentifications. All he have on him wus whut he wus wearin' an' de money. I wait wid him fuh de train to come in, an' I put him on de train, an' I asked de conductuh to look out fuh him. I knows dat conductuh."

"How long ago was that?"

"De day befo yesdiddy," he concluded.

Josh, who had taken a keen interest in my interrogation, asked me, "What do you think?"

I told him that I was convinced that the man was Solomon Morehouse.

"I don't see how it could be Solomon Morehouse," Josh said, "unless he is a victim of amnesia."

"Years ago he went by the name of King Solomon," I explained. "He started his public career as a fortuneteller. The woman who used to assist him has a temple of her own now in Chicago."

"I see now. I see what you mean," Josh said. "Do you reckon he was tortured so that his mind snapped under the strain?"

"I don't think anybody will ever know what happened to him up at that house," I said.

And I wondered, as we rode along, if he were found, could the shattered wreck of his mind be salvaged and pieced together and

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made whole again? I could not bring myself to concede that this was not at all possible. The man still lived! Why his persecutors should have allowed him to live, I didn't know. The fact remained, he lived!

It may sound like a cruel and unfeeling thing for me to say, but, right then, I wished that Solomon Morehouse had died at the hands of these lynchers. For then he would be a martyr and the whole country would be roused to pity and to shame. For, alive—such as he was—he could only bring disgrace and evil mockery to the very cause his martyrdom would have brought to fruition. I think his lynchers had this idea in mind and that is why they let him live.

Josh had Preacher drive to a country place called Piney Grove, a few miles out from Butler City, where I could catch the midnight bus that goes to Atlanta. Butler City was not a safe place for a Negro to be caught out in the street during the Klan demonstration, so we went around the city and out to Piney Grove. As we passed, we could see in the distance flames shooting up in the sky from crosses which had been left burning by the Klan.

"That's over toward where the colored people live," Josh pointed out to me. "That one is for us!"

With a terrible feeling compounded of gratitude and loathing, I said, "I might be decorating that one, hadn't been for you fellows and Wardie!"

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7

I reached Atlanta without incident.

The long waiting for the bus to come out of Butler City was a more agonizing experience than was the long, wearisome ride itself. I was too close to Butler City and the cross-burning for comfort. And I was alone out on the highway. My rescuers had summarily left me there to fend for myself. Josh didn't seem to think anybody would bother me way out there. The troublemakers, he said, were all in Butler City either watching or taking an active part in the demonstration. Which was not enough to allay my fears, so I stood way off in the shadows deflected by a large tree whose spreading top branches overhung the lamppost and the road, ducking behind the tree out of reach of automobile headlights.

I waited fully two hours for the bus. My feet and my legs were numb from standing. For there was no place to sit. I had to stay near the road for fear the bus might shoot past and I would be stuck in this place for the remainder of the night. For all I knew, the Klan might be scouring the countryside for me. They might have grown impatient and tired of waiting for their Grand Dragon to show up in Butler City and might have gone out to the Salters estate to find out what the cause was for the delay. The woman might still be there. It was possible that she knew that I had escaped and that the three men had gone after me, and possible also that she might have heard the shooting. My brain sizzled with fears and speculations. I had no way of knowing how far from the house the shooting had occurred. If she heard it, she surely must have phoned into Butler City and informed the Klan.

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Fortunately, when the bus finally did come, there was nobody on it but the driver. I made a point of behaving as humbly and looking as nondescript as I could. The driver was gruff and apathetic. I kept my head bowed and avoided looking directly at him, careful to modulate my voice softly and inoffensively when I asked him what the fare was to Atlanta. Without bothering to answer, he made the change for the five-dollar bill I handed him and gave me a check. I moseyed to the rear and sat down and pretended at once to fall asleep.

I couldn't have managed a nap even had I wanted to. Each time the bus stopped to pick up a passenger, I could not be sure if the newcomer had not been deputized to seize me and take me off. The whole trip to Atlanta, I had the awesome distinction of being the lone Negro passenger. I had the back seat all to myself.

I stayed on the bus during the twenty-minute stop it made before a small, dinky-looking roadside diner which kept open all night. I could see that it made no provision to accommodate Negroes. There wasn't even a "For Negroes," "For Whites" sign anywhere. I guess Negroes with any sense wouldn't think of traveling any distance through the South without carrying their own food and drink along with them.

The air inside the bus was stale and fetid, for the windows remained sealed shut as they had been when I boarded the bus. Tobacco smoke clung to the ceiling and clouded the windows with a grayish-blue haze. Being alone and running no risk of offending anyone, I raised the window nearest me, then sank back inconspicuously in my corner and imbibed the fresh air. For where I sat I could look through the screened door and see a portion of the people as they ate or stood by the counter waiting to be served.

For the time I sat there, a radio had been going and a mushy, drawling voice was stumbling through a dull, somber speech as though he were having difficulty making out the chicken-scratch which he had written down in a hurry. This may not have been the case, but that is how it sounded to me. It was not the kind of a voice to engage the attention unless it was saying something of great urgency and importance. What did attract my notice was the manner in which the people were listening, their stony silence and only this

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uninteresting voice, this and nothing else. The radio was not turned up high, so I got close to the window.

". . . An' if you-all will co-operate with the militia an' will keep yo womenfolk and yo children indoors till this whole mess blows ovuh, we kin soon restore order heah in Atlanta. I thank you."

Then the announcer came in: "Ladies and gentlemen, you have just heard an address by His Excellency, the Governor of Georgia, speaking to you from our station here in Atlanta. . . ."

A state police officer foot-padded his motorcycle to a stop just outside the screen door, dismounted, and then braced it upright. He went inside and then I saw him talking with the driver of the bus. They came toward the door. The driver pointed me out to him with a nod of the head. He stayed inside at the door watching as the trooper came back out and crossed the stretch of gravel to the bus. He climbed in and came back to where I was.

"You git on at Butler City?" he asked.

"Butler City," I said.

"Got to send you back there. 'Fraid I cain't let you go to Atlanta."

"Doesn't this bus go to Atlanta?"

"It does. But you cain't. An' don't you argue wid me. Bus be 'long any minute now. You take it and go on back to Butler City."

"I don't belong in Butler City, officer."

