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WASTED TRAVAIL

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WASTED TRAVAIL

By

SADIE MAE ROSEBROUGH

Sadie M. Rosebrough

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To
DR. ROBERT W. McCLURE
From his grateful patient

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Preface

The theme of *Wasted Travail* needs few words to introduce it in a country founded on the principle of liberty, as ours is. In fact, it takes us back through the years to that Greek world where the idea of freedom was inwardly accepted but not always outwardly practiced.

My reason for writing it is twofold: first, to acquaint people who believe wholeheartedly that we should live together, fight together, and die together, with conditions prevailing in some parts of our cherished America; second, to aid people who find themselves in the depressing situation of having to contend hopelessly against disagreeable assumptions of superiority to adopt attitudes towards life which lead to the doing of things that are fair, honest, and elevating; and for those who live their lives in a partial atmosphere of freedom, to approach the confusing problems in that hopeful frame of mind which comes from a tolerance born of intelligence, good will, and understanding.

I have set forth my experiences in fictional form so that I might write with "malice toward none." I am deeply indebted to my doctor, who truly lives by the creed: "All men are created equal." I also am glad to acknowledge my obligation to Professor Hugh Skinner for his encouragement, and particularly his assistance in evaluating and arranging the material, and to all my other teachers whose helpful suggestions have aided me in my attempt to win a place for myself in the highly competitive field of fiction writing.

S. R.

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CHAPTER 1

ON THE CREST OF A ROLLING HILL IN THE DEEP AND DISobliging South stands a house, an old house. The low, pine-paling fence in front of it has lost its coat of lime-and-chalk whitewash, and the grayness of its boards adds to the forlorn look of the worn and weathered structure. Nothing very important has ever happened there, nothing that could justly give it a place in history; the ghosts of no famous people haunt it, and no Paul Revere rode by it, but it is there that I was born and named Taffy.

It is the place where I was introduced to the words "racial supremacy," the deceptive method of share-cropping, crop-lien, and lynching—where I learned that Sherman and his aides were lousy Yankees because they dared to fill their canvas bags with hickory-cured Southern hams, and satisfy their gullible lusts on the unyielding bellies of pompous Southern maidens, finally leaving a trail of fire, ashes, and backened ruin through the proudest cities of the shameless empire—where men boldly use the epithets "nigger," "dagoes," "crazy Jews," and "poor white trash," without a single embarrassed flicker of an eyelash. It is also where the Southern fields are swamped with mulattoes who sometimes work for their fathers, but whose mothers dare not tell them who they are, or where and how they were conceived.

Such are the surroundings I came stubbornly into. Because I was a girl, my mother hated me. I was a twin; my brother was born six hours before me, and my painful mother was overjoyed when the midwife told her, "It's

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a boy." She seemed not to regret her travail, but when I came, after nine hours of agony, pain, and near-death, she screamed and swore that her travail was wasted.

Later, when I was older and I seemed to have a talent for writing, she convinced herself that it truly had been wasted. I recollect clearly the first time the ugly flames of the legless old wood range licked up my mediocre story and she shouted, "There'll be no lie-writing in my family, and I mean to stop it right now, if I have to break every black bone in your body to do it. Who'd buy the mess, anyhow? You're no white girl, and besides there is nothing for you to tell, unless it is how I wasted nine months out of the field to wag with you, and this is what I get—a good-for-nothing young'n like your grandfather, with his high and mighty ideas."

Many years have passed since that day, and countless more important things which have happened in the meantime have vanished from my memory. But there are things out of those years that I shall never forget—words, fragments of sentences, deeds, days, things that seem to weight my mind like huge lumps of coal, and a few things now and then that flit across my memory like pleasant dreams.

The story of my birth is one of the leaden memories that I shall certainly never escape. That story came to represent many things to me: it was a whiplash that my heckled mother cowed me with during the years of my early childhood; it became insecurity, hot and violent emotion, prejudice, for which I found no compensation until I met —but let's not get ahead of my story, which in the end became the strength that gave me an understanding of the happiness that lies within oneself, in the stars, the sunset, and even in the mucky, stubborn Southern soil.

As I write this, I see again the farm as it was then, with its acres and acres of hilly earth; the deep dismal gulleys that stared back at you threateningly; the big fireplace piled high with oak logs; Mother jabbing needles into

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patchwork quilts with the baby on her lap, or bustling about in the dark kitchen with a resentful look in her eyes.

At such times my father would be reading the Bible aloud, pausing to look over his spectacles when he had finished a verse which he thought ought to make us sit up with excitement. I can see Bloomer the cat, heavy with her litter, stretched out on the uneven bricks of the hearth, stirring only when my father's well-aimed Bruton snuff spittle missed the burning oak logs and fell on her soft, furry stomach. As I look back on those years I can now realize that the beginning of my life was not a total loss, although it was neither a continuously happy experience nor an event of total sadness.

My father was a country schoolteacher and a brick mason for many years before I was born, and for a few afterwards. He was, or I should say is, almost a mathematical genius. I sometimes think that solving problems for the neighborhood children is the only true joy that makes life worth while for him. The days of his career as a teacher are far behind him; the faint memory of the coming and growing up of nine hungry children who robbed him of that joy seems to be more vivid.

The things I could now say for my overworked mother are many and varied, but considering the time and the place of her life I shall only remark that for all her shortcomings she was a wonderful mother. It was my grandfather, however, who taught me to talk, read, and write long before I should have. In fact, I can hardly remember when I could not read, although much of what I read did not make sense to me at the time. Grandfather was a hard-working man. He bought two hundred and forty acres of fertile land when it was cheap, which he planted and worked as though, if he stopped one minute before the darkness of night appeared, or started one minute after the blazing sun came over the hill with thousands of "time

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flies" accompanying it, he would not survive.

His rewards were good crops and a comfortable livelihood; in fact, it was far better than that of the neighboring landowners, or the sharecroppers and renters. He also practiced dentistry on all who felt that a saving of fifty cents was worth a little pain. I was afraid of this one-man medical center; the room was oblong with a small window at one end, and another in the middle. A long bench occupied one side of the room and a kerosene lamp hung from the wall, making the room dungeonlike. In the middle stood an awesome barber's chair. It was here that men, women, and children alike came to him to pry their teeth back and forth, until one final yank finished the job and they left, feeling a little more pain and misery than they had felt before.

But Grandfather's world was an entirely different world from ours. My father owned no land at that time; therefore, we were renters, cotton-pickers, and what have you, living on a hilltop near two white families who were outcasts of their race and neighborhood. They gave you a peculiar feeling—you knew that the older boys of one of the families thrilled to the velvety touch of Guernsey heifers, and that the younger boys satisfied their newly felt lust with the hairy feel of Hampshire shoats; also that the father spent many erotic hours in the pasture with his horse Daisy, she in a shallow ditch, he on its banks, patting her hindmost part—but you also knew that it was a hush-hush subject. The Botts were one of those families born without mental discipline; they were the product of a tenacious environment and an inheritance of racial sophistry, but with no guiding principles or ambitious ideas; just hate for those they termed "niggers" and a sincere desire that no harm should come to their livestock.

I recollect the first day I put a question to one of the Botts boys, Freddie. It was Saturday evening, and the

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dilapidated wagon-bed was filled with blocks of pine wood, painstakingly cut into lengths to fit the hairy old storekeeper's greedy old range. I sat in front with the reins in my hands, listening to the creaking of the mules' trace-chains, my mind stirring like a churn of unripened cream. I passed their shabby house, rounded the corner of the leaning barn, and headed for the sand-embedded road. He was kicking and scolding the pig as she ran around the fence.

"What did she do?" I asked.

"Acted like a nigger," he said, "so I'm treating her as I would a nigger. I should swing her to a limb. If I had some dynamite I'd blow her to hell. See here, a nigger ain't no good," he bellowed at her, "and no damn pig I tote feed to is going to act like one."

I gaped at him but said nothing, because I had no desire to see what I had heard the preacher call the "Pearly Gates of Heaven," even though he had said there would be plenty of milk and honey there. I wanted to tell Mr. Rub, the storekeeper, what I had seen and heard; I wanted to cry, say things, many things, but I thought about my mother and what she had said. Who would want to hear anything a patched-clothing Negro girl in a wood-filled wagon on a lonely country road had to say? Who'd believe me? Anyway, Grandfather had said to me the last time I spent an evening at his house that even the black-birds we saw soaring overhead would always defend their kind. I poked around in my mind in quest of words to say to myself, some amusing thought to take my mind off ugly scenes, but I couldn't find any; I wanted revenge.

There were many more days like this to follow, times when I seemed almost on the brink of an enlightening footing, with some answer to the perplexing problems of life; yet I found neither happiness nor mild comfort in my tender conclusions. The sweaty mules pulled hard over the deep sucking sand as I mused to myself that even

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the Southern soil seemed to dole out the wrong portions in the most hateful way and in the most hazardous places. My repressed ideas and words, and the haughty deeds of men, worried me; I couldn't understand this thing called life. I was uneasy, sad; I had dreams in which I cried out to God—if there was one—to remove the seething, sapping, ceaseless drudgery. But the wounds still grew; sank deeper and spread like a spiteful hog-sand adder; they bled and festered; they seared; they pained and seared some more.

I groped nightly in a horrible world; my dreams were like suddenly waking up in hell alone, surrounded by a scorching fire, without even a single wicked soul to share your horror. I formed the habit of talking to myself, preaching, swearing at the dozing cows, which I hated because of the Botts. As they stood, unmindfully chewing their cuds, I shouted at them: "You meek heifers; fight back! You have horns, tails; why do you stand for it? You can run and kick, you can hook, you do not have to work from morning until darkness stops you; furthermore, you're not a nigger girl whom nobody wants to hear say anything. Fight, you fools! Run! Moo! Moo! Loud as hell; fight with your tails! Look at you standing there, letting the beastly flies gnaw your hairy backs and suck your lousy blood. I can see by the way you act that if you belonged to the Botts' you'd swish your tails and let them pat you as much as they wished."

I bellowed at the lean-necked mules, the cackling hens, the scaly-legged roosters; I screamed at them: "You proud, feathery, foolish cocks! What have you to strut and crow about, while we suffer? The least you can do is keep quiet and stop your wicked crowing."

I built a grotesque altar in the pasture with dried corn-stalks, in the center of a cluster of stubby pines. This was for years my sanctum. Around the altar I placed make-believe people, which were really bunches of grass with their thick roots braided around them. Sometimes I would

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be the minister; I would reprimand my followers, and pray for them afterwards. I told God that they were not wanted because they were Negroes, and it seemed to me as if he should not have made them. I wept, and asked him what was wrong with Negroes. "Didn't you make all peoples?" I asked pleadingly. "Then why," I continued, "doesn't the world want to hear anything a Negro girl has to write, but will buy and read what a white girl has to write?"

Sometimes my meetings were court sessions and at those times one of the bunches of grass would be my secretary; two sticks with rags tied to them would be Mr. Botts and Freddie: the others were the spectators of the court, and I would be the judge. I swore at them, I pounded them with sticks, I kicked them and sentenced them to long terms at hard labor. I yelled, I sobbed, sobbed until often the pounding in my brain stopped and I was happy for a few days; but the rebellion and sadness returned, bore on, and beat down like a hot sun whose rays never shift.

The house was demolished by a tornado that year: the wind blew hard and recklessly until it lifted the entire roof and scattered it about the orchard; the lightning reached out two long flashing streaks and set a fiery tongue to the remainder of it. I can still see those vicious flames as they reached out and lapped up the shabby structure. They scorched, they raved; they lapped up the yard, the barn (till even the tears of the lonely weeping willow tree were no more), the grass, the brave flowers that dared to bloom and look cheerfully up at the sun. Those fiery arms reached out for the lean-necked mules, but once those animals' heels struck the rotten boards that had fooled them and kept them confined within the smelly walls, they knew that they were free; they kicked up their scrawny legs, flipped their unsheared tails, and, with a snicker that showed all their yellow teeth, they fled.

The family went to live with an aunt until a house

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could be built on Grandfather's place for us, but this aunt did not want a gloomy-faced girl in her house, who ran about swearing at roosters and pigs. I was sent to live with Grandfather, and spent many happy hours there; also many hours trying to figure out why it was so wrong to be born a girl, and, as Mama said, to be so much like my grandfather. I wanted to stay on, and on, but unfortunately Grandmother also favored my brother. She said little to me, and, when she did say a few words, her conclusion was usually: "I can't see to save my life where Son and his wife got you, anyhow; you're just like an ugly parrot among a bunch of canaries."

I was happy the day Sister sent for me to visit her in Memphis. I was more ladylike then, that is, as ladylike as a fifteen-year-old could be; but there were still days during which I told myself: "Your mammy didn't want you, the world rejects you, so why not end it all? Go drown yourself. Don't talk; keep quiet; nobody wants to hear anything you have to say. Draw into your black shell like the homely turtle." However, Memphis was heavenlike to me. I scoured the broad streets, looking at almost all the passers-by to see if they seemed any kinder. I felt lost, unwanted. I fought with myself; I wasn't satisfied, I had to prove that my mother's words were wrong, untrue. I did not know how I should go about it, but I knew it had to be done; I wanted to make her sorry, weep, cringe. I dedicated myself to finding a solution. I'd get an answer to my problems; I'd get results swiftly, huge and lasting results.

That was a search that later took me to New York City, where I walked about and thought—like Jean Labadie, when he and his followers settled on Bohemia Manor—that Utopia must be somewhere near. I went to the Statue of Liberty, about which I had read so much. I looked up at it and wished that the lady with the beckoning look could speak to me. I milled around it, trying to see

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beyond it to some peaceful foreign land. I went to Washington and searched, but it was there I found reason to become more sorrowful. "There is no freedom here," I thought. I passed by the White House, and wished I could yell at the President and ask him if he knew why Negroes were not wanted in the hotels, the cafes, or any of the other places that practiced segregation. I visited Niagara Falls and looked at that powerful flow of tumbling water. As the mist sprayed my hair and face, I wept that a God able to create such beauty would not create a little especially for me, somewhere where I would be thought of as a lady, and not in terms of my color or the shape of my nose.