"What you mean by that?"

"My folks in Atlanta. My home's Atlanta," I lied.

"How come you in Butler City, then?"

"Some relations of mine live there."

"You know there's been trouble in Atlanta?"

"No, sir."

"Well, there has."

"First I heard. What sort of trouble, officer?"

"Boy, there's been a race riot up there." I said nothing. He looked hard at me. "I think yo' folks git the worst of it, so far I been able to find out. That whole nigger section in Atlanta 'bout burned to the ground. The city's under martial law. Friggin' thing got so out of hand and too big for the local police to handle, so they must call out the state militia. I'm actin' under orders to stop any nigras I see

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from goin' into Atlanta, but, since you live there, I guess it's all right to pass you through."

He wrote upon a slip of paper. "Show this, 'case you stopped."

"Much obliged to you, officer," I said.

"Guess you is worried 'bout yo folks. Hope nothing happened to'em."

"I hope not."

"O-kay, boy," he said.

I watched him from the window mount his motorcycle, wave to the driver who was coming out, and take off down the road. I looked at what he had written: "This boy has my O.K. to enter Atlanta. Signed, J. T. Blivens, State Police."

I was a stranger in Atlanta. My family had moved away when I was a small boy, so I remembered very little about the city. I had the address that Dolly Whisonant had given to me and I planned to go by and see her before I continued on to Chicago. I probably would not have bothered, had this terrible thing not happened. It made my promise to her all the more binding.

Getting off the bus before it made a detour to bypass the Negro section, my vague recollection of this section could not help me decide where it was that I wanted to go. I looked at the address Dolly had scribbled upon a piece of letter paper to fix the name of the street in my mind.

It was daybreak. I set out to walk. I was still in the white district. The street ran downhill past the beginning of a narrow stretch of park. I remembered the park because, as a child, I had once gone there to explore and a group of white boys had pelted me with rocks, chasing me back to the Negro part of the city. The park served as a natural line of demarcation. When I reached the bottom of the street, I turned left and walked along the "colored" side of the park in the direction of town.

I had walked but a few minutes, when I saw ahead of me a road-block. Beyond that, as far as I was able to see, the whole of what I remembered as the colored section of the city was a mass of wreckage and smoke, as if it had served as a target for an air blitz. Not a

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house, not a building of any kind was left whole. Firemen were everywhere playing water upon the charred and mangled mess still burning and smoldering.

A white policeman hollered to me, "Keep goin'!"

"Where do I go?" I queried.

"Go somewheres. Don't hang round heah," he said testily.

"Where are the people gone?" I persisted.

"Keep on goin'. You catch up with some."

I heard him say to another policeman nearby, "Where th'hell *he* come from?"

So I kept on going.

I encountered relays of special police and the state national guardsmen posted at every street corner. They were mostly callow, red-eyed youths to whom all this was fun, a chance to stay up all night and a chance to escape from the boredom of poolrooms and street-corner loafing. The excitement of the night had doubtless petered out by morning, and the young men were tired of waiting here. The Negroes were all gone. They were all over the place till the fires started. The wind was blowing just right, and it fanned the flames clean through their section and cleaned them out. There hadn't been a Negro here. They looked with a little astonishment at me as I passed, wondering where I came from.

I had passed many streets and had not come to the one where Dolly Whisonant's folks lived. Suddenly, I found myself beyond the devastation. I was halfway in town. This part of the colored district, the poorest in Atlanta's West End, had escaped. It was now a make-shift haven and a refuge for those who had been burned out of the beautiful homes the whites and even the slum-dwelling Negroes had resented. The streets were gutted with expensive-looking cars, which did not belong to a section so run-down as this, their owners inside them, sleepless, gimlet-eyed, harried-looking. Emergency canteens had been set up, and the people were doled out coffee and dough-nuts. Many looked as though they didn't care what happened after this. Automobiles would take off—the triumph of hope over despair—with people waving dispirited goodbyes.

Women and their children who had been protected from the coarse vileness of this place—which lay between their own restricted,

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high-class section and downtown Atlanta—who would never go by streetcar let alone walk through this area, but always drove through it as any well-to-do white Atlantan would, behind the wheel of an automobile, these wives and children of the "talented tenth" of Atlanta's black belt now moved forlornly about and shared their being in the privations and the obscenities of this accursed and slattern slum. I said to myself as I saw them here, for it was easy to tell who belonged here and who did not, I said to myself: This is where the white folks want you. This is where they think you belong. You with all your high and mighty airs, your lighter colors, your fine upbringing and education, your simulated effeteness, this does not impress the white people. Education is the one solution to the race problem. Can you still believe it is? Then you are a fool! An outmoded fool! For the bitter truth is that, no matter how high we Negroes get, the lowest of the lowest white man can take us down and spit upon us and make us grovel in abject physical impotence. He becomes one with all other white men in that he chooses to lump us all together.

A fierce, consuming disgust welled up inside of me. I hated the bottled-up fury and the futility of my hatred. I could do nothing here to retaliate. Absolutely nothing that would not end in self-annihilation. The hopeless reprieve: You can't win! You can't win! This is a white man's world, this Southland, even this country, even this whole world, the Here and maybe the Hereafter, too, is run by white folks. White folks *über alles!* This kind of feeling could lead to utter madness and destruction: a crazed Negro running through the streets slashing or shooting up white folks until he in turn is hunted down like a mad dog and finally riddled with bullets!

Instinct and habit told me that this is not the way. Violence has never won. It only hurts and slowly corrodes. It is a cannibal masticating its own flesh. Not violence, then, but the organized non-violent opportunism which Solomon Morehouse had preached and tested.

I reached the house where Dolly Whisonant's parents lived. It was a small, two-storied frame dwelling, the front porch almost level with the ground, which set way back in a yard cluttered with a big grape arbor and peach trees and rose bushes and whitewashed stones. When the Whisonants came to this neighborhood, their street was

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the one remaining "white street" left. The neighbors thought the Whisonants were white, until their suspicion was aroused by the visits of Negroes. Then, one by one, the white neighbors sold their homes and moved across the park.