I went back to Memphis and walked up and down Beale Street. I went to the banks of the harnessed Tennessee River and thought about how turbulent the waters were before they were brought low within huge locks and dams, where all became serene and peaceful. I looked across the water and wondered if life were more pleasant on the other side of the mud-swept banks. A white man passed and smiled at me. I looked after him and thought about the woman who once touched the hem of Christ's garment, and wept a little.

I walked up and down Beale Street again, and studied the crowds stirring there, comparing them with crowds on other streets in other cities and towns. I was reminded that except for one factor it might have been Fourth Avenue in Birmingham, Alabama, the South Side in Montgomery, Yellow Front in Tuscaloosa, William Street in Buffalo, or Harlem in New York City—just a street with bundles of human flesh in the likenesses of men and women, succumbing to their sucking environment or trying desperately to show by their walk that such a moral atmosphere was not a part of them. I looked at them with affinity. I thought about a passage my father had once read to us and attempted to quote it softly:

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"The voice said cry. And he said, 'What shall I cry? All godliness is as the flower of the field; the flower fadeth, therefore, I shall go softly all my years, wailing for my people.' "

As all these scenes flowed freely and clearly through my wandering mind, I felt like the same confused, over-emotional girl that I had once been. The old County Training School swept vividly before me. I recalled the pleasures and sorrows it had brought me. I separated the scenes and thought about each in its own setting. The four and one-half miles I walked to and from school each day —with wry amusement I laid that incident upon my pile of sorrows. There were days when the miles seemed to stretch a little with each step; days when the heavy raindrops beat down upon me like oversized balls of hail; days when the chapped and frozen ground sounded like the crunching teeth of a million mules under my feet; days when the sun seemed to make a mad, racing dash to hide its face beyond the beckoning horizon, and darkness sneaked triumphantly and frighteningly upon me.

Then there were the chilly nights I spent peering greedily and anxiously into the open pages of my schoolbooks until far into the new day. I would sit hunched over before the firelight until the logs burned themselves out and the glowing coals dimly refused me sufficient light. The cold wind as it played peek-a-boo through the cracks of the thin walls, even the hungry call of the young calves, came amusingly before me. I remembered I would lie wearily among the weighty patchwork quilts and wish fervently that the calves would content themselves with chewing their cuds a little longer. But they only mooed louder and more piteously. Finally, my foster mother would call:

"Don't you hear those calves? I know you do. Well—you may as well get up; it's about time, anyhow. So hurry out there and stop their devilish mouths."

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Grandfather had died then and my twin brother had tried to take his place in my heart, but I did not like him at that time. I felt that he was to blame for all my troubles. He ran away from home and worked as a water carrier for a railroad crew to help my sister take care of me, but my father found him and brought him back home. However, he sent what money he had earned and what I had hidden under the house to my sister. Grandfather had given it to me and told me to keep it until I needed it very badly, but my brother wanted me to find a happy home somewhere with someone who would love me and be like a mother to me. But I was young, inexperienced, and shy; therefore, the visits to the cousins in New York and Washington had brought me no home.

I did not stay with any of them although I had no place to go back to and I could not live with my parents; my father had adopted a further downward attitude and quarrelsome way of life. I couldn't stand it, of that my brother was sure. He found a place for me with a distant cousin whose wife was a schoolteacher. I went to live with them to work for my board and a chance to walk to the County Training School to finish my high-school education. Nine miles each day seemed a short distance to walk at first, but the heavy, continuous farmwork left me little free time, and I became a sad, overworked young lady. I was older than most of my classmates by that time, more shabbily dressed, and perhaps more sorrowful than anyone in the whole school. Nevertheless, I studied faithfully and graduated from high school. That brought me a little happiness, but, as college was out of the question, I had little reason to remain on the farm. I left and went back to my sister's. As the years moped and skidded ahead, I became a living part of the uneasy impatience, the unrest and fear, which the disordered world paraded.

I waited, and looked for the clean sheets of true democracy, but each time I turned back the covers of pretense

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the damp spots seemed to grow bigger and bigger. I was tossed and driven by the winds of justice, which came encouragingly up from the half-tolerating Northerners, but once they met the hot air of the Dixiecrat-infested South, they quickly shifted directions without even rustling their dirt-concealing garments. I watched, read, and listened, while the justice for all of which Lincoln spoke squatted, strained, and spewed in its effort to divert its own conscience-haunted eyes, and the eyes of others, from its sectional freedoms. Like the bulbar garlic, it slept and slumbered with its fleshy portion underneath the earth, growing more offensively odorous each day.

There were no promising situations; it was a grievous vision. While America gazed responsible-eyed upon the borders of foreign lands, tolerance and understanding in the South were like rolling things before a whirlwind. Then came the Second World War, and there arose anew the question of civil rights, and the questioning of fascism, socialism, communism, and what should rightly have been termed "falsism." I had no faith in the talk, nor in the halfhearted actions of my fellowmen, but I had not given up the idea of trying to to become well educated in order that I might at least gain a one-man audience to hear my story, as I saw it.

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CHAPTER 2

I MET HIM IN A FACTORY IN DEPEW, NEW YORK. IT WAS during the war; the odor of the rubberized solution filled the air and seemed to seep through the uncomfortable respirators we wore, making them more unbearable and smelly. The steam was hot and the submarine batteries we were krolacking felt as if they weighed a hundred instead of twenty pounds.

We were doing piecework, and had, as we often did, finished our work, although we seldom stopped, and when we did it was only long enough to run across the street for a cup of half-sweetened coffee. Forge hammers rang in the adjoining departments and the heavy buzz of the machine engines was punctuated by an occasional laugh, or a gush of powerful words coming from a disgusted worker which would have caused St. Peter to hide his saintly face in shame.

We were tired and pushed beyond our strength; we had worked seven hours overtime each day that week trying to get the required quota of batteries out, and only the memory of loved ones on the battlefields kept us steadily at work and on speaking terms with our foremen. Then the whistle blew for production to cease for five minutes of silent prayer for those who had given their lives for threatened fellowmen, those who held their places on battlefields which were direct invitations to death, and others who worried and worked during the uneasy period.

It was difficult to analyze my feelings at that moment. I put down my tongs, shut the machine current off, took off

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my respirator, and looked at my sweaty partner. He looked just the same as always—blunt, frank, and humorous in a sarcastic way. When he spoke he gave you a feeling that he measured his words in ounces, and that he was ever careful to say just the correct amount and no more; on the whole, a man a little hard to place.

I looked away, deciding not to analyze his soul, but my thoughts drew me back to him. I started wondering what he thought about prayer, especially about the prayers at that moment, the feverish praying that would end for the majority who joined in it that very instant if peace were declared, and they felt that they no longer hovered about with their security and freedom in danger. "Peace!" I thought. "What a laugh, when even I haven't found it in my own little individual world."

"Wasted words," I said aloud.

"I don't understand you," he said. "If you thought they were going to be wasted, why did you bow your head and bear witness to them?"

"Because I'd like to believe that they are sincere," I said.

"Then you have no faith in prayer?"

"It's not that," I answered. "It's like this: one day you are born into a world—a wicked world, with no consent of your own—"

"You're tired, fellow," he said, smiling at his use of the male name. "We've done enough for today; let's get a cup of coffee while you tell me about how men are born."

I forced a smile and followed him; we entered the cafe and sat down.

"Now," he said pleasantly, "you were about to tell me about the day, or one day, when we were born; that is, when someone was born—go ahead and let's see what we can do about it, or should have done about it."

"Well," I answered, "I was saying that one day you're born into a confused world, a birth which you have no hand in creating; yet you're born—born white-skinned,

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brown-skinned, red-skinned, yellow-skinned, and black-skinned, or perhaps just a bundle of flesh, bones, blood, life-maintaining breath, and skin the exact color of David's carefully woven coat. You're heavy with little wars which become overheated during your growth, and befuddle and warp your tender mind; then suddenly you are scrambling and praying for the cessation of a particular war, but nobody pays any attention to the little wars which have been developing in the heads of the bundles that came scampering into the world and have grown up into wholehearted, and halfhearted citizens of their countries.

"The growth of some of the individual wars, as well as the international wars, might have been halted had someone given a listening ear to the questioning cries of the fruitful crop of would-be citizens in the days of its youth. They might have grown into something fine and noble, individuals who fought to end the beginning of wars; but left alone they grew into something low and evil, as warped and crooked as a sea of snakes, existing like the hastily traveling moles which have not the blessed gift of eyes with which to see."

"And just who are you thinking of, fellow?" he asked. "Yourself or some staunch historian?"

"Myself and all of humanity," I replied. "Life for a member of this last generation becomes a swarm of mystifying impressions, holding his mind like a solitary cell which keeps a lonely praying-prisoner isolated with only his dream of the beauty of the outside world."

He nodded and I kept on talking.

"Everywhere you go promises are being made for a better world in the future. You hear talk of civil rights—lots of talk of many things, words, words, which kindle hope, stir up hatred, and wring pity from hearts of steel; but in my opinion they are useless and ambiguous, used just to build up a pretty system. I imagine that when the soldiers

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return, those who are fortunate enough to return, things will be in as much of a tangle as ever, and people will be as full of hellish evils, and as intolerant as ever, if not a little worse."

"Perhaps you're right," he said. "But are you sure you should expect normal conditions at a time like this? To me, that is shallow optimism and this is certainly no time for such optimism. Tell me, just what are you trying to say anyway; are you saying that you live in America, a land of opportunity and advancement for all who choose to make it their home, and yet sow seeds of hopelessness? If that's what you're doing, then—what harvest do you expect to reap?"

I thought about that last sentence before I spoke; I looked down at my hands and then glanced at his. He had two hands, a head, arms, ears, fingers, as I had. I looked at the color of his hands, the shape of his nose, and wondered what difference they made between our lives. It surely hadn't lessened the amount of work required of both of us, nor had it lessened the offensive odor of the steaming solution we both detested. I was then tempted to tell him that the pigmentation of my skin made those glorious opportunities of which he spoke impossible for me to enjoy; and that I could not advance, that is, more than one step in a number of years. And the pigmentation was created by the same almighty hand that created all men in his image. Instead, I tried to sum up a portion of my life during the few minutes I waited for him to finish talking. I decided that my life as a whole was a cheat, and the only advancement I could claim was a job that had been created by the horrors of war and the memory of a meager country home from which I had escaped before it was too late, with a few other scant scenes that might be sorted out and called pleasant.

A bit of this, a bit of that, on the pleasant side, but big hunks of heartache and what might be rightfully termed

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an ocean of tears! Yes, that was my advancement, and someone had said that every tub must stand on its own bottom. I wondered what he or she intended or allowed for the unfortunate tub which found its bottom pricked and heaved asunder every time it tried to take a stand.

"Have you," he asked, "ever tried to figure out how to challenge the world and really become boss of your own destiny? Of course, it can't be done at once; but it can be done. Take now, today. No one seems to have much faith in the future of anything. We're all a little jumpy, muddled, and frightened, but it shouldn't be like that. We should be looking forward to better days and using our energy toward bringing them about. We should be full of faith in the ultimate success of our efforts, whether it is a family problem, a racial issue, or a national war we are facing."

"That may be true," I answered, "but I have never felt that there was very much for me to hope for. When I think of America I see again a group of frightened slaves forced aboard a ship and sold into the hands of greedy masters, who tied and whipped them until they were so humbled and cowed that the offspring whom they begat among themselves, and from the loins of their lust-crazed masters, came into the world beaten before they had a chance to poke their dusty faces into the crowded life of humanity. For you it is different, because for you there is really a harvest to be expected. You say, take the world as it stands today. Suppose we do. What do we find?

"Let me tell you—deadly bombs on the verge of being hurled back and forth to destroy the God-given habitation of the country-sides; men and women living and prospering under the protecting arms of the Declaration of Independence, yet betraying their country at the slightest nudge of a foreign elbow; men and women being hauled into court and called fascists, socialists, communists, because one day some ideologist searched various books on

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semantics and defined someone's attitude or thoughts as such; Negroes being mobbed collectively by men whose hearts are full of violence and who justify themselves with their own demarcated mouths. And all because some publicity-seeking white women flaunt their bare legs, thighs, and midriffs before their dusty eyes, and as soon as one turns his head they start screaming, 'Rape! Rape! A nigger did it. Two of them, three of them, six of them; no it was nine—all nine of them attacked me!' Men and women of every land elevating themselves like eagles building nests behind the moon. My people, your people, acting like fools, walking in danger-shrouded shadows! That is what we have today in the land of opportunity. That's why it's so hard to believe in anything!"

"It's a damn shame, I know," he replied, "but let's put it this way. Suppose you have some much-needed advice to give the country. Telling me alone, or keeping it pent up within yourself is not going to solve the problem. You'll have to do something about it; of course, it won't be an easy job, but a little trail-blazing would certainly hasten the procedure, and the difficulties are not so enormous.

"If you feel that there is something wrong in the world, go and find out what it is; examine it carefully, ceaselessly, critically; take it apart, then fit it together again; ponder over it and, if you want, say one of your wasted prayers over it, but be sure to fight for it, hold to it, and purge it like hell. Then it won't matter so much what color your eyes are, or how much weak men look with growing emotion at the naked parts of tradition-craving women; nor will the shape of your nose seem like a stamp of inferiority. But, fellow, you must have guts enough to purge your ideas until you are sure they are free from all impurities; then fight with all your hard-earned knowledge to put them across. Somebody will listen, don't fool yourself; somebody is waiting for the birth of new and sounder notions."

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My eyes came up quickly. I had never thought about my predicament in so casual a manner; to me there just didn't seem any way to fight an issue alone; yet his words revealed something to me that was to be the guiding principle enabling me to face life squarely and nakedly.

"The secret of life," he continued, "that is, my understanding of the secret of life, is being able to look critically and justifiably into your own heart first. Know yourself and become so deeply aware of your shortcomings and abilities that you are able to see those of other people in like manner; yet feel that you are allied with them, feel them to be kindred spirits, whether they are Jews, Italians, Russians, or Southerners—feel that there is a bond of common life, common destiny, yet that you are set apart as an individual, through the intentions of God, who created all men equal.

"When the problems seem too weighty, go to someone and talk about them; for you, it will be your intolerance, and the intolerance of your fellowmen. Talk every day of every week about it. One of your wasted prayers might even help a little. But first start with yourself. Don't be afraid to shout about your own unbearables, because in the long run people become great to the extent of their compassion, tolerance, and quiet wisdom."

I walked with him out of the restaurant. "I'm going home, fellow," he said. "You can tell Don I'll work overtime tomorrow." His broad hand clasped mine. Looking down, he said, "There are many more hands ready to give you a friendly and firm clasp; there are many people of all races who are not afraid that your nearness will affect them in the manner of the color-changing tree frog, people ready to give you a pat on the back for your courage in fighting any issue for a better world. It doesn't matter about the color, for those who are really sincere. The insincere you should not care about. So begin to fight back in the proper manner, fellow, and I'm for you one hun-

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dred per cent."

When he had gone, I went back into the restaurant. It seemed a little incongruous to me that, after all the things I had heard about Russians, this man should be so pleasantly human. (I had heard that he was Russian, although he neither affirmed nor denied it. But our foreman had said it was true.) I thought seriously about him for a few minutes. There was crispness in his voice, and a suggestion of power in the broad, swift hands, but I couldn't visualize him as coldhearted; in fact, I couldn't place him, for example, as a teacher, or a lawyer, by any means of scheming characterization; therefore I gave up the idea. A half-hour passed without my realizing it. I arose and left the restaurant. I had arrived at no definite conclusion, but somehow I knew at last that what had befallen me during my life so far was not the end of the world.

I would perhaps be faced with insults and injustices reaching far into the years, but I would stop seeking Utopia, or a change to be brought about by magic, and fight to make the ugliness of the world dissolve into incredible beauty.

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CHAPTER 3

I MAPPED OUT A COURSE FOR MYSELF THAT DAY. I LOOKED into the faces of the customers as I passed out of the restaurant and told myself, "These men are your friends; feel free, smile, and be content; perhaps they have already examined the things you do not seem to understand and have found a new perspective of life."

I decided that I would see if this thing called justice could be found anywhere in America for all alike; of one thing I was sure, that the idea certainly hadn't been born in the South. I decided that I would begin as my Russian friend had suggested. I would cease the eternal mountain-out-of-a-molehill complaints, ignore the snarl of destiny, the unending insults, old burdens, old vexations of everyday living—stop clasping them like roots holding the rain for gentle seepage. I would talk to people, ask them in my meek way what they thought about justice for all as practiced in America.

I was making a trip to the doctor that evening; I would ask him about it—just ask him casually how he felt, and if he thought I was being overemotional, or was it my growing tendency toward self-distrust that was sapping my faith? My mind went back to the recent conversation which had been such a disturbing influence that it led to my newly planned outlook. I thought about life, my life, in terms of a road. I wondered if my travels over the roads of life would be wasted. I thought about my friend and work partner and wondered if others also found him of an uncertain quantity. I wondered if the customers I had just

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left in the restaurant had been caught in this turbulent storm—and, if so, had they also tried to analyze the clouds to see if there was a wee sign of a rainbow, buffeted by a friendly wind, gathering.

There had been no smooth-paved portions connected with my life; no correctness, of that I was sure. There had been rough roads, winding roads, misleading trails branching off in all directions, and the gouges and ruts lay open-mouthed and impassable. All through the years there had been a war between myself and livers of life. I wondered if the virtues acquired through conflict would ever prove worthy of the war. "This is a fickle land," I told myself. "Maybe my mother was right; maybe her wailing cry voiced the true state of all those mothers whose dusty wombs hugged, panged, stretched, and spat out the black no-land men and women to be."

I checked my thoughts for a moment, reprimanding myself for taking a course contrary to my recent plans. But I resumed my train of thought after a few seconds. I tried to hum; but I couldn't get past "My country, 'tis of thee." As I thought of the following lines, I began telling myself: "Land of vague liberty, of shadings I sing; Land where democratic men worked and died; Land where my slave fathers cried; From every forbidden side; No freedom rings!" I jerked the bell cord frantically, shocked at my own thoughts. "And you were told about the importance of self-discipline this afternoon," I told myself sternly.

The bus drew to the curb; I hurried out and across the street to Dr. Brunch's office. But I was still thinking of the incidents of the afternoon and wondering if Socrates had accomplished anything after all; I wondered what he would say if he could see his principles strangling in the dust of modern practices. It was a small office tucked between the lofty buildings of the broad city streets. I went inside, sat down, and looked observantly around the neat

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room. A woman and a man sat on the sofa. I approached it and started to sit down, and they slid over to the far end like scared kittens. They snuggled close together and peered at me, as if afraid I would fade on the sofa and mar their tinted whiteness. I looked at the woman and tried to think of a way to assure her that I also was human. I tried smiling, whereupon her companion turned his head and looked at me like a bull viewing his grown-up offspring, and turned away.

Presently the door opened and the doctor asked, "Who's next?" They popped up and disappeared behind the quickly closed door. I sat looking out of the window, trying to determine how I had benefited by leaving the Klansland. Just then the door opened, and the two people, accompanied by the doctor's wife, emerged. Mrs. Brunch was explaining, "I don't see why Doctor insists on keeping his practice in this section. I hate it. All these old Negroes coming in with their filth and silly ideas! If they tried keeping themselves clean for a change they wouldn't have to run to the doctor so much, anyway." The couple nodded in my direction and I jerked my head back toward the window, pretending not to have heard. I thought of leaving, but the door opened the next minute and Dr. Brunch beckoned me to enter. I followed him into his consultation room and sat down, feeling very dejected and irritable. His wife had entered radiating smiles, and busied herself by helping him with the examination. I extended my arm for the customary blood test and thought about what I had heard. I wondered how many times she had scolded him about treating Negro patients.

The examination was over and he was saying, "Your blood deficiency has not improved. You'll have to spend a couple of weeks in the hospital; at the company's expense, of course. Lead poison can be very dangerous if neglected, you know. We'll take you off your feet for a while and treat you; if that doesn't help we'll give you a

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few transfusions. It's too bad you didn't heed your foreman's advice and wear your respirator. This might have been avoided. I'll arrange for a bed for you by tomorrow afternoon. Will two o'clock be all right?"

I mumbled a reply and left the building. I was annoyed. I didn't feel ill, only weak and tired; furthermore, this was no time to go to a hospital; there was a shortage of nurses, doctors, and everything else, I complained to myself. Besides, I no longer had any faith in him as a doctor. It was true he hadn't uttered the words I overheard, but somehow I felt that he should have been able to explain to his wife that sickness visited all peoples alike, regardless of position or nationality. Nevertheless, I decided I should go to the hospital, because I feared the probable ill effect later. If I refused treatment, the company would not be liable for damages.

It was a small hospital, sweeping back snugly from the bustling street, with an ordered, well-tended appearance. "Perhaps this is just what I need, a haven of rest," I told myself. I entered the corridor and made my way to the receiving desk. A uniformed figure glanced in my direction and kept on writing. After she had presumably reached the end of her sentence, she rolled back her lips in what seemed to me more of a snarl than a broad smile and asked what she could do for me.

I wanted to tell her that, if she really wanted to do something for me, she should stop that beastly hypocrisy, and get on with the signing up. After going through what might have seemed like a grinding day to a state witness during an important murder case, I lay listless upon the hard mattress, wishing with all my might that I could go to sleep and stay for a long, long time. The woman lying in the bed next to mine was paralyzed; her once fat buttocks lay pallid and motionless upon the white bed sheets. There were fourteen beds in the ward; in them were four Negroes, three Poles, two Italians, three former Southern

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belles, and two others whom I could not connect with any race. From the color of their eyes, hair and skin, they might have been German, Spanish, or a mixture of the carelessly sown seed of several fair and dark races.

Between pains, my inquisitive brain wondered, but they never betrayed themselves in any manner; just lay there still and in misery. Occasionally a frantic jerk on the bell cord stirred ether-smelling patients out of a fitful slumber and sent a nurse scurrying to the supply closet for a sheet, a gown, or a belated bedpan. I lay there, turning my head in different directions, observing the activities. "This is," I thought, "what Grandfather would have called a stinking mess. Look at us, a pathetic collection of pain and deathly stares." However, most of us sometimes felt like talking to someone or listening to someone talk to us.

The woman (shall we call her Mary?) just lay on her back and looked up at the ceiling continuously. Although I felt as lifeless as one of my mother's ragged dishcloths, I thought about her each day. I thought surely she must feel worse than I did, and I wished that I could do or say something that would give her a little peace of mind—even if it had to be something like trying to believe the story of Chicken Little after coming of age—something that she could put faith in and hold to.

The doctors and nurses said she would never walk again. I thought about it pityingly and tried asking her questions in an effort to cheer her up, but she just grunted and stared. I remember trying to say something about God's healing power, as mentioned in the Bible, but she didn't seem at all interested, just moved her puffy arms from one position to another, and shamelessly performed like a jug of wine suddenly visited by a strong whiff of air. I finally decided that she either wished to be left entirely alone to nurse her bitterness, or she wasn't given to talking very much, and let it go at that.

After many restless nights and days of feverish pain and

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hypodermics, I felt better; that is, well enough to try to figure out how to determine which of my conclusions fitted her manner. As long as I live I shall remember the incident which gave me the correct answer. It was a Sunday morning near visiting hour. The hospital staff was scant that morning, and the two nurses moved hurriedly among the beds in our ward, jerking the curtains together behind them, not bothering to see whether they were completely closed. Relatives and friends were beginning to tiptoe to the bedsides of hollow-eyed patients; some solemnly consoling, some cheerful and smiling before friends or relatives on the progressive road to recovery, or lingering between the puzzling forks, waiting and uncertain.

The nurse passed around my bed, stopped long enough to pull my upturned toes, and hurried to brave the task of creating a more rose-scented atmosphere than the fever-clad ward then offered. "Relax," she said, as her soft fingers rolled the yellow, flabby figure over to the other side of the bed. I lay there watching her, thanking God that she and others like her had chosen the profession of nursing. I was not irritable that day. I was in what might be called a jovial mood. I had not been thinking of the boldly exhibited racial demarcation of the South, nor of my pent-up hatred of my mother. I was thinking of home, and the warm sunshine. And although I wasn't entirely free from pain, the picture of a scarecrow-guarded watermelon patch kept rising up before me.

I smiled to myself as I remembered the times we had stolen into the fields, plucked a melon, and walked backwards from the patch, being careful to step precisely in the tracks we made entering. It was a long time before my mother figured that simple one out. She had called my older sister and nervously explained that the tracks led the culprit into the melon patch but that he seemed to have vanished after pulling the melon.

I realized I was feeling lively; perhaps I was acquiring

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a passive view, accepting the world as it is. I thought about Mary again, and started to turn my head to look at her, but before I got half way around, I was shocked by: "I don't see why I lie here and cry over what you say to me. I should report you for scolding me as if I were a prisoner. Having to lie here day and night, surrounded by black niggers, is heartache enough, without your leaving the curtains open like a barn door so that they can feast their black eyes on my white panty. Try to remember from now on that I'm a white woman and that I am here only because I'm ill and my husband is out of work; and keep those damn curtains closed."

I was stunned; my beautiful world of a few minutes before was swept from its newborn horizon in shambles. My head ached. I felt like a frozen potato that couldn't yield to a much needed thawing. I wished with all my strength that I could be out of there fast—run, run, on and on, never stop. I did not know then what the nurse had said to her; I only knew that I shook like the land of eternal earthquakes. I pulled the coverlets over my head and tried to get very small.

Maybe I could smother myself. "There is no justice, no peace, no contentment anywhere in this world," I moaned. Why had I come yelling into the world from a darkly spiteful womb to grope in a senseless world like this, I wondered. Why? Why? I tried to remember what that voice reminded me of. Was it an incident during my childhood, or had I heard something similar at some other time in my adult life? Then it came to me and I was again seeing the daring, slimy, poison-tongued, sneering rattlesnake Grandfather had killed once long ago. It had hissed and poked its red tongue out repeatedly, as if telling a threatening story of its dislike of us. Grandfather had said that he acted no differently from some people who should have been born of themselves, and raised by themselves, and lived by themselves all their appointed days, so that

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they might escape the presence of others whom they thought had no right to enjoy the privileges they enjoyed.

It was too much of a strain on my energy trying to think. I wished that my brain would cease to function and leave me in peace. I must be mad, I thought. It was like a mile-long, algebraic problem—it was swelling out of all proportion. I buried my face in the pillow and wept. I suddenly needed to know myself badly, and as thoroughly as my Russian friend had suggested. The sobs grew in my breast like a live thing trying to free itself from some confinement as I fell drowsily into a troubled, comalike sleep.

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CHAPTER 4

IT WAS AN UNUSUALLY STICKY LATE SUNDAY AFTERNOON during the early part of my stay in Buffalo; a jumble of wails, gurgles, and smells filled the air; and the children in the tenement were exceedingly noisy and irritable. The whole scene oppressed me.

I came out of the house and walked slowly along the littered sidewalk to Main Street. I was painting inner pictures of confusion, chaos, and torment; words kept intruding between each attempt I made at pleasant thoughts. When I came to the corner of Lower Main and Perry streets, I paused to decide which way to take. Glancing in the direction of the dock, I walked on toward it. As I walked, my eyes moved over the scenes before me. Typical waterfront, it was; hungry-looking, former shiphands—drunk, hairy, ragged, and sweaty; twenty-five-cent-a-night, bedbug-infested hotels; and a few overrouged women. A panhandler stepped in front of me and begged for a dime. As I reached into the pocket of my slacks in search of one, suddenly a crowd gathered around me. Ducking away from their poverty-haunted faces, I ran across the street to the ship-landing and sat down, disgusted beyond words.