I lifted the gate-latch and entered the yard. Dolly must have spied me from the window, for she was holding the front door open as I stepped onto the porch. If she was surprised to see me, she didn't show it. She eyed me critically, the way a mother might look at a child she didn't quite know how to handle. The outlandishly gay smock she was wearing over a pair of baggy slacks and the disarray of her white-folks hair didn't at all harmonize with the mood she was in.

"You look a mess!" she said.

"I feel the way I look!" I retorted.

"Like something the cat dragged in!"

"Never mind how I look," I said. "I'm damn lucky to be here."

"Between you and this mess last night, I don't know why I'm not out of my mind!"

"I had nothing to do with last night. Why jump down my throat about last night?"

"Not with last night, but, Lordy, the night before! I call myself coming down home here to spend a nice quiet vacation with my folks. And what happens? I get mixed up plenty in this mess of yours on the train. I get home, and there's this terrible awful mess the whole night long! Were you here? Did you see it?"

"I just arrived here."

"Where've you been all this time?"

"Butler City."

"Butler City? What a fool you are to come here! This is no place for you to be now. You oughtn't to come."

"I'm here now, and that's that," I said. "Am I welcome in your house?"

"Don't be sarcastic!"

"I didn't know," I said icily, but I was play-acting. Dolly understood and she laughed, grabbing me by the coat sleeve and pulling me past her into the hall. "Nerve you have to act hinkty with me! Nigger, for two cents——!"

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"Who is it, Doll Girl?" her mother called from the kitchen. Memory leaped over the years and the sound was identically the same, so I knew right off it was her mother—"Miss Addie." I called to her, "It's me, Miss Addie."

Dolly added: "It's 'Thello King, Ma."

Neither of us expected the old woman to remember me. I don't think I bore any resemblance to the child she had known. Dolly took me back into the kitchen. Miss Addie, as I had always called her, was sitting at the table having her morning coffee. She squinted up at me through her glasses and smiled as I greeted her.

"Mama, this is 'Thello King," Dolly said. "Missus Caroline King's boy. You know."

I don't think she heard Dolly. She pretended, because she didn't want me to think that she could have forgotten me. "Oh . . ." said she. Her nearsighted little blue eyes twinkled prettily as she fluttered her dough-white hands. "Quite a stranger!"

The back door opened and in came Dolly's father with a scuttle of kindling wood. They had a fire going in the ancient kitchen range, presumably to cook breakfast and to take the early morning chill off the house.

Rangy and agile for a man who must be over seventy-odd years, Mr. Whisonant's florid whiteness made him look like an East European. Both his hair and his full scraggly mustache were black without a streak of gray visible.

He didn't notice me. He busied himself methodically stoking the fire. The room was filling with smoke.

Mrs. Whisonant coughed and fanned away the smoke with her hand. "Mr. Whisonant, don't go making a big fire," she pleaded.

"Ain't a big fire. Make it so to take the chill off," he said.

"I know, but it is summer. It's goin' warm up. The radio man says he predicts round ninety degrees by noon."

"Way long time before noon." He saw me and Dolly and grinned. "You got a sweater on," he kidded his wife.

"Hello, Mr. Whisonant!" I said.

"How's the boy!" he greeted me cheerily, as though I were someone he was used to seeing and talking to every day. The truth was that he probably thought he should know me, even if he couldn't

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place who I was. He was a retired letter carrier, and this fact may have explained his friendly casualness. "How you been, son?" he asked.

"Oh, just fine," I said. "Just fine."

Dolly saw no need to reacquaint us.

"How did you folks make out with the fire last night?" he asked.

"I wasn't here," I said. "I was out of town when it happened."

"Didn't reach your place? Tha's good to hear." It was apparent that he thought I was somebody else. I sort of encouraged the deception. "By the grace of the Good Lord, the wind shifted and tha's what saved us-all up here. That thing got to goin' so, couldn't nothin' have saved us, if the wind don't shift. I don't much think them firemen tried very hard. They was sure a long time gittin' out here."

"Tell me, how'd it start?" I asked him.

Dolly pulled a chair up to the table, then led me to sit down, while she hustled up breakfast for me. Mr. Whisonant saw what she was about and obligingly got out of her busy way. He leaned back leisurely against the sink to talk to me.

"You know, things ain't been the same round here, since the time that Solomon Morehouse was here and spoke in the auditorium and the white papers carried his speech he made. That was quite a while back—I don't know if you remembers it—but it sure made these white folks think! That fellow stirred up a hornet's nest! And I tell you what make'em so plague-take-it mad is that they know he's got the whole country behind him. You know, he said that the South can only redeem herself for her crime against the Negro one way, and that is by the immediate creation of a Negro state. 'Separate, but equal!' he shouted. I heard him. I was right there when he shouted it 'cross the hall. Ol' Klan try they level best that night to break up that meeting. You remember that meeting! A hundred or more o' them in white hoods stampeded right into the hall and made for the platform where Morehouse stood speaking. Somebody got to the basement and switched off the lights. They hustled Morehouse out the back way, into a car, and got him outta town in a hurry! It was quick action, all right. They was goin' lynch Morehouse sho as anything."

"How did this thing last night start?" I again asked.

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Mr. Whisonant looked surprised. "What! You didn't hear the President's speech?" There was anger and reproach in his voice. "Why, it come over all the radio stations and the TV. Where was you?"

As if I could have known about anything outside the terror and desperation of the past twenty-four hours of my life!

His censure gave way to a patronizing sense of humor, as he was amused by the apathy and know-nothingness of the members of his race. I rather fancied he enjoyed his intellectual isolation. He poised himself like a great dramatic actor and declared, "The President said that a state of emergency exists and that the whole country is now under martial law. Then he read the Proclamation. The Proclamation, son." He wagged his head. "I'm tellin' you!"

I was astonished. I must have looked awfully funny to him, because the old man laughed at me.

"Mr. Whisonant, are you serious?" I asked, my voice trembling with emotion. "What sort of proclamation?"

"You mark my words, son, this proclamation is goin' down in history as the Second Emancipation Proclamation! The first one emancipated the colored man from chattel slavery, didn't it?"

"Yes. . . ."

"The second one emancipates him from second-class citizenship!" he declared astutely. "From here on out, son, you and me and all the rest of the colored people in this country gonna be facing the greatest challenge to our manhood since Lincoln freed the slaves, 'cause this will mean that we goin' have to think and work and govern for ourselves. Yes, we goin' have to stand on our own two flat feet. Son, we're free at last! We free as any man can ever hope to be. Now, we got our own place in the sun."

Mrs. Whisonant winced, cutting her husband with a silencing half turn of her head. She sat prim and upright, looking to catch Dolly's eye. When she did, she warned Dolly in a whisper she wanted to be heard, "Fetch him his soapbox!"

Dolly humored her mother and pretended to be laughing at her father behind his back. The old man understood. He winked at Dolly. Dolly winked back. There was conspiracy and counter-conspiracy. It was difficult to tell who was laughing at whom.

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I had a plate of ham and eggs set in front of me, hot bread and coffee to my left and right respectively. I had had nothing in my stomach since the breakfast Tannie had prepared for me and Wardie, which had been all of twenty-four hours, and I was starved. I relished every mouthful of that food, and I think Dolly enjoyed seeing me eat.

"You make these biscuits, Miss Addie?" I asked with butter-melting sweetness, southern-style.

The old lady smiled. "No, honey. They's Doll Girl's," she said, and gave Dolly an affectionate smile, as though she were pulling for Dolly in my behalf.

"That Negro's hungry, Mama! Anything taste good to him!" Dolly quipped, as she brought me a second helping of hot biscuits. She reached between me and her mother and gathered up the pack of cigarettes and matches that were on the table. She put them back after she had lit a cigarette, smoke streaming from her thin nostrils. Mrs. Whisonant coughed, shooing the smoke away.

"Doll Girl!" she reproved.

"I'm sorry, Mama."

"Blowing that ole smoke right in my face! Over this boy's food!"

"Doesn't bother me, Miss Addie," I said.

"I don't like it blowin' in my face. Besides, you hadn't ought to be smokin'. I think women smokin' is vulgar. I love the smell of a good cigar, myself. Tried to get Mr. Whisonant to smoke cigars. He prefers that ole stinky pipe to a good cigar. . . . Doll Girl, who you say this boy was?" she turned to me.

"He's Othello King, Mama—Miss Caroline's boy."

"Caroline Morris' boy?"

"Yes, Mama."

"Well, I do declare!" she marveled, taking a good look at me. "He takes right after Caroline. Looks a whole lot like her brother Grady."

"They all said I took after my Uncle Grady," I told her.

"Just like Grady Morris for the world! I said to myself, when you come into the room, this boy sure do put me in mind of Grady Morris, Caroline Morris' older brother!"

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Addie!" Mr. Whisonant moaned. "Grady been dead so long! You stay in the past! The past! It's all dead and

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gone forever! This young man don't remember his Uncle Grady. Grady died when he was too young to remember he had an uncle. Anyway, it isn't important. My good woman, do you realize that we are passin' through one of the most—if not THE MOST—critical moments in the history of the colored race in this country?"

Mrs. Whisonant sighed mockingly: "Oh, Lord! Dolly, it's more soapbox!"

The old fellow turned his appeal to Dolly and me. "Trouble with people like Addie is she don't want to face up to facts and reality. She won't admit it, but she's afraid of what's happening here in Atlanta. I ain't afraid. I seen all this coming on long time ago." Then, before resuming, he paused and relighted his pipe. I watched him, the sucking motion of his cheeks expanding and contracting like hand bellows. Toughness and durability showed even in this so casual act.

"Miss Addie," he chided his wife, "what you goin' do when they order you out of your own house?"

"Let me ask you that question, Mr. Whisonant."

"I'll go, tha's what I'll do," he said.

"Go where?"

"Wherever this government orders me."

"You talkin' pure craziness, Mr. Whisonant!"

"I'm the same as anyone else. We all in this boat together. I'll start a new life."

"New life nothing! At your age, too. Your life is behind you. This house is my home and I'm not goin' give up my home, Mr. Whisonant, and go somewheres I ain't sure I'm even goin' have a roof over my head!"

"Listen to that talk! As if the government was packin' her off to some foreign country! You'll still be in the United States. In a brand-new state. Thas' all it is, Addie—a new, created state. Do you know it's goin' to include parts of several states, they say, 'bout one-third of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina, which will make it just about the size of Tennessee. I'm all set to give it a name. I've thought up a name to give to our forty-ninth state."

Miss Addie sniffed. "You've thought up a name!"

"Take the *M* for Mississippi, the *A* for Alabama, the *G* for

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Georgia, and then you add the *INA* in Carolina, and put them all together, you spell M-A-G-I-N-A—Magina!"

Beautiful-sounding, I thought! "Magina—Magina—Magina," I repeated orally, testing the euphony of the new word. Mr. Whisonant watched me with a pleased expression on his face. "I think that will be a marvelous name to call the new state," I said.

"I thought of writing the President and suggesting it to him," he said proudly.

Miss Addie was distraught. "We scraped and saved to buy this house, Mr. Whisonant," she went on, oblivious of our enthusiasm.

"You goin' let a house decide your future for you?" Mr. Whisonant asked.

"I ain't got no future. I just want to live wha's left of my life in peace."

Mr. Whisonant wagged his head, his hands fluttered in gestures of despair. "You can't talk any sense into Addie! No vision! Plague take it, Addie! You have got to make sacrifices. Tha's the truth as I'm telling you, girl. Old and young alike got to bring this dream to pass. We ain't goin' be round long enough to enjoy it ourselves, but Doll Girl here, her and this young fellow will, and if they have children, they children goin' look back on us dead and gone and it's goin' make them feel mighty proud that us old people had this vision. Girl, I'm telling you!"

The three of us—Dolly, her father, and myself—looked at one another, touched by our mutual understanding. Then, we looked hopefully at Miss Addie. Miss Addie shut her eyes tight, defiant-like, and said, "You go follow after the niggers, then, Mr. Whisonant. I'm goin' up North and I'll live with Doll Girl and I'll pass myself off as white! So help me, thas' what I'll do! Do what we both shoulda did years ago—for Doll Girl's sake. And it was all on account of you, Mr. Whisonant, that we didn't. You made the race problem for yourself, you did!"