As the quiet of the evening fell on the shallow water of the canal, the hue was little changed. The day was dying like a wilting plant. A faint rank odor hung in the air. The Lake Erie wind began to move gently along the banks. I gazed across the water and singled out a big ship with the name *Greater Detroit* on it. There was a man on deck, a man who appeared to be about fifty. The boat

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pulled in to anchor and the stranger made his way to the dock. His serious glance rested on me.

"Good evening, madam," he said. "Didn't your expected party arrive?"

My eyes brushed him with a suspicious glance. "Do you always go around intruding on the privacy of strangers?" I retorted.

He laughed amusedly, and sat down beside me. "Nor do I always sit down beside haughty young ladies who apparently would rather that I be on my way."

"Then why not heed your conscience?" I replied, edging over to the end of the bench.

He went on talking in his clear, slow, deep voice. "Because that would be conforming to general behavior," he returned, "and I'm not a true conformist."

I told him that, although the world was a free one, I was sure he could find another place to sit, and looked out across the water. He talked on. I half listened, and purposely made inappropriate answers to his questions, wishing he would leave me alone with my thoughts. Perhaps that was the reason people became hermits; they wished to separate themselves from meddling talkers like this.

"You're rather a sad-looking being. What are you thinking of?" he finally asked.

"My life, which is no business of yours, nor interesting," I said brusquely.

He checked a smile. "Tell me about that tragic life; I like excitement," he teased.

His words struck me and stung like a blow. I felt the blood rush to my face. I was wretched and desolate, but what right had he—? I just sat there; feeling as if I had lifted the latch of a secret door and suddenly encountered violent greetings at the threshold. I groped for something to steady my senses. I started to jump up and run. I tried to summon a reply, but succeeded in capturing none. I looked at him searchingly and haughtily and, as if

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prompted by an unfamiliar tongue, I dug my fingers into my palms and began:

"Perhaps I ought to explain to begin with that almost all the things I've known have been sorrows instead of pleasures, defeats instead of joys—the whole pattern of my life seems from the beginning to have been anchored to a drifting stump. Fear and delusion have been with me as far back as I can remember, holding me like entangling sheets after a sweaty, frightening session with a nightmare. The *why* of these things is not important. The fact that they are real and crawling and strike back into my life like a camouflaged two-tongued scorpion, putting things I had previously forgotten or refused to acknowledge daily in my path, barricading and silencing my spirit and swirling desires, is the frustrating important part of it."

I paused, looking at him and questioning his solemn attention, but the words rushed on and dropped from my lips like hastily thrown pebbles. I told him about the old farm, about dark, lonely hills; hounds of wind close on my heels on a wintry day; fertile-terraced Alabama fields; plodding workers, and a wind-leaking farmhouse on a lonely knoll; about the haughty-spirited South; of Northern men and women wearing vague costumes of tolerance but taking crafty counsel, and covering the blood of the innocent with their skirts. I didn't find it hard to tell it to this stranger; I was hot with old familiar bruises and pulsing sores, old griefs, old shame, and lurking, stinging words. Suddenly I felt a desire to weep. I crushed it down and got to my feet, feeling desolate, yet at the same time experiencing a queer sensation of relief. I had no more to say, and so was silent.

After what seemed an eternity of knee-deep silence, he said, "Well, madam, those were sad experiences, but you're no longer a teen-age girl and should therefore have found happiness in at least a part of your daily life."

I looked at him again, this time questioning his con-

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ception of human lives. "I think I ought to be going now," I said, and started in the direction of Dandy Place, to the shabby tenement in the drab Italian-owned section.

"I'll walk with you," he said, taking my arm quickly. We walked on in silence. At the door he gestured a brief farewell and the dusk swallowed him up completely.

I went upstairs, remembering for the moment his seemingly rapt attention and silence, but soon shoved him out of the door of my mind and latched it, or so I thought. Maybe my ever-searching thoughts would have better sense than to try to bring him back to a door that had been shut against him. But during the evening my mind wandered back to him. I did not mean to waste any more thought on him, but his face had interested me. Now I thought about him with real attention—his voice had been calm and—yes, reassuring. He had a good figure, strong and upright, though middle-aged. He wore a neat conservative suit with careful grace. His graying hair grew back from a slightly frowning forehead. He had an expressive mouth, and kind but highly penetrating eyes. Grandfather would have said, "He seems to stand out," I thought.

The soft breeze swept in from Lake Erie and stirred the calm of the night. I lay staring out the window, thinking that before this man came I had been only half-remembering, and then the years were like the lash of a whip in my face and I felt that I had betrayed myself. The almost wasted moon gazed down from the clear sky, and moved slowly on its nightly journey. As it floated on I watched its course, while thoughts that were partly dreams slipped through my mind. My mood was now half-lulled and relaxed. My eyes followed the moon; there was something soothing in the glitter of the semicircled object.

The image swelled before me and I found satisfaction in the subsided growth in my breast. I imagined that the moon was telling me, "The more desperate the struggle

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toward any end, the more valuable the victory. All scars are honorable after the war is successfully ended." Troubles and heartaches were then no more; my brooding mood was past. I realized vaguely that I would drop this idealized world again and yet again, but this afternoon a stranger had interested me. His calm words and silences were kind. The night was meant for just such pleasant reminiscences, and I had every right to drop practical thinking and indulge in fantasies. A sudden star darted across the sky. I watched its mad dash and the moon a moment longer, then slipped into a peaceful, untroubled sleep.

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CHAPTER 5

IT WAS A GRAY DAY IN THE WEAKENING LIGHT OF EARLY winter in the late months of the war; when victory seemed in the arms of the enemy; when there was little food and a great deal less joy; when all young men were still uniformed and old ones shuffled weary feet and moved wrinkled hands hastily about performing duties in heavy war industries; when women mastered huge tasks; when no beauty-seeing eyes lingered upon the wonders of man or nature; and the world was bleak with fear and revenge-seeking hearts. All day long memories had tugged at my elbow and finally clung rampantly to my sleeve. I felt as if it were a day of much trouble, perplexity, and sore travail.

I was employed in Buffalo as a city bus driver at the time, although my sickly features created rather doubtful assurance of the permanency of my job. I had grown thinner and perhaps sadder. I had also spent several long weeks in the hospital, and I somehow felt that I was again at the threshold of the ether-smelling abode. I lay in bed with my eyes closed, trying to force myself back to sleep. I covered my face and tried counting sheep, but I was seeing goats, instead, with their hind parts bare, high on a rocky, desolate hill, and their blood atoning for the sins of the world. I do not know how long I had been dreaming, I do not know how long the dream would have continued if I had not awakened, but I heard a voice crying out to me, "Wail not, for this is a disordered world, and all things you connect yourself with shall turn to ashes in

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your mouth. What do you seek, and what are your hopes?" I did not cry out that I was seeking equal opportunities and hoping for a full harvest of true democracy; I did not even say I hoped at least to find a welcome; I just bowed my head and replied meekly, "I seek a land devoid of false freedoms, and hope to find a true spirit of brotherly love and understanding there." I heard no more because the goats returned, filling the air with their smelly odors and pangs. Suddenly a loud bleat rose up from the herd. When I looked around me I saw a lone kid stretch out its tender legs and disappear into the abyss below. "All travail wasted!" the wailing mother seemed to bleat out. I sat up in bed and rubbed my eyes to full wakefulness.

I jumped out of bed, ran to the window, and looked out. It was almost daybreak. I dressed and hurried on my way to the car-barn. When I arrived, my guide was waiting to watch me prepare for my run. I punched my time-card, picked up my supply of transfers and change, donned my cap, and left the building. Outside, I checked my tires, brakes, lights; everything in order, I left immediately. The operator ahead of me was running off schedule that morning and crowds were waiting at most of the stops. I drove past the next group on to the next street, and stopped. A woman with a baby in her arms boarded the bus. I closed the door and fumbled an extra minute purposely to give her time to sit down, but she just stood there uncomfortably and gaped at me, then sat on the seat nearest me and continued to eye me suspiciously.

I drove on to the next stop, and while the passengers were getting out I noticed that she still looked straight at me. I decided that perhaps she was afraid of women drivers and that I should say an encouraging word to put her at ease.

"Madam, is this the bus you wanted?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied, "I took the right bus, but I was

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just trying to figure out why the company hires you people as operators."

"I suppose you mean women," I said as I eased my foot off the brakes.

"No, I mean darkies," she replied, "and at a time when one cannot buy a car!"

I pressed my foot on the accelerator and wished with all my might that I had passed her and left her standing in the chilly street. Words sprang to my lips, but I said nothing. I wanted to shout them at her—to tell her that darkies were put on the battlefields when America needed more blood to protect its security. I wanted to tell her of a day in 1492 when the ships of Columbus set sail and discovered a free America; the story about Jewish dwellers in Spain who were driven from their homes into strange lands on that same day by intolerant people like herself. I wanted to ask her if she had ever cherished a dream—a dream of a common ground on which to stand with other men in an atmosphere of true freedom. Had she ever sought a welcome, and found only insults instead?

Suddenly my mother's words came back to me. "Who would listen to me? Who wanted to hear anything I had to say, or wanted to see me take part in American industry anywhere, for that matter?" I asked myself. "All travail wasted," a voice seemed to remind me. "Yes," I thought, "indeed so. For what is there glorified in the pangs of a slave child; or a scapegoat? And a slave I am. Although I am free from the bold, ruthless evils, I am a slave to job-discriminating industry."

I had reached the end of the line, and as I watched the people leave the bus my eyes filled with tears. "This is no job for me," I thought bitterly.

A lone passenger entered the bus. When I reached for his transfer, he smiled at me and said, "This is nice; our people are at last reaping the harvest from our slave parents' sowing."

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"Harvest of what?" I asked. "Insults, prejudice, and oppression!"

My heart was hot within me as I talked. I cannot remember what I said during the time I stood there taking fares and transfers and issuing them mechanically, before someone tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Madam, what on earth are you murmuring about? I'd like to make connections with the South Park bus, if you don't mind."

"Sure, mister," I said. "I'm sorry, but we'll make it—" No, this no job for me, I thought, as I drove hastily down Delaware Avenue.

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CHAPTER 6

I LOST WEIGHT EACH DAY. I WAS WEARY, WORN, AND GRIEVous. Thoughts of almost faded freedoms, carefully padded rights, and cankerous liberties ate and sucked at my spirit. Therefore I was hospitalized once more for a brief period. The months came and flew by as if propelled by two conflicting winds; my mind seemed similarly buffeted.

It started during the night and continued all day long. The snow covered the buildings, burdening the nude, upstretched branches of trees, piling on the ledges, covering dingy windows, halting traffic, and turning everything King Midas-fashion into a clear whiteness. The flakes fell tenderly, but profusely and persistently. It quieted sound too. When I went out, Main Street was as quiet as a once-fussy dead parrot. Heavy-clothed, carefully buttoned-up figures stepped off into the deep drifts to let fellow trudgers pass.

Nobody pushed, rushed, or glared; cold air closed in around me, then suddenly picked up speed and swelled into a wild wind. It blew hard, it whined and pushed about every lightweight thing in its path. It even shook the lofty buildings, testing their endurance. I stumbled on with downcast head, stepping in and out of the now snow-crushed path into high piles of softness. Suddenly I wanted to go home, back to the South. What if it was heavy with false pride and evil practices? If I were there I could at least get to work without having to fight my

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way. Tears flooded my eyes, blinding me; the snow flew at me, filling my shoes, my eyes; the wind snatched at my breath and raved on, pushing me roughly. I began to cry out bitterly.

"Hey," said a masculine voice. "What's wrong? Haven't you any more sense than to try to go to work today? I suppose that's where you're headed. I'm sure you're not that desperate."

"You and your meddling tongue can go to hell!" I said, gasping for breath. "Whoever you are, I'm sure you can do that for me."

I brushed the snow from my eyes and opened my mouth to say more, but looked up and saw the steady-eyed stranger who had walked home with me some months before. He stared down at me, reached out his hand, and drew me out of the snow, steering me to the side of the department store. We looked at each other.

"Haven't you stopped speaking harshly to people?" he asked. "Well, let's not stand here and freeze. Shall we go back to your room?"

"Apartment now," I corrected him. We began the trek back.

"Don't be afraid of me," he said. "I'm a gentleman; also a minister, if the fact will help any."

Then he started talking about himself, how he had first run away from home and gone to the city as a youth. "My name is Evergreen," he ended.

"My name is Taffy," I said as I unlocked the door. "Do come in, Reverend, and please excuse my uncivil tongue." Inside, he sat down. I removed my things and placed his on the hall rack, and kept on talking.

"I came to Buffalo sometime ago to find both a job and happiness, but, although I found the job, the confusion of the busy city has netted me little happiness."

"I remember your story of woe quite well, but it won't seem like that after you are acquainted with the place,"

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he answered pleasantly. "I suppose I shall be snowbound here a few days," he said, rising to his feet, "but, if you'll permit me, I assure you I'll beat a path from my hotel to your door despite the heavy-handed tricks of the sneaking snow, as well as speak to St. Peter about your hasty tongue."

"Since you put it that way, the favor is gladly granted," I rejoined. The snow continued to fall for three days, paralyzing wires and vision, stunning everything with its soft blows. Bill, as I soon began to call him, visited me often. After about ten days of these visits and talks, I knew that something different would eventually come into the relationship between us. Talking to him was satisfying; I felt completely at ease, comfortable with him. I felt gay for the first time in a long while; but he lived in Detroit, and when he left everything seemed empty and more lonely.

The months wore on. We wrote often and he paid me several enjoyable visits. But, although I felt as flushed and foolish as a schoolgirl at times, I was moody and I felt that the love and role of wifehood had no place in my justice-seeking program.

I was sitting up in bed with a book in my hand; the nurse had partly drawn the curtains so my bedside lamp would not disturb the other patients. He came slowly and stood beside the bed. I extended my hand; he took it and held it gently between his strong ones. Then he began talking abruptly.