"Oh, shut up, Mama!" Dolly snapped. I knew she did this out of consideration for my feelings. "I think it's all foolishness. I don't care what I am. It doesn't bother me. Never concern me. I'm some of everything. So's the rest of the human race, they only knew it. I

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don't say I'm white. I don't say I'm colored. I don't say anything! Get me?"

Her eyes narrowed into a concentrated hardness, as though to warn me and her father not to expect her to change her present way of life.

Later, when we were alone together, I asked Dolly what she intended to do.

"Nothing," she answered.

"Your father is quite a race man," I said.

"He is. No put-on about Papa. As white as Papa is, you know, he's always been proud of being a Negro. I never understood why he has to be *proud* about it. I never been one way or the other myself. How about you, 'Thello? You proud of being a Negro?"

"I have to be proud—in self-defense," I said, not profoundly.

"Come on, now! What can you be proud of?" she argued.

"I don't know truthfully."

"What have the white folks got to be proud of either?"

"They have to pretend the same as we do. It's a basic social need."

I thought we could laugh off our dismay, but Dolly didn't seem to want to.

"'Thello, I know what is happening for our people is the right thing, and I'm glad. I want to see it. They're my people. But how I choose to live and the people I choose to live with is my own business. I like the advantages of being white. You know what I mean?"

"Sure," I said. "A white skin pays off. White folks are here to stay." I meant to hurt her. I could see that it did hurt her.

Dolly looked long at me without saying anything. We each understood how the other felt, and yet our feelings imprisoned us separately. But I really did want to make an exception of Dolly Whisonant, because I knew her heart. You could see through so easily to her heart. I would not have liked her but for that, because I disapprove of any colored person who passes for white. I got away from Dolly as quickly as I could and was out of Atlanta before the morning was spent, because I knew that there was not any longer a place in my world for even a Dolly Whisonant.

The Dolly Whisonants could think white, look white, and act

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white. If I tried to, I'd only delude myself and probably get into some serious trouble to boot. I can feel no affinity for those of my race who can and do pass for white. And, to the ones who can't, like myself, the Dolly Whisonants are lost and their loss should never be counted.

Dolly had insisted on going to the station with me to see me off, but I refused to let her come. I told her frankly that she was too white to be seen on the streets of Atlanta with any man who even remotely resembled a Negro, and especially at this crucial time. She laughed in ridicule at my qualms, for Dolly always had a reckless, independent spirit, but I made it plain to her that I meant to leave Atlanta without incident and that it was best for me to go my way alone.

Dolly yielded, but she chided me about my being awfully silly and afraid of my own shadow.

"I'm going back to New York," she announced. "I'm flying back. I might do it tonight. I'm going out to the Municipal Airport now and make reservations."

"What about your folks?" I asked.

"They'll be all right. Things will work out. We've got to wait anyway and see what happens. I don't think anybody is prepared for this," she said.

"I know I'm not," I said. "I sure didn't expect it to happen so soon."

"I want you to give me Katherine's address, so I can go by and see her," Dolly said.

"Why would you want to see her?" I asked.

"Woman's reason," she smiled.

"That all?"

"Isn't that enough? Good God!"

"Not where you're concerned!"

"Plague take you, 'Thello King! I'm making it my business to find out if she's good enough to have you."

"Aren't you rushing this thing a bit? Honey, I don't profess to be in love with anybody, but if you want to meet Katherine, well, it's all right by me. She's a swell girl. I know you'll like her."

"Do you?" she smiled roguishly. "We'll see. What's her address?"

I gave her the full name and the address, and she wrote it down.

"Will you really go by and see Katherine and tell her how I am?"

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I almost pleaded. I know that the way I said it was a dead giveaway, for Dolly patted my cheek and smiled.

"Shows how much you know!" she scolded. "You don't even know when you love a girl!"

"I know I ought to love her, even if I can't make up my mind," I said.

I had already explained to Dolly why I was going to Chicago. I told her what I had learned about Solomon Morehouse from the men who had helped me escape from Butler City. She had the same feeling that I had, that if he was in Chicago, I would find him at Krisna Deva's "Temple of Tranquillity."

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8

I cleaned and fixed myself up before I left the hotel.

When I arrived in Chicago, I went immediately to a men's furnishing store in The Loop and, thinking of myself as stark naked, bought everything a naked man would need to emerge fully clothed and well dressed, then hopped a cab which took me to a hotel for colored on South Parkway.

"I want a room and a bath," I told the clerk. I was unshaven, and the clothes I had on showed the dust and grime of my flight from Georgia.

"You any luggage?" the clerk asked skeptically.

"Yes. All this here." I unloaded both armfuls of boxes and packages upon his desk. He gawked at the names of the stores where they had been purchased and thereupon changed his mind about me.

Later, when he saw me cleaned and dressed, he grinned and nodded approvingly. "You really in there, man!" he said. "Look sharp!"

"I feel like a human being now," I told him.

"You look it! Did you go into those high-class stores looking way you looked when you came in here?" he queried.

"I showed them the money first!" I said.

"Money talks loud in this man's town!" he chuckled.

"I just came from Georgia," I said.

His mouth and his eyes popped wide open all at once. "Georgia?" he swallowed. And he seemed intrigued and pained all at once, too. "I *know* Georgia. I oughta. Come from there. I'm *from* there," he

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made the point, giving it a significance and drollery, "and, man, I means to *stay* from there!"

I asked him, "How are the people here taking the news?"

"We're just stunned," he said. "You don't know. Somehow, you can't think at all about it. You try to wonder and you can't. I know I try to engage some folks in conversation about it, but I can't get them to say a thing. There's so much confusion. I guess we all are just dumbfounded. Tell me, man—you think it's true?"

"Let me put it this way: if you had been at the station this morning and seen the train I came in on—packed and jammed!" I told him.

"With our folks?"

"They ran it special. They wouldn't sell tickets to white people in Atlanta. Colored folks took over the entire train. So I think there must be some truth to it."

He nodded numbly. He looked perplexed and sad.

I went out into the street.

Krisna Deva—"Mother Serena," as she now called herself—had the most placid face I have ever seen and, I believe, the saddest pair of eyes. Were it not for her tubby fatness and the meringue and pepper whiteness of her beautiful hair which came down around her shoulders and back, you would take her for a wistfully lovely little girl who loved to play with dolls and make-believe.

Everything in the room was enormous, more enormous than was the Buddhic Mother Serena, whom the baroque-styled furnishings and green velvet drapes dwarfed. I sat across the table from her and watched her peaceful face, waiting for her to open her eyes and acknowledge my presence. She seemed asleep, yet I noticed the delicate, small fingers daintily pinching the edge of the table. I became embarrassed at my peeping, and out of respect, or contrition, I lowered my head. The oval mirror in the center of the table reflected the glittering chandelier above it. The effect was that of looking down into a pool and beholding there beneath the water a miniature temple of rainbow glass.

She was watching me when I raised my head. Had me under surveillance all along, I thought. She fixed her eyes upon me so that

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I thought she must know all there was to know about me, my past, present, and future.

Suddenly, she murmured a cry of pain and put her hands over her eyes to mask them. "Please, go! I have had a trying day. I've given of myself so that now I am tired. There have been so many people here to see me. Please! Another time. Go! Go!"

She sounded pompous and affected. She was acting the Queen Mother and being excessively exalted. Adulation had turned her into a spoiled, effete goddess. I had no wish to take her down, but I could not help thinking of her as having once been a tiny, hip-shaking chorine up at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, the pretty little thing who freely gave of herself to the slick-haired musicians in the bands that played there. "Don't you put on airs with me!" is what I felt like saying, though I didn't dare.

"Mother Serena, I have a great favor to ask of you," I implored.

"I cannot talk with you. My secretary will arrange another appointment for you."

She was so grand, so precious. I disturbed her. She must be coddled with delicate deference.

"But, Mother Serena, it's urgent. Extremely urgent that I talk with you."

"I wish you to leave at once!" she hissed in a voice that was imperious, angry, yet she barely raised it above a whisper.

"I've come a long ways to see you, *Krisna Deva*. I know you must remember Dolly Whisonant?"

She did not answer, but she peeped at me through her fingers like a little girl.

"I just left Dolly in Atlanta. She was down to visit her folks. I got Dolly to give me your address."

Her hands let go and fell limply to her lap. She was outdone by the anger she had allowed to possess her. She would not look at me. She held her head sideways and pouted, breathing big chunks of breath.

"What is it you want of me?" she demanded stridently.

Suddenly, I sensed why it was she avoided looking directly at me. I had looked up and my eyes had been attracted to a life-size portrait done in oil of "King Solomon" dressed in an oriental robe and wearing

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a fez. I had a self-conscious feeling that I was looking at a portrait of myself in a costume and made up to look like some wise man of the East. Instinctively, I examined my own face in the mirror upon the table. It was uncanny. I remember Dolly saying that I looked like Solomon's twin.

Mother Serena had *read* me. I had no doubt about that now.

"Why do you turn your head and refuse to look at me?" I asked.

"The aura about your face disturbs me," she lied.

"Could it be something else—something more about me?"

"I do not know."

"Do I look like Solomon Morehouse?"

"Yes! You look like the man he *was!*" She folded her arms upon the table and buried her face between mounds of flesh and cried softly.

"Krisna—Krisna, let me see him," I whispered. "Take me to him."

"It will do no good. Solomon Morehouse is dead."

"I could try to bring him back."

"It is too late. He has come back to me. Our love is all that he remembers."

I reached across the table and pried loose her hands and held them. They were softly fat and delicate, baby-soft hands. The sad, tearful eyes shimmered behind the loose silver strands of hair that got in her face.

"Could he remember what happened to him in Georgia?"

She looked surprised and frightened. She shook her head.

I told her the story of his kidnaping and about his probable torture at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan. She showed no emotion at all. Her face was implacable as she listened.

When I had finished, she said quietly, "I had a premonition of these things a long time ago. I would have warned him, but I knew that he would not have listened to me then. He is very tired. The strain has been too much for him. He needs peace and quiet—and love. Ah, yes! Love is what he needs most—and tranquillity. To be tranquil. It is best for him to remain here. You do understand, don't you, dear friend?"

"I understand, Mother."

A bell summoned her secretary.

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"Yes, Mother?" the young woman queried.

"Is anyone else waiting to see me?"

"Yes, Mother—Mrs. Fowler and Sister Rebecca are waiting."

"Give them my blessing and, please, dear, will you persuade them to come back tomorrow? I wish to see no one."

"Are you all right, Mother?"

"My peace is wonderful, dear."

"Mother, I'm so glad!"

"Thank you, Daughter!"

"I thank you, Mother!"

Mother Serena preceded me up the long, winding stairs of the sedate old mansion which had been reconverted so as to accommodate the particular needs of her prosperous cult. The downstairs consisted of a consultation room, an enormous chapel where services were held nightly and all day Sundays, and the banquet room where the Sunday "Love Feast" was held. Mother Serena's private quarters and the guest rooms were on the second and third floors. She told me about her temple as she labored slowly up the stairs.

"All that you see about you is the handiwork of God," she affirmed in a dreamy, singsong voice. "I am the overseer. I see to it that everything here must express some of God. This is a house of love and devotion. I am the vessel—the channel for Infinite Mind and Divine Principle. I am not the reincarnation of the Virgin Mary as my followers insist that I am. I rebuke them for saying this. I do! I am a manifestation, certainly, but I am not the Virgin Mother."

"You have a beautiful place," I said.

"Isn't the peace wonderful!" she exclaimed happily.

"Beyond words!"

She smiled approvingly.

The man inside the room we were entering stood with his back to us before a huge panel of richly curtained windows framed by thick velvet draperies which hung from a high ceiling down to an immaculately polished parquet floor. The room, I gathered, had been transformed from a bedroom into a parlor. The sliding doors of the closet were closed tight and partially concealed by draperies. The ponderous antique furnishings must have come with the purchase of the house, and the whole shebang lifted bodily from downstairs

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and brought up here to crowd and to junk a space that was way too small to do it justice.

The man stood with his forefingers locked behind him, his head bowed in meditation, for he did not seem at all interested in the view the windows may have given him.

"Darling?" Mother Serena called to him gently. "There is someone to see you. A nice gentleman from a newspaper. And he has come all the way from New York to see you."

Without turning round to acknowledge either of us, or to lift his head, he inquired, "Does he seek my help?" He seemed a trifle annoyed at our intrusion.