"Taffy," he said, "let's get married. I have listened to you complain and find excuses for refusing me long enough. They come to me in my dreams, in my sermons. Yet they don't make sense. So I've decided to do something about it. Your moods, your fears, your memories, and your desired isolation cannot undo what has grown

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into something beautiful and big for me. And you shouldn't allow them to take your happiness away. Put them behind you and give your heart a chance for once in your life. Let it rule you and your decision. You say you've never had a home; no one to love you. Well, I'm standing ready to give you my love forever; and my home will be your home, our home, yours and mine. We'll share our sorrows and happiness. We'll live."

I started to speak. He raised his hand and silenced me.

"Go ahead and be moody if you must. Do all the things you want—go to school if you care to, go as long and as much as you wish, but these things shouldn't stand in the way of a happy marriage for us."

I had meant to refuse again, but the sentences got mixed up and I said simply, "I'll marry you, but first I must tell you a secret—"

"Another experience of love and loss?" he asked.

"Yes, and of life," I answered.

"Forget it," he said. "We'll be married soon; as soon as you get out of here. Yes, very soon—! 'For love is strong as death; many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.'" He jumped to his feet. "But you're tired," he said, stroking my hand. "And I'm behaving like a country schoolboy memorizing his first poetry. Get some sleep, dear. We'll be married soon, very soon!"

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CHAPTER 7

THE WAR HAD ENDED AND I WAS MARRIED; LIVING IN Detroit and enrolled in college with renewed faith in the future. Although my own seeds of dissatisfaction and those of my fellow man had been continuously sown, I felt that after the addition of the seeds of haggard veterans and the starving millions, there might be a harvest after all.

The students of journalism sat with bowed heads writing hurriedly, or silently concentrating on what to write. It was the day for the midterm quizzes. It was a typical February day, a cheerless sun and a howling wind adding to the heavy stillness. The leafless trees in nearby Grand Circus Park were bowed under the weight of ice-coated branches. I closed my blue book and walked over to the window, satisfied that if I got more than an "E" for what I had written my instructor must surely be a godly man.

I looked out the window for a few minutes, then tiptoed silently out of the room. Outside, I boarded the bus and rode in the direction of home. Then suddenly I decided that it would do me good to go for a walk to clear my foggy brain. I went down Michigan Avenue and from there to Hastings Street, riding part of the way and walking the rest. I walked slowly, trying to analyze the feelings of those hunks of human flesh and bones parading the streets; some in gaudy finery, with hair dyed red, brown, platinum blond; some with hair down their necks, looking like females, although they were men; some drunk and staggering; some bleary-eyed and loud; some grim and intent; some giggling and seductive, giving the effect of an

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ocean of rainbows.

Somewhere back of a saloon a record-player peeled out "Open the door, Richard," in a snappy tone. The *slush-slush* of many feet could be heard as they trampled the dirty snow. My brain seemed to function only in the sense of *slush-slush;* "Open the door, Richard," *slush-slush;* "Richard, Richard—" I looked about me in a feeble attempt to find something to draw me out of this mood. My thoughts went back to my childhood days and I almost wished that I were back in a pair of faded overalls, heavy with patches, and that I could run down the street and yell at these people: "You fools, snap out of your ruts! Come on, wake up! Think, damn you, you husky, drunk-eyed weaklings! No eyes pity you, you travail with ignorance and degradation!" I turned around and started to go home. I boarded a passing bus and sat down, still lost in thought.

At the next stop a woman boarded the bus. When she stepped inside, smoke came gushing from her nostrils and I was reminded of our bull, long ago, when he came snorting after me angrily. Two pie-shaped circles intersected two reddish-colored spots on her well-outlined cheeks. She hoisted herself upon the seat with a powerful sigh, determined to take advantage of her thirteen-cent fare.

Back of me two men sat talking. I do not know how long they had been talking, nor what they had said before I overheard, with a shock: "What are we coming to next? As if the niggers in the South did not already have too much liberty, Truman brings up some damn civil-rights bill. I was born and reared in the South and I say they should be kept out of places they have no business in. I remember when they were afraid to sass white folks, but look what they do now—come here and other places, stay a little while, sit and woller up against our women, then go back home, bragging and gloating over their escapades. I'm for voting Truman out. To hell with 'im!" His companion nodded and opened his mouth to speak, but I gaped

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at them and they stopped talking.

I got off the bus at the next stop and walked toward the house. When I came to the cross street a little girl and a woman were standing on the pavement. The woman shook her finger and scolded: "I bet I'm going to break your durn neck about fooling off your time with that old messy crayon. When I get back home I'm going to bust you open. If that's all you're learning in school, I'll get you some day work along with me. I didn't bury myself in the house nine months, wagging with you and toting an ugly belly, for you to grow up a good-for-nothing. I don't know why I was fool enough to have you anyway. You're just like your daddy—not worth a damn."

I stood there a few minutes, as if trying to decide something, then hurried on. Memories gouged into my senses, not those memories that make the heart glad and bring smiles to the lips, but memories of another woman who said that all her travail was wasted, and of a little girl who nursed a beautiful dream. I wondered if the child dreamed of being an artist or a designer, or was she really just creating a little beauty to satisfy an ambitious spirit and a love-starved heart?

I went into the house, but images of my mother and her horrid words kept looming up before me. I took off my coat, and hurried to the kitchen where I put the coffee on to perk. This done, I picked up the paper and read a few sentences about Russia's stand in world politics, King Cole's unrestrained spending, the Dixiecrats and their anti-Trumanology, and the Duke of Kent and his berry-swallowing act, but none of these items appealed to me. I thrust the paper from me and sat silent a moment. The headlines glared. "President Truman, the lone fighter." I read a word or two, then sat thinking of Mr. Truman.

"All energy wasted," I said aloud. "Mr. President," I continued, "the bed of Justice is too broad; the color-

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sprinkled patchwork quilts of humanity are too confused and fickle; the naked, spent, and raped body of Democracy crouched upon it, too weighty for you to move alone. You need help to tidy it; besides, the moist spots of intolerance, indifference, and ignorance need many soakings and thorough scrubbings to make them clean. Don't try it alone; not by yourself, please! Even a faithful daughter's aid is not enough; you'll be jeered and booed beyond endurance; they'll break you. Wait! The public-pleasing politicians are behind closed doors, fondling and easing out their rigid tools of cowardice, and shunning facts. They'll rush out, challenge and overpower you, and leave you half-clothed before a bold-eyed, tinted-rights country."

I wished that I were facing him. I'd tell him that as long as Rankinism spread out two netlike, demarcated feet, shod with only two per cent of the eligible votes, into the heart of the nation's capital and formulated laws, his volleys were like whiffs of smoke against a swelling wind; that the Talmadge sermons of white supremacy were too palatable to the conscience-hiding soul of the half-democratic system; that, although his coat might be the exact cut of Lincoln's, and although he admired the broad, rugged seams, the criticism-threatening pants of Johnson's were too long and baggy for hasty progress.

I'd also tell him that his travel southward was wasted, because the Southernists, the Bilboists, the communists, the Wallaceites would pour out their deep-seated opposition upon him, unmindful that their skirts were over their faces and their secret parts bare and protruding. I jumped up and tried to staunch my flow of words, but they rushed on. I started pacing the floor, my blood fermenting with the remembrance of insults. I shook my head and beat my fist against the palm of my hand as old burdens, old tears, and old rebellions swelled before me. I sobbed and talked to myself.

"There are many in the North, the East, the West, and

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perhaps the South who sanction your policy," I said, "but they are like the glazed-eyed, stiff-fingered, sunken body of my grandfather that lay powerless and rigid upon his death-cloaked bed."

I wanted to shake his hand and say to him with the same strength of utter confidence and courage as that of my Russian friend and of my doctor, "You are my fellow countryman." I wondered what he would say. If he had time to spare, would he listen to what a Negro woman had to say?

"Someday," I told myself, "I'll ask him about the cramping pains of freedom as felt in America by my people and other peoples; someday, somehow, I'll do that, if I have to stand among the crowd and touch the hem of his coat to see if the gentle tugging of a true, freedom-seeking Negro woman could bring forth a tolerant glance from a true, democratic-spirited leader.

"A Missouri mule, the cartoonist depicted him," I went on, half-aloud. "Well, the shod hoofs of the determined mule may kick hard in the light of the freshened morn, but in the heat of a long, unclouded day the spirit wanes, and his blows lose their drive.

"Calm yourself, you're acting like a nervous jackass," I told myself sternly. "This is America—my home—the land of the free, the half-free, the brave, and the half-brave.

"But, the differences!" I argued. "His nose is not judged, nor his color analyzed, in an effort to test his intelligence and rightful place in the world. Therefore he can afford to shout, talk, talk fast, loud, loud as hell; the world does not reject him, and I imagine his mother thought of this day when she first held his infant body in her happy arms.

"However," I ended, "I shall not give up the search for complete rights for all peoples! Though I walk through the welcome and unwelcome streets of Northern cities, over the hills of the domineering South, I fear no evil,

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for there are some who think with me; their tolerance and philosophy comfort me; and I hope to dwell in an entirely free America someday if there ever—"

Once more the tidal waves of the years swelled before me; they tore, they seared, they ripped; they bled and tore some more! I jumped up, ran to the window, and let the shade up with a loud flap. Outside, the wintry sun was still shining; a stubborn tear rolled down my cheek; I gazed out the window. Suddenly I wanted to talk, and talk, and talk some more; talk loud, fast; about my intolerance, the intolerance of my fellow men, my country, all countries; I had things to say, lots of things—questions to ask about life, people. But who'd listen to me? Who was I, anyway? Just Taffy, my instructor's average pupil; my husband's loving wife.

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CHAPTER 8

IT WAS WHAT SOME FLOWERY WORDED JOURNALIST ONCE called "high noon" outside. The wind had taken on a new determination and crispness. The challenging sun continued its ray-piercing boldness, while the rushing wind mocked it with its disturbed mood.

Inside the library, the hunched backs of students reminded me of a day in our country church long ago. Brother Raiford was in the act of sending up his voluminous petitions, heavily spiced with localisms and ambiguity. I recalled that, as I sat there squirming in my outing-flannel drawers and feed-sack petticoat, I had searched the slightly bowed figures in an effort to see their faces and reactions. I had tried to figure out the pretenders and sort them from the more serious-minded, intent on entering the "pearly gates" as their expected goals. They were there for a special purpose, I supposed, but I saw no special spiritual vigor, just hunched backs, bowed heads, and a group of individuals in an uncomfortable church.

I directed my glance around the room once more, poked it through the window, and rested it on Grand Circus Park. I thought of life in the terms of a passage of Scripture I had heard somewhere at some other time of my life, "And I will multiply thy sorrow and thy conception." I was thinking of my mother and myself. I was sure of one thing —that her sorrow had been multiplied when I thrust two long, bony, flat feet into her painful womb, but whether nine patched children were the result of God's multiplication I could not figure out. I was worried, and ill. I felt

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that I should see a doctor. But I decided that I was letting my emotions get the better of me.

I snatched my glance back and sent it around the library, and noticed the expressionless librarian move stealthily toward the table where two students had begun to talk. I glanced in his direction, half expecting him to pull out a concealed club or blackjack. "Cut that out," he roared, in his usual startling manner. I quickly stood my tired legs on the floor and left the room. The little incident reminded me of feeding the hungry pigs on my grandfather's farm long ago. I recalled the scene clearly. The pigs knew it was feeding time, and that each would receive its just share; yet they placed themselves in the trough, under it, ran around it, again and again, their noisy squealing filling the air. And Grandfather had said that it took a lot of yelling to feed those greedy swine; in fact, he said, "It takes more than a little girl can do, so I'll feed them and you watch how I go about it."

I came out of the building, walked across Witherell Street to Woodward Avenue and joined the rushing crowds. Not wanting to go home, I walked a long time. I went from place to place, hating everything I saw; noisy crowds, teeming department stores, clanging streetcars, and crazily driven buses. The unrest crept on; it was like a steaming pot of tough troubles; or huge corns, each sinking hardened roots boldly into the structure of tender, much-used feet. Once they become infected, although nursed back to a degree of normal health, they are never entirely free of the deep-seated, disturbing corns. Why, I wondered, did the beastly things not sweep past the unfortunate individual who must tramp the streets, burdened with bulky salesman's bags, or tools, in order to earn his daily bread. I thought about that for a moment, then about a time now long past when I came, tender feet foremost, into a turbulent, blossom-scented world. My arrival had brought forth no joyous celebration, no surprising shower of tiny

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clothing, nothing—no more commotion than the mild breeze which arises among the branches of the trees, stirring and scattering frail blossoms, and suddenly is no more.

"Wasted travail," my mother had said. Perhaps it was, but why had I been created? What about the years I had spent and was spending in the world? Was there to be no meaningful ending? Life, I decided, was yet too confusing a pattern for me to understand. One day you overtax your brain cells in an effort to arrive at what might be correctly termed legitimate solutions to the varying problems. You decide you have the answer at last; then the very next day a huge, buglike problem creeps upon you, and jolts you back into your old rut, jabbing at you with its feelers until you feel like a pot of overcooked beets. Maybe there were no answers to some things—or did they exist only in the minds of the famous philosophers? It was too trying; I gave up reasoning and started home.

I decided I was sick, maybe very sick; I turned around and headed for the doctor's office. I thought about my experience at the office of my former doctor, and tried to compare the two men, but before I found any suitable comparisons I was entering the lofty building. I rang for the elevator and waited impatiently for it to descend. "Going up, all floors," the operator said pleasantly. I entered, and soon was seated in the neatly arranged office. I sat down and started wondering if I would ever be physically strong and uncomplaining, not needing the services of a doctor for anything more than a yearly check-up. Maybe he would tell me I was not ill but just needed a rest, I decided, and quickly began to think of other things rather than of the approaching examination.