She looked at me as though to beg my indulgence, then said, "Yes."

He sighed heavily, mumbling, "I will help him. Where is he?"

"He is here now."

He described an imaginary arc as he turned himself around. There was charm and vanity in the way he received us, a smile of affection for Mother Serena and for me a benign nod. He waved his hand to us to sit down. As we seated ourselves, he strode back to the window. I had seen so many pictures of this man in the newspapers I received while I was abroad, yet I don't believe that a single one I saw did him justice. For one thing, he was not as dark of skin as he showed up in those printed reproductions. He was the lightest possible shade of brown—close to being a "high yaller." It is the fate of most pigmented people to photograph either too light or too dark. For another, he was not in the least flaccid. He had a well-formed nose and, for a Negro, a small mouth. The eyes were something else. They were big, poppy eyes, the yellowed, bloodshot eyes of a man who had difficulty sleeping. His head had been shaved and scrubbed till it glistened like an amber-colored wax orange. The hair which had been allowed to remain about his mouth and chin gave promise of restoring to his features the occult likeness of King Solomon. The long, high-collared frock of scarlet red, lavishly brocaded down the front with mystic symbols of gold, and the wide green sash wrapped tightly round his waist and lapped over once so that the tassels fell about his knees and bobbled when he moved about, further restored the likeness.

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It was evident by the pleased expression on Mother Serena's face as she watched him that she had gone to considerable pains to array him in the garments she thought befitted his priestly dignity. She lavished her love upon this man who had cast her aside and who had risen so far above her. Perhaps, it was this evidence that he had not forgotten her that made her happy. The broken mind retained the memory of having loved her, and what had come between them was forgotten as though it never had been. She was happy because she had loved him for himself, not for what ambition made him become. She had given him great restorative care. He was not the physically broken man I had expected to meet. Yet, I did recall that I had asked Ewell the night we were driving back to Butler City from the Salters estate if Solomon showed any signs of having been beaten up, and he had said that he had noticed none, that Solomon's clothes were badly soiled and that he needed a shave. Thanks to the diabolical subtlety of those white men who had tortured him, the damage had been done to his memory, not to his mind. The mind went right on functioning, its loss of memory not missed at all. Perhaps some of it might return in dreams and reveries, though it was unlikely that he would believe any of them. He would probably shake them off, perhaps smile at their vagaries. It is doubtful that he would discuss these with anyone, not even with his devoted Serena, but would go about his oddly mystical business of being "King Solomon," as if such a one as Solomon Morehouse had never existed. For any Negro is likely, according to the mood he is in, to fancy himself a Solomon Morehouse—a great race man—only to renounce the folly and wonder sadly whether anybody could ever get Negroes together long enough to achieve anything!

Indeed, that would be something!

King Solomon stood straddle-legged, his arms folded, looking fiercely omniscient out over and beyond Mother Serena and me.

"Are you in trouble?" he asked me.

"No, I'm not in trouble myself," I said. "But I have a friend who is."

"A loved one?"

"A friend, sir. Well, I wouldn't exactly call him a friend either. You see, sir, I've never really met him. I know this man only by

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reputation. You've heard of him yourself, no doubt. His name is Solomon Morehouse."

"Morehouse did you say? Morehouse?"

"Yes, sir. Solomon Morehouse."

He turned sharply to Mother Serena. "Dear one, who is Solomon Morehouse? Have you ever heard of the man?"

"Of course, my darling! Of course!" she chided.

This annoyed him. "Then who is he? Who is this person? Tell me!" he demanded.

"Dear, don't shout!" she shushed. "Now you know as well as I who Solomon Morehouse is. The great race leader, dear! Of course, of course, my darling!"

He didn't. He avoided me while Mother Serena was explaining, "You see, racial distinctions, physical and mental, do not exist in our kingdom because these—as such, you understand—are not divinely authorized. We are neither white nor black nor any color whatsoever. We are vibrations! Oh, yes, we know of this celebrated man. Perhaps if you tell King Solomon what happened to Mr. Morehouse, he might be able to help you," she suggested with a benign smile.

Solomon seemed grateful for the help she gave. She asked him to sit, but he graciously declined with a delicate, fanlike motion of his hands. He was more at ease now. He seemed to radiate a warmth of good feeling that seemed to have come up from the floor and up through his feet, his limbs, his body, and to his mind.

"I would like to hear about this man," he said.

So I carefully played back to him the story of his life when he was Solomon Morehouse, the militant race leader. He listened with rapt attention. I searched, and so did Mother Serena with me, his face for a sign of cognition. Nothing came of it. Nothing.

He sighed. "I don't know if I can help you find him," he said. "The man may be dead. I have been out of touch with material things. I do not know what is going on in the world of men. Metaphysics has its drawbacks, I regret to say. You can be in the world and not be of it. Did you know that all this was happening, Mother Serena? Did you really know?"

"Yes, dear. I knew."

A lost, pained look came into his eyes. "Why is it I know

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nothing?" he asked, staring at Mother Serena. "Absolutely nothing! I can't understand. Have I been out of my mind? Did I have to be put away? Krisna! Oh, Krisna! Don't be ashamed to speak the truth! I knew it would happen to me! I'd go insane! Remember the terrible nightmares? Those awful dreams! I was afraid to sleep. You know that, Krisna. I told you about them. You're trying to shield me from the truth. I know you are. Bless you, Krisna, darling! It's all right. Yes, it's all right. You did what was best. What was best. . . ."

Mother Serena wept and could not talk for weeping.

He knelt before her and took her hand in his own and patted it. "There! There! You must not blame yourself. You could not keep a crazy man. I was dangerous. I might have killed you. I thank you, Mother. I thank you for peace. I was filled with hate and I had no room in my heart for love and God punished me. You see? I know! I know now that all is love and love is everywhere. And love is sweet and wonderful, Mother. Love and you will hate no one, because love cannot beget hate and hate cannot withstand love. Isn't that so, Mother? Hate is a parasite, do you know? A parasite that withers and dies when it has nothing to feed on. You see? When you abandon all hate, you purge yourself—your mind and your body and your soul—of the scars of hate. Then, what happens? You can look at your enemies with eyes of love and loving humility and proclaim the allness of Almighty God! Is it not so, Mother? Isn't it the truth?"