In a few minutes the neatly dressed, confident-appearing doctor opened the door. "Come in," he said. I arose and followed him into his inner office. He began the customary inquiries about my health, jotting down notes as he

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listened. This done he arose, beckoning me to follow him. "I shall have to examine you thoroughly, of course," he said. "Now, if you'll please ring when you are ready, I'll be right with you." He closed the door and I undressed, climbed upon the high white table, covered myself with the fresh sheet, pressed the button, and waited. He entered and began the examination in silence, thumping and probing, listening to my now racing pulse, pulling my eyelids down and peeping knowingly into the sad, black pupils. A stray eyelash fell into the down-pulled lid; he reached into the sterilizer, selected an instrument carefully, lifted the offending hair out, and let it fall unheeded to the floor. I blinked, and wished that the evils of the world could be as easily plucked out and dropped lifeless and carelessly upon a trampled floor to molt and decay until time ceased its eternal grind.

"I think I have found your trouble," he was saying, "but I'm afraid we'll have to resort to X-ray to be sure we have the root of it. I think you have a concepted tube, which we must operate on at once because it seems to be swollen to its capacity, but we must be absolutely sure about it before deciding what to do. And thanks to modern science we can soon find out—yes, we can find out soon," he said, as if speaking to himself. "Yet that is still the world's greatest trouble; people are not sure enough about anything. Like incompetent doctors, they probe painstakingly into the susceptible wombs of life; yet their deft fingers do not feel the tiny lumps that finally grow into huge masses of smelly, cancerous tissue, which forces its destructive tentacles into the sturdy hearts of men, leaving them like hollow logs in a fertile meadow."

I looked at him and smiled slightly, wondering what he would say if I told him he was at that very moment answering a multitude of questions that reached out and clutched me tightly, holding my thoughts like the long-tongued waves of an unsympathetic sea, which poke them-

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selves out and lap up all the moving things upon their shores, churning them viciously within their deep damp walls, and finally spitting them out again lifeless upon a sand-washed bank.

Instead, I said, "Life is certainly one big mess, doctor. Illnesses and troubles far outnumber the pleasures, always."

"Nonsense," he answered, snapping his blue eyes. "Young lady, if you had fought and dared death to come by stalking into the lives of groping, courageous men and women as many times as I have, and then, sometimes, had stood back with sweaty brow and watched it destroy your carefully built-up handiwork, you'd appreciate the gift of life, and think it a very precious possession. I do not like to encounter cowards," he continued. "I like to see people want to live on and on; I feel that the story behind a person who holds on to life until he is sure he must give up and then bravely departs is the answer to why God is so merciful to people who do not appreciate the blessedness of living as well as to a tired death-challenging doctor."

He had finished the examination; he then removed his rubber gloves, threw them onto the stool, and left the room. I dressed hastily and went outside. He sat at his desk. When I sat down, he said, as if sensing the force of my disturbance and as if he hadn't ceased talking: "It is evident that something is bothering you. Suppose you sit there and tell me all about it. Is it the grief of disappointment over your expected child?" I opened my mouth to say something, but I remembered that there were things to be done hastily if I had to go to the hospital, and changed my mind.

"Oh, well. I guess you can call it that," I said. "I'm very sorry my attitude irritated you; I am just feeling upset and worried these days."

"Forget it, it's quite all right," he replied. As I went

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out the door, my eyes felt like a slowly seeping pool that had been imprisoned by a mud-chinked dam without a single trace of an outlet. I hurried down Woodward Avenue to the bus stop, boarded the bus, and sat down, only half aware of my surroundings. The darting, familiar scenes brought me frantically to my feet. I jerked the cord hastily, but the driver kept on to the next stop. I jerked the cord again, silently calling him a dirty cracker, stepped off the bus, and walked angrily toward the house.

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CHAPTER 9

THE ERECT YOUNG MAN PULLED A PAIR OF LONG, BONY legs through the doorway, poked them hastily between the narrow openings of the seats, pushed them into the half-desk, and dropped down. He dumped his bulky briefcase onto the opposite seat and leaned back with the air of a globe-peeping seer imbued with a gushing flame of utter confidence.

It was a typical winter day; all day long the sharp river-born wind had briskly fingered Witherell Street and felt its way down Woodward Avenue, slapping and fanning the flushed-faced crowds, sending them hurriedly on their ways.

Just outside the window the muffled monotone which is ever present in the city was speared by the irritable *sputt-sputt* of the street workers' machines. Inside the room a lone, fading ray of the cold-faced sun shone dimly through the smudged window and fell full upon the professor's varnish-shedding desk.

I sat uncomfortably in the half-desk, wishing with all my might that the sun would finish its date with the daylight, kiss it passionately, and ride away on its bluish sea, dragging a blanket of twilight and quietness after it. I glanced around the student-filled room ponderingly, sighed, and just sat there measuring the students with my eyes. I noticed that some sat with open books in quiet study, some talked pleasantly together in a leisurely manner, others dipped their heads up and down lazily as they yielded to the lusty pull of sleep; while still others drew

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doo-dads on open-faced notebooks, or lived a few minutes of mindlessness.

I dragged my eyes toward the door and directed them at the young man sitting next me. "That guy!" I thought. "Who does he think he is? Bernard Baruch?" I rested my glance on him and almost wished the shoot of a likable young man would sprout from that deer-legged character. My expression, I'm sure, was scornful and haughty; it shocked me. "So that's how far my dislike for him has gone," I rebuked myself sternly.

My eyes remained on him. I neither lowered them nor raised them, but I broke off my spiteful thoughts long enough to reflect that it seemed a little incongruous that a lean, culture-seeking young man could be so unpleasant and act so important! You found him stiffly struggling to impress you with his superiority and to convey that he was an expert in the writing field, or maybe he wanted you to feel that he, as my grandfather had once phrased it, "belonged to the upper crust."

Just then the young man drew up his legs and straightened his shoulders with a self-righteous toss of his head. I smiled ironically. Oh, well! Why should I bother my head about a young man who reminded me of an angry wasp which once sank poisonous stings into my grandfather's innocent bald head, just because I had knocked its nest from the pine-shingled farmhouse roof. My eyes rested for a second on the young man, my reason assuring me that his manner was his own affair; yet I could not dispel the peculiar irritation that possessed me.

I was thinking slowly now how odd it was that I should become so disturbed about a classmate who evidently did not want to be at all friendly. I wanted to tell myself that it was just an uncomfortable day for me and that I was irritable; instead, I began debating with myself about the proper way in which a young man should act, and

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decided in the end that I should arrange some way to bring this sycamore-tree dweller face to face with himself. Maybe he would come down from his lofty mount if he really knew how much he resembled a stiff-necked deer.

The young man turned at that moment and looked brazenly at me. His eyes told me nothing, but I imagined that there was an egotistic smile simmering under his facial muscles. As I raised my eyes and met his gaze, I called him a fool, with a deceitful little smile, and turned my gaze toward the window. The machines were still jabbing my brain with their irritable noises. It seemed as if they poked each sound directly into the stuffy room. I sighed and returned to my planning.

"I wonder how he would react if I wrote a story about him and read it aloud," I asked myself. That would teach him to go around with his feet on his chest. "I'll do it," I said, snapping my inspired eyes. For a moment I was tempted to discard the ugly thought. "After all, why should I stick my neck out?" I mused to myself. "Why not let the whole matter go by, instead of taking on the role of Upton Sinclair and his *Brass Check*." I reconsidered, but the thought had already begun to grow in my mind. I could see it finished — even to the minute description—haughty mouth, brazen eyes, bony cheeks, antelopelike legs, and sophisticated questions. Just then the bell clanged rudely and noisily in the outside corridors, and the professor stepped softly and briskly into the room.

He strode toward his old-fashioned desk, sent a hasty glance around the room, bowed gracefully in recognition of the group, and began the class period. My glance fell on him and rested there. For a moment my scornful plot vanished, while I sat there trying to compare the two. "But of course there is no logical comparison to be made between Peter and Ananias," I said, half aloud. Satisfied with this conclusion I looked again in the direction of

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the young man who sat erect and attentive now, his long legs hunched against the desk.

He was sunk in thought. For a fleeting moment I thought I detected a hint of sadness, a trace of suffering that had once been felt by a now stubborn, hardened heart. I searched closely. No, I was mistaken; none of these things were written on that bony structure which seemed too lean and hollow, yet in balance with the other parts of his figure. I glanced around the room, giving full sway to my writing fever; I searched for something to create a proper setting, and hastily constructed it in my mind—Witherell Street, workmen below a dirty window, a group of college students in Room 407, and a helpful professor behind a boxlike desk—well, it would have to do; it was all I saw.

Before I had time to plan further, the bell clanged loudly, announcing the end of the class period. It jostled me to awareness of my surroundings, whereupon I recalled that I hadn't heard a word that had been said during the entire period. "You're a spiteful witch, Taffy," I reproached myself. "One of these days you'll be sorry for your catlike actions." I sent a final glance around the room, said good-by to the two girls next me, and left the room.

I felt amazingly cheerful, as I hurried down the corridor; in fact, stimulated. The fresh wind stung my face and hoisted my thin hair above my thought-weary head like the bushy tail of a frightened, angry mink as I came out onto the street. Presently I was climbing into the streetcar, my thoughts glued to the minor episodes of an emotionally provoking day. The ambling streetcar journeyed homeward, shaking and tossing its victims to and fro as they clung tiredly to the dangling straps. "One of these days it'll surely curdle my inner linings if it keeps this up," I mused humorously. "It would be a fine thing if it were the other end and my silly brain could be given

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a firm shake." I made a serious attempt to smile, pushed my way to the door, and left the rocking car.

I was seated behind my desk now, pencil and pad in hand, yet I sat motionless. I no longer felt the urge to describe a haughty young man in a dingy classroom; in fact, I no longer hated him. "This isn't going to work," I thought. "I should have left the classroom and written it out while I had it within my reach." Just then a voice came through the window, high-pitched and acid. "You're a fool, hussy. Who do you think you are? Mrs. Ford? Buying a high-priced shack and a Chevrolet car don't make you any better than anyone else, you slut." Lucy Taylor and Mary Smith were in each other's hair about the children again. "Some day I'll leave this hateful neighborhood," I snapped, as I reached up and closed the blinds.

I picked up my pencil and hastily started to write. Half way through I realized that I could never present the story to the class. Why, even the professor would guess that I was being little and haughty. It was the young man, all right, and at his worst. With sharp dismay I regretted that I could never read it to the class, because it gave me a feeling of pride. I felt that I was learning the knack of creative writing; in fact, it sounded good to me.

I was clearing my desk now. I paused, listening to Bill humming softly as he crossed the porch. I closed my pad and turned to greet him. He threw his Bible-stuffed briefcase onto the sofa, and came over to kiss me.

"How's Mrs. Shakespeare tonight?" he inquired pleasantly. "What is the tale about; a chicken snake, or St. Peter?"

"Neither," I replied, "but it's all finished, and it's very short. You can read it."

He walked around the desk, slid into a chair, and began reading. I waited, searching his face for an amused or

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pleased smile. He was halfway through now.

"So that's how you feel about a classmate," he said, turning to me. "I'm afraid you're a long way from the Christian pathway. Is he really that bad? Sounds pretty mean to me, but then I don't know the young man."

"No, you don't," I replied. "And besides, you're acting and sounding just as annoying as he does."

"Probably so, probably so, I am a little tired," he said, as he closed the pad. "I'll read it again tomorrow, if I may, madam. But drop story-writing tonight, Mrs. Shakespeare," he continued pleasantly. "Let's go out."

"I think we most certainly should," I snapped. I reached over and closed my pad, turned out the friendly glow of the desk lamp, and left the room.

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CHAPTER 10

THE SUNLIGHT POURED INTO THE WINDOW AND BATHED the boxlike desk. Outside, the wind from Lake Michigan tore sharply through the leafless trees, then skipped and hopped across Woodward Avenue like a frisky heifer in the budding season. I pushed my weary legs across the threshold and slipped into a chair; three weeks at Harper Hospital had left me feeling like a drunken earthworm. The group of students sat around the room, some slouched in the half-desks, unmindful that they were degree-seeking gentlemen, lounging in the respectful, cultural atmosphere that surrounds a well-ordered college. I closed my eyes and started to examine them, but I kept seeing a group of apple-polishers bent on making the seedy fruit glow. It was English Eleven, and all who displayed their talents here felt sure that this was the right trail leading to authorship.

I was in a bad humor; I searched myself quietly, wondering if I had been right in making one last greedy attempt at getting an unbiased education. I wished it were possible for me to know all the important things in the world or about the world in order to escape the tough job of getting an education. I smiled. "That would be outwitting my intellectual lust," I thought. "It would keep quiet then, I'd bet, and stop probing and inquiring." Just then our professor walked briskly in. He bowed pleasantly, sat down, and, without any discriminatory glances, began his work.

I looked at him respectfully, and imagined that, after

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a trying session with our mediocre, bloody stories, he felt like Jesus when the virtue left his body and quickened the pulse of the longing woman. Then he was calling me to come before the class; I was going to read aloud my precious story. I arose, determined to put my nasty mood aside, and make my classmates see the human element in my plot.

It was a story about my childhood writings in the South —nothing important or wonderful happened; no one was murdered, nor did my heroes marry and live happily ever after; they just lived among the suctions of their discriminatory environments until they finally smothered and died. But I needed my classmates' interest in order to find the kinks and straighten them out. I explained my simple plot and background, and began reading. Presently I ended; I glanced feebly and searchingly in their direction as I waited for them to give their impressions.

He was perched on the end of his desk, hard-lipped and lean. His wild hair stood on end, unruly and brown. His bulky briefcase rested on the desk next to him. I looked at him, trying to discover what caused him to withdraw into such a haughty shell. I wished I hadn't read the silly story; perhaps he felt insulted; maybe his pride was injured; maybe he was from that "solid empire" and, likewise, felt loyal to the staunch monarchs.

"What prompted you to write the story?" he was saying.

I hastily explained that I was born and reared in the South and had found it very hard to adjust myself to it during my childhood.

"Well," he rejoined acidly, "the colored people don't have to stay in the South if they don't like it; they can just get up and leave, go to Africa."