"Let it be! Let it be! I'm so glad!" she intoned.

"What can I tell this man, Mother?"

"Be still and God will tell you what to say."

"Shall I prophesy?"

"No."

"What shall I say?"

"Be still!" she whispered. She gripped his shoulders, then shut her eyes tight, swaying and moaning some kind of incantation. "Now! Now!" she shrieked like one in unendurable travail.

Solomon stumbled to his feet, panting. He was watching Mother Serena as he backed away. His face was inscrutable, drawn. Then, as Mother Serena began to smile, he smiled, too, ecstatically.

Mother Serena's eyes blinked superciliously.

"I am not him you seek," he told me with a deep, exasperated

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sigh. "How could anyone like me have done the things—the great things—this man has done? I couldn't read or write my own name until I was a grown man. My father and my mother were both illiterate people. My father was an old-time root doctor. He practiced voodoo and black magic. He was an evil black man. I get my light color from my mother. She was a mulatto. My father could fix people and cause them to have fits and spells. They bought his vang-vang oil, the lucky Mojoe Drops and Mojoe Incense. It was from him that I learned the secrets of love potions and fortunetelling. I know voodoo, though I never used it to harm anyone, you understand. Mother will tell you. . . . She is reposed. I shan't disturb her. No. It wouldn't be good for her. She is in another world. . . . Let us go quietly. I will see you to the door."

He closed the door behind him gently and went with me down the stairs.

He smiled. "I was on to you all along!" he said.

"On to me *how?*" I asked.

"I knew you were trying to insinuate that I might be Solomon Morehouse."

"Insinuate nothing!" I said bluntly. "You are, man! You've had a terrible thing happen to you. You lost your memory. I've followed you here to Chicago."

"You claim I was kidnaped and taken to Georgia for a secret meeting with the Ku Klux Klan, and then they did this terrible thing to me because I didn't do whatever it was they wanted me to do?"

"Yes. How do you think you got to Chicago? You remember coming here?"

"It's been so long! I've been in Chicago a long time."

"How long?"

"I don't remember exactly."

"I can tell you that you haven't been here over two or three days, because I talked with the fellow who put you on the train in Butler City."

"It was somebody who looked like me—like yourself. Here. . . . Turn round." He made me look at myself in the big mirror at the foot of the staircase. He was smiling as I marveled at our physical resemblance. "There! Aha! Even with this head of mine shaved

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and the chin whiskers! And we're the same height! My goodness! How much alike we two are! I'm older, but it doesn't show much. See? How you can be wrong?"

"I'm not wrong."

He burst into peals of laughter. As I turned away from the mirror, he placed his hand upon my shoulder. "If I admitted to you that I am really Solomon Morehouse, do you suppose I could get away with it?"

He was jesting. He didn't mean for me to take him seriously.

"Why shouldn't you? The whole country knows who you are, what you look like. They've heard you speak. They've had you in their churches, their homes. They've shaken your hand. You're famous. You're a public figure. . . ."

"Solomon Morehouse is a famous man—not King Solomon. I'm an obscure cultist. That's all I am, Mr. King. And I do know what I am. I'm not interested in any race question. I don't say this to hurt your feelings. But I don't care what happens to Negroes as such. Don't you see? My concern, as a metaphysical practitioner, is with the soul of man—not the race he belongs to. I don't care! People of all races come here to our temple, and they must behave as brothers and sisters or out they go."

"Do you deny that you are a Negro?"

"I deny the limitations you put upon me when you say that I am a Negro."

"You are a Negro in the eyes of the world."

"Shall we say, I live in a Negro body, but I have lived in many bodies—white, yellow, brown. I know something about my past incarnations and who I was."

"What you don't know—and what I do know—is that you are Solomon Morehouse! You are!" I cried. "I don't care how many incarnations you've been through!"

He looked at me with compassion—the lofty compassionate infinitude of understanding. He was gentle and persuasive the way he spoke to me. "Mr. King, believe me, I know none of these people you have mentioned to me, no, not a single name. I wish you would believe me. I have nothing, absolutely nothing, to hide from you. You've even made me doubt myself, because I wanted to believe

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that what you said was true—that I am Solomon Morehouse. Those little tricks the mortal mind can play! I did start out by being a fraud. But then, every fortuneteller, whether he knows it or not, is a fraud. Because no man can tell you what is going to take place tomorrow or the day after that. He's guessing. I long ago gave up telling fortunes, preparing love potions, and giving numbers to lottery players. Those things are wrong because they're not true. All that disgusting business of taking money from ignorant washwomen and jealous wives! I have Mother Serena to thank for my turning away from these materialistic practices. I turned away from all that to the search for truth. Mother and I and those who follow our teachings are divinely happy. There is nothing like it to be found in this life."

A man should know who he is. A man should know all that he is. And he has a perfect right to deny that he is somebody else somebody claims him to be. And all that. So, I felt like a fool. And at the front door, I apologized to King Solomon. He dreamily shook my hand.

"Strange," he said, "that you should take me to be a man I've never seen or even heard about and connect my life with his. Stranger still, I should feel that he is *you*—from what you have told me about him and described him to be. Do you see the *mystery?*"

The sounds from the street filtered through the gray stone walls of this elegant old mansion and welled up inside the entrance hall where we stood. The sounds were extraordinary and came in waves of jubilation, as though a great crowd was gathered right outside the door and was carrying on for some special purpose because something of great moment had occurred. Like some great get-together. And made everybody and his brother feel good. An out-and-out noisy goodness and elation that only a flock of happy, glad-feeling Negroes gathered together could stir up.

I turned to King Solomon and asked, "What is all that noise outside?"

Solomon neither heard my question, nor did he hear the commotion.

I said good-bye. He raised his hand as if he meant to wave to me.

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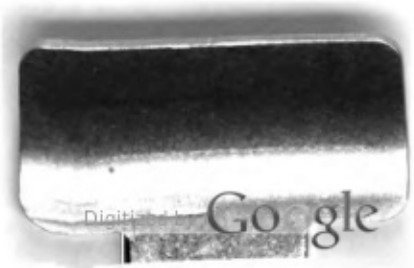

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