I jerked my head in his direction and gaped at him. I found it hard to remember whether this was a class in creative writing or an open session on the Bill of Rights.

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I collected myself, mumbled something about writing the things you feel, and stumbled to my seat.

The next sound that filtered clearly up to me came from the rear of the room; someone was saying he didn't agree with Mr. Truman on his Bill of Rights theory. I said no more, but the talk droned on. I reminded myself that we were college adults, trying to prepare ourselves to become leaders in the world and therefore we should act the part, but I couldn't get it straightened out. Other things kept coming before me, things like the picture of a beastly hawk that swooped down and sank his vicious claws into my pet chicken; or Rock, the dog, with a well-filled belly, snatching at a meatless bone to keep Bloomer, the cat, from licking it. He couldn't eat it, but he could bury it and keep it from snooping black cats. I looked at my instructor who was talking now, calmly explaining the possibilities of the story and suggesting changes here and there. I searched his face pleadingly, wondering why he did not say something to assure me that I hadn't done a terrible thing. But he acted in his usual helpful manner, talking about the errors and what might be made high points, in the same way that he had handled other stories, on other class days. I decided that he must be sincerely interested in us and our problems—perhaps he had outgrown the effects of the unimportant trifles in life that stung and infected some people. "Well," I told myself, "you cannot take him apart; he is too deep and broad for you." I looked away, not listening. I just sat there and told myself over and over that I would leave this writing business alone and settle down to a career of housekeeping. I thought about it once more and resolved to ask my instructor how he felt about segregation. Maybe he would have something to say.

I turned my head and looked out the window. Across Witherell Street, the sunlight seemed cold and unfriendly. I felt chilly; fragments of thoughts, regrets, and heartaches

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went bolting through my head. I tried to extend my imagination past the park, the stores, the theaters, the apartment buildings, and the streets, to a future which my classmate had the leading role in creating, but I could not make it balance.

I looked back at him and suddenly I wanted to yell at him, to shout: "You simple fool! You insulting fool! Why are you sitting here between these confining walls if you have no better solution to offer a fellow American than to pack up and go to Africa, where white men are greedily wresting the heritage of wild black men lustingly from under their bare, dusty feet, like a pack of hungry wolves in a pasture of fattening sheep?"

I wanted to tell him that "this is America, the home of no particular race, but of many peoples from various lands, all in search of the same ideal—freedom; a land of opportunities and advancement, with plenty for all, a home for me, or him, as much for me as for him, as much for all of us as for any of us. Why should I flee from the land of the free and the brave?" But I said nothing. The sound of shuffling feet in the outside corridor grew louder. I got up and surveyed the room—why, this was a glorious world! Who said I wasn't an American? I smiled, said good-by to my classmates and left the room.

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CHAPTER 11

I STEPPED SLOWLY AND CHEERFULLY INTO THE CORRIDOR. I told myself that I must do something about what Mamma called "my devilish thoughts." Being able to withdraw from my cold swamp of thoughts added to my increasing happiness. I decided that these little, recurring problems might peep their vexing little heads up to the surface every now and then for a breath of air. The problem lay not in their emergence, but in whether they were exposed in a refreshing or a foul atmosphere.

Maybe the trouble lay in my feelings; maybe I had lost my carefully built-up tolerant spirit. Why had I let the classroom incident get under my skin to such a disturbing degree? I had not been born with a jolly, humorous personality, it was true, but surely, deep inside, I possessed a correct sense of proportion, a conviction toward life that was strong enough to spare me the frequent, gloomy, glowing, and sensitive habit of reaching out into my imagination and conjuring up situations in which I magnified trifles into insults.

I'd get hold of myself; I'd take a stand against my inner self and stay put, I vowed. I'd begin by asking my instructor to tell me whether or not I was wrong; I'd do it the very next time our class met. Yes, I'd do that; I would not be content until I had laid bare my feelings and asked him to examine the American democracy as I lived it, as he lived it, and as other men and women lived it, to see if he could see through their pretenses—of being right, but wrong; righteous, yet sinful; truly democratic, but deeply

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prejudiced; favoring full human rights for Negroes, yet in their opinions, thinking of them as "niggers."

I realized that I liked this man, not only as my instructor, but because his very manner was that of the true type of American citizen—sincere, sagacious, and sanguine. I rang for the elevator; presently I found myself outside. A warm moist wind came leisurely down from the Detroit River, giving the air a tinge of spring. There was no hint of winter in its breath. As I stood there on the street, waiting for an empty taxicab to pass, I was suddenly reminded of the day long ago when Grandfather died. In life he had been so full of vigor, so tempered with mellow wisdom. Yes, in his battle of life he had seemed so wonderfully energetic, so powerfully earnest, and so well fortified against even the heavy-handedness of death. But that day he lay there calm and collected, without even a tiny hint of his former vitality.

I stood there gazing pop-eyed into his wrinkled face until he turned his head and gave up forever his realistic role in the drama of human experience and human emotions. My tender years had not prepared me for that tremendous ordeal. I was horrified and helpless. I cried piteously for my uncle to tell me that he was not really dead, but instead he took me to the kitchen and left me to soothe my broken heart after my own fashion. I tore at the wall, beating against it until my young blood dotted the pine boards; I kicked it, I tried to cry but I could not. I felt as if I were being pushed through the round, pawlike rollers of Grandfather's syrup mill. As the salty tears rolled down my tender, timid face, I swore that I would surely make God pay for what he had done to me.

After some time had passed I became outwardly quiet, but felt sick, very sick—sick unto my little soul. I hated everyone; I went back into the unfriendly room, pulled back the sheet and looked at him intently. I thought about his pet phrase, "a stinking mess," which he had always

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called the unpleasant things he encountered. "Well," I said to him, "at last you have made one of your stinking messes, because I know those stiff hands of yours can never pull me upon another hairy-backed mule, or pull my feed-sack petticoat high above my country-scarred knees to wipe away a tear, or catch the aftermath of a leaky nose."

Suddenly I hated him. Why had he left me? He knew Mama had said that she had wasted her travail in bringing me into the world; he knew that I was hated because I looked like him and had what Mama called "white folk ideas" like him. Where would I go with my burdens now? Who would listen to me? Who wanted to hear anything a nigger girl had to say, besides him? Who would hear my many questions and try to find answers to satisfy my growing brain? Who would carefully explain things as he had —about Bloomer, the cat, for instance—that the reason she lay stretched on her belly, panting in pain, while one, two, three, four, and finally five wet kittens came blindly into the world yelling their heads off in cat language, was that she had been hard-headed and slipped outside in the dark, after we were in bed and could no longer watch her?

"How the poor cat must have suffered!" I now reflected. "We took turns keeping watch over her after that, carefully stuffing the openings at the bottoms of the doors with rags. "Who?" I asked him, "who—" Then I thought about what he had said about the blackbirds—I looked down at him again. "Yes, you're certainly my kind," I said meekly. With that I carefully covered his face and left the room.

I visited my pine-thicket sanctum more often after that. The neighbors thought that I surely had been born a perfect specimen for the insane asylum, but after a time I gave up my frequent thoughts about him.

When I extricated myself from the sweaty hands of my memory, I found that I was cold. I had been leaning there against the lamp post on the corner of Witherell and Adams

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Streets a long time. I was sick—this return to school after my recent illness was almost too much for me.

I hailed a cab, got in, gave the driver my address, and sat back against the seat wearily. The cab driver was talking. I did not know how or when he started, or hardly when he stopped, but he was saying something about pumpkin papers, and what should be done to those hideous Russians. All at once I was reminded of my former friend in Depew in the defense plant, and the hurry and bustle of the war days. He was Russian, yet he had seemed able to see the cruel side of life so clearly; he could hardly have been called hideous, or murderous.

I wondered how many people of his race were really hideous, or how many were like myself, groping bewilderedly in a confused world, without any guide by which they could resolve the problems of life, or means of balancing good with bad; without even a thread of light by which to interpret such words as freedom, human rights, honor, or democracy. It was like an incorrect account, with a padded statement of profit and loss and a tricked-up balance sheet; and although an inventory had been taken at the beginning, many decades before, among the men who worked and fought, suffered and died for true democracy, there were no surpluses, and no equalized dividends, yet the account had been neatly, double-line ruled, and filed for future reference.

Suddenly I hated myself, my classmates, and my flimsy story. I'd not suffer this uproar of emotions. I'd burn it in the furnace. I hated my thoughts, and the beastly urge that kept tugging at my brain, like a half-starved hog under an acorn tree. Why, I'd been a fool sitting up through the cold wintry nights writing sentence after sentence, as flushed and heated as an opossum hunter's torch which spat out black, hot-pitch droplets.

I felt crazily insecure; this time the feeling was like the "pummings" of carefully squeezed sugar cane. But, try as

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I might, I could not stop this feeling of hate from growing within me. Most of all, I hated the balmy Southern hills, the black cloddy soil, the hot sooty-breathed, plant-laden cities, the rugged, muddy, sandy roads, the weak human beings—black men, white men, women and children—both races for what they were; one standing nervously in the shoes of a man with a million ants in his breeches, or the already condemned man; the other like an insecure judge, who keeps the respect of his criminal-infested courtroom by pounding his gavel and angrily threatening to cite them all for contempt. I hated and loved Detroit in a single thought. It was a wonderful place to live; I found joy and contentment here. Yet there was no such thing as a taint-free atmosphere gushing from its motor-producing, human-crammed veins. I wished that I could copy nature and sprout a thick protecting verdure to cover the scars and gashes that lay open in my deeply emotional breast.

But hadn't my doctor said that there were no quick cures for smelly cancers once they had a firm hold on the victims? He had also said that cancers were the result of one's own cells going wrong, together with the laxity of an unobservant, careless doctor who wanted only to maintain his powerful position in a community, plus the ignorance of the victim. But this problem concerned more than my emotions. It was something about people, people who lived together, fought together, people who traditionally set up standards for other nations across the eager seas to live by, and how much they were part of something else. It sounded something like the Philistines with the Ark of God in their midst, and hemorrhoids in their secret parts.

I tried to remember whether or not it had mattered to me if, when I saw a snake, it was a rattlesnake, a thundersnake, or a long, shiny, black snake—well, they all represented *snake* to me, and not humans. I went back to com-

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paring life with the cancerous tissue, and I remembered that the doctor had said that one crooked cell often destroyed the whole cell body of a once robust individual. This then must be the secret of conquering life philosophically—to probe and search out the diseased areas of the world while they were only tiny affected spots, then to fight with all the modern methods of efficient, effective, earnest ideas and ideals to halt their flaunting progress. It was too much like trying to thresh peas by hand, a chore I did as a little girl; therefore I gave up. I had tried hard to follow Grandfather's instructions; to hold the pans high, one above the other, and gradually pour the peas from one to the other, remembering always to follow the path of the elusive wind, but it seemed either to blow just beyond me, or it was weak and hushed, or it just rushed madly in no particular direction and passed over me, leaving me with as much chaff as I had peas. When I cried and gave up the task in despair, Grandfather had said, "Well, you just keep growing. You'll be able to clean those nasty old peas some day."

I opened the door of my house and walked in; the room was warm and cozy, the chair felt heavenly. Who cared about pea threshings, crawly snakes, word-fixing, or painful hemorrhoids in the secret parts of men? My! how I wished I could write a book! It would be a honey—intermixtures of Southern sun, greedy hogs, and the prosperous city of Detroit. I got to my feet and straightened my shoulders. I must get over this sickness and I must do it in a hurry!

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CHAPTER 12

I AWOKE WITH A JOLT OUT OF A FITFUL SLEEP. I HAD NOT slept well. Too many dreams had haunted my subconscious mind; too many scenes had reappeared, revealing the shabby, dejected past. The sun, warm and glowing, glared into my disorderly bedroom; the bold rays told me that I had overslept, but I dressed listlessly. What need was there to hurry? It was just another day; another day of looking backward, without hope, before it ended, of being able to look forward to the future. I felt sodden and beaten clear through; it seemed that until now I had lived all my years in the past, my thoughts rarely visiting the present or promising to spend any definite portion of my time thinking farther than the next moment. "Is this what people call going nuts?" I asked myself. I thought about that for a moment, and then began a vigorous attack on my housework in an attempt to escape the mad spell of remembering.

But I kept remembering times past, and apparently for no reason at all; besides I saw no conclusions, no special blessings to claim. I saw those days in disheartening clarity—so many things crept up and blinded me; the few joys, and the many, many sorrows; faces; a child grieving for a dead grandfather; a poor family on a hilly Alabama farm performing burdensome tasks; four little boys and a degenerate father satisfying their lusts with the hairy backs of shoats and mares; my workworn, nerve-racked mother in a star-lighted farmhouse and a yelling, stubborn-born infant. It was almost as if some of the old days

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were back, the old scenes and old wishes that made the world I used to know.

As I recalled things and times, I felt as if the years had pushed me into a special path and left me to dwell alone among my sorrows. "Surely I am going mad," I thought, as months of sad experiences stretched into years—two, three, four, ten, twenty, thirty years — creeks, wagons, mules and gullies kept coming after me. "They call this a holiday," I mused to myself sarcastically, "a time for quiet enjoyment, of remembering man's blessing and God's greatest gifts to a turbulent world. It is not strange," I thought, "that contemplation on the life of Christ should also bring other visions, but why can't I take joy in the fact that he died for one and all, regardless of religion, creed or color?" I looked down at the hands in my lap as I thought about that, and suddenly began to weep with a desperate grief.

I couldn't shake the picture from me—it was a sad, twisted confused trail that my tender mind had started treading years ago, and traveled for a long, long time—until even the balmy Southern winds or a white face were hateful things to me. I sat up and wiped my eyes, and searched my brain in an attempt to find a logical reason why an intelligent college woman should sit on a sofa in a comfortable living room and behave like a lost calf in a lonely pasture.

I again questioned my judgment of humanity. I decided that I was boiling in my own oil. "Maybe I am sick," I told myself; "maybe some small portion of my brain has lost control. I am not in the South any more; I am in Michigan living a comfortable, interesting life; I am engaged in schoolwork, civic work, and above all I am making progress toward my cherished dream of becoming a novelist, or so my teachers seem to think." I felt like an old woman starved for friendship. I would call my doctor and ask him to see me; maybe I was overnervous and an

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examination would reveal the hidden thing that was causing me so very much agony lately.

I remembered what he had said about the wild cells in an otherwise healthy body and wondered if the racial problem and the insults it bred were as disturbing as it seemed on the surface, or if too much dwelling on them as a means to an end was causing the wild growth in the entire cell-like system of America. These problms were here, I realized, the same as the presence of the cancer he had used as an illustration, but he had said that, if diagnosed by a competent physician at the correct stage, there were cures for the evil, smelly things; perhaps not quickly, but, with the patient's cooperation, and given time, there would one day spring forth a perfect and satisfactory cure.

I picked up the telephone and dialed his number; luckily he could see me. What was bothering me? I didn't know, I said; I was just sure I was sick. I dressed hurriedly and left the house. Outside, the feel of the winterlike April wind cleared my head a little. Presently the bus drew up and I lost my thoughts for the moment, anyway, and scrambled aboard.

I was sitting in the doctor's office now; everyone I noticed seemed happy and calm, talking pleasantly as they stared from sickly eyes. I sat alone and said nothing; my straying thoughts had possessed me again and my heart felt like a huge mound thumping within my breast. After a little time had passed, during which the others had finished their consultations and gone, I arose and followed the graying, kindly man into his private office. He motioned me to a seat and began thumbing through his card file for my case history.

"Here we are," he said, as he rested his kindly blue eyes on my face. "Now suppose you tell me just how you've been, whether it's a case of too much schoolwork, night life, or housework," he added teasingly.

"None of these, Doctor," I replied, getting straight to

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the point. "This time it is a case of too much thinking."

"Oh," he said. "Well, let's hear about it."

"Perhaps you'll think I'm crazy," I said, embarrassed, "but lately I have been feeling wretched; it has been getting worse each day until today I am unable to restrain myself from sobbing violently. I try to stop the foolish tears from flowing, but they continue to gather and roll down my face like the slow, steady stream of a country spring."

Just then I felt a lone tear trickle down my cheek, and paused for him to say something; but he said nothing, and I continued.

"The crazy sobbing is too much for me, Doctor," I said. "It creeps up and presses my breath, as smotheringly unnecessary pictures of the past rise before me."

"You mean something special that's bothering you?" he asked.

"No, just hateful pictures," I said, "needless, sordid pictures that unbalance and upset my life, and I don't know why," I sobbed.

He handed me a towel and looked intently at me for a moment. "I haven't another appointment for the present," he was saying. "I have known for some time that something was bothering you. I thought perhaps I had said something to you on your previous visits here to still your fears, or end your probing, but apparently I have not; so now, since I am your doctor, you must realize that, unless I know all about the things that are affecting the general condition of your health, I cannot help you. Suppose you start back as far as you can remember and tell me everything about yourself, sparing nothing, and let's see if we can undo the bungled knots you have tied your life into."

I looked across the desk at him and suddenly I felt comforted; as if I had no burdens, no cares. I felt that I was being thoughtless. Here I sat, intruding upon the kindness of this hard-working public servant with a problem

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that should have been explained during my early life; that is, the procedure of it, if not the methods by which it could be solved. But I continued explaining, although there seemed no need of it now.

"It really begins the day I was born; the day my tired mother decided that I should not have been born to bring her added work and misery."

Then I was telling him all about it without reserve; the old home place; my grandfather; my uncorrected emotional habits; my dislikes; concerts in a country school room; a ragged girl seated on an unpainted old wagon drawn by two sweaty mules; a shabby farmhouse. Of all I said I cannot give account, but when I drew my thoughts back from a desolate past I noticed that I felt relieved. Of course, I had talked to others, but no one had heard me out so completely and thoroughly before. I no longer felt as if I were going mad, or was wholly rejected because of my color. I had been insulted many times, yes, and perhaps would be insulted many times more, but it wasn't the end of life, nor had everyone insulted me.

I opened my mouth to apologize for my childish behavior, but he motioned to me to keep quiet and just sat there in the uneasy stillness, looking out the window. After what seemed like a long time, he spoke.

"Now, Mrs. Evergreen, I suppose you know the old adage about it always being the sick animal that seeks isolation. Well, isolation can be helpful, yet in many cases it can be considered as a deadly disease, or maybe I should say it is sometimes desired because of a disease, which may or may not be contagious. It is necessary sometimes for self-analysis, and in that sense it is helpful, but it should never be cherished or lived in too long, because one cannot live permanently in a disturbed state of mind and keep healthy.

"It is a wonderful thing to be able to remember things so vividly, to keep track of man's injustice to his fellow-

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man. But the mere recollection of past events is not what counts; it is the courage, common sense, and tolerance gained through experience that matters, and finally the strong faith in the real purpose of life. You've had a rugged life, far too rugged, but the one important thing you should have been able to gain from your open view is utter confidence.

"Try to recall a day long ago when a frightened group of black-skinned men and women were forced aboard a ship, protesting and cowering. You were not there, but it happened. You should see them laboring in the Southern fields and crying out the injustices they felt; but you should also recall a day that a country with a heart laid down a principle that to me is almost sacred: 'All men are created equal.' In the chaos of these eruptive times there is not much sense in trying to build up pretty imaginary systems, I know, but sorrow and tears will not settle the problems created by men who suppress and disregard the rights of other men, or by prejudiced, narrow minds; such problems must be faced nakedly, squarely, and frankly. I cannot tell you that you have no problem, but I can tell you that you are not alone in facing it. I am sorry you feel so close to it, because it flourished even in Greece, where the idea of democracy was born."

I looked down at my watch, and immediately stood up. "I can't take up your time like this," I said.

"But you haven't had your examination," he reminded. "If you could spare another fifteen minutes—"

"Not another minute today," I said. "Anyway, I feel better. However, I should like to come back for a checkup next week if I may."

"Of course, of course," he said. He walked with me to the door and offered me his hand. "It was good of you to listen," he said. "You'll come back for that checkup, won't you?"

I nodded. "Next Tuesday."

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His hand pressed mine and both his voice and eyes seemed to soften a little as he said, "I didn't mean to sound preachy, but it helps sometimes to be reminded that life wouldn't be life without problems, and the fact that we somehow survive them. I'm sure unreasonable prejudices will be overcome some day if given time."

"I suppose so," I said, feeling instinctively that he was remembering something in his own life; that he was remembering some tragic thing long past. As I made my way toward the elevator and home, I wondered what it had been.

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CHAPTER 13

WHEN I ARRIVED HOME I SAT DOWN AND LET THE HOUSE-work go. A half hour passed without my realizing it. For me time stood still, and I told myself that it would continue to stand still until I arrived at some notion of how I could stop this self-probing. Talking to the doctor had pressed the emotion down, but I felt it coming back now as an aching emptiness. Yet he would never know what he had done for me, I thought; he had directed my attention to something else, a different angle of the entire situation, in the South and elsewhere, and now, coming back to it, I was able to see that the incidents which I had faced were being faced by countless numbers of men of different races everywhere. It was something to which you must adjust yourself, with a continuous hope for it to end as quickly as possible.

This was definitely the end of a part of my life, I decided. During the last few months I had become too despondent, too moody, thinking of life only in terms of its sourness, of immeasurable prejudices, without viewing the situation judiciously. My mind had been kept busy conjuring up images, and my emotions had worked overtime reacting to them.

I told myself that in order to live a full and happy life one shouldn't allow the rudeness of the existing practices of men to weigh so heavily upon his mind that it dimmed his thought and glutted his vision with rage, scorn, and sizzling evaluations. This word *democracy* I had been lamenting over came to America abounding in associa-

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tions which were created in Greece in days past, and ever since those days men had suffered, fought, and died for what it stood for. It had flourished and taken permanent root in America. There were exceptions, of course, but they were gradually being replaced by fairer practices in many communities of the land.

There were no cut-and-dried methods of meeting adequately every situation, but the basic solution remained the same in all ages—freedom and equality in the proper sense of the words. I decided that I would concentrate on that end as a practical guide to my future conduct. I would quench the fire I had kindled in my veins and which had caused me so much unhappiness and made me sick almost of life. I thought about the rising tide of communism and wondered if this was the way it had planted its bold and trenchant purposes into the core of weak hearts, and dug deep, deeper, and deeper still, until it took hold of the susceptible individual like an acute, feverish disease. And the poor, half-hearted citizen found himself advocating the forceful overthrow of tried and trusted principles.

I continued wondering about life, about people, about laws, rules, order and disorder. These were the elements which, when totaled, made life worthless or worth while, and finally led to sensible living. I felt as if the waters of reality were closing in around me and those of my childhood world were subsiding to their proper level. I attempted to enumerate the reasons why I should be proud to be an American. I saw again my old, sweaty, frightened, suffering forefathers as they moaned, groaned, and died to make a secure place for me. I remembered that, although colored, they alone did not die. A clear-cut picture of the Civil War flashed up before me. I decided that one of the major reasons it came to pass was that someone like myself, perhaps, had become too eager for quick results and had thereby gotten only partial results.

The dreadful event took time, effort, and lives as its toll.

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How much better it would have been had it taken only time and effort! Regardless of the consequences, long after the dismal days of slavery, Southerners still had the wrong slant on life. They still failed to realize that people were people regardless of the color of their skin, or the shape of their noses.

The April sunlight slanted through the window, touched the maple desk, and blinked at me. I looked about me for something to sustain my new resolutions. The lifeless portraits on the wall looked out courageously into their confining space. An ashtray with the picture of our nation's Capitol embossed on it caught my attention and stirred my thoughts vigorously. I saw every event of my life distinctly. I closed my eyes and relaxed as the scenes again rose before me. I was surprised to see the old homestead stand out like a strong, solid root from which sprang tender oaks prepared to weather many fierce storms. The lone old house stood on a Southern hill, lovely in its quaint setting. I saw the wooded, flower-scented hillsides, the warm Southern sun; whippoorwills calling out in the yellow moonlight, blackbirds singing over the head of a small girl with tear-swollen eyes and heavy heart, dressed in ragged overalls. My mother's face was there now, and I could see her, tired, worn, confused, and discouraged, as she struggled to rear nine hungry children on a rocky hillside. My! what a harrowing experience those bleak times must have been to her as she fought the engulfing sordidness and threatening poverty!

I saw my mathematically minded father in his old age—his days almost past and gone. I smiled as I remembered how he had enjoyed solving problems in fractions—none had stunted him. I now saw how carelessly he had wasted his life, and lost my bearings. I became engrossed in anguished thought as I slipped into a clearing on the border of a groundless land where all things came to me as one hears sounds from a long way off. From somewhere in the

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thick silence my grandfather's voice came to me, sympathetic and unearthly.

It came through the window like a tinkle of tiny rhythmical chains. I felt the blood run swift through my veins. I sat still; the silence poised itself on one leg and continued its action like the mood of the imperfect tense. His voice drawled on at the pace of a heavily laden hearse; I listened attentively as it floated up from some place vague and shadowy, like a land of perpetual sleep.

"The world almost whipped you," he said. "And it won its rounds while you stood viewing life with a dull eye. As you stumbled along the rugged path of life there in your world, you opened your ears only to the rude upheavals and, although you picked yourself up, you harbored bitter thoughts so long that no tears could soothe them. You should make a firm decision, today, now; vices are inherent in human nature. Decide today that you will stop living through seasons of fear and expurgation."

I jerked my head around, half expecting to see his face. I opened my mouth to reply, whereupon soundless words tore loose from my tongue like so many wild boars.

"What on earth are you talking about? What are you trying to say?" I gasped. "That those practices are to be expected because of the erring nature of mankind, and therefore should be soft-pedaled? A decision! Suppose I ask you for one. What will your answer be? You who delivered all your wonderful, self-constructed theories. You who said that the bold, intruding currents could not budge the prolific fruit of the seeds of good work planted in America in its infancy; yet you saw them uprooted and left to wither and rot in the wild heat of Southern democracy.

"Would you tell me that although slavery was renounced thirty-three years before Lincoln's day, the law that publicly declared it was constructed like the laws that brought the corporation into existence, just as invis-

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ible and intangible? Let me tell you the true reason why I can't make a definite, final decision, or call it resolution if you wish—it is that as long as my country and what was your country tolerate men who burn fiery crosses before the tumble-down shacks of the South, as long as men and women are forced to speak up like a child using his prettiest manners and answer 'yessir' and 'yessam' to every man, woman, and half-grown child of the South, whether he or she is middle class or upper class, half-breed, whole breed, or low class; as long as lines of dark-skinned men and women must queue up like herded, leprosy-infected victims to spend their hard-earned money in business places; as long as men excuse the practices of the evil Southland by saying that progress is being made and good will eventually win out; as long as men skirt the injustices, as the document-bearing Freedom Train skirted some Southern cities; as long as those few men and women living in the South sit back on their weak, extenuating heels and witness the low deeds and practices of their fellowmen; as long as men fail to fill their hearts with God-fearing fealty and brotherly love, and go among the disgraceful areas and talk about the prevailing evils of the land—the mothers of Wesley, Lincoln, Wilberforce, Booker T. Washington, my mother, and others, wasted their sweaty bloody travail!

"Don't ask me in your dead voice how to begin—as my friend from the depths of the Iron Curtain suggested. We must talk to people, talk loud but pleadingly, each saying to his fellowman, 'Our country was founded upon the sturdy rocks of a welcoming freedom, the freedom of which Lincoln spoke, which Christ preached. Let us put aside these lofty, sophistical ideas and live wisely, religiously, and tolerantly.' Ask each racially prejudiced person to search himself and try to find the rotten seed in the seat of his Hitler-slanted heart. Ask him why he sent his sons and daughters into a bomb-drenched war to fight for

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a thing apart from himself. Ask him why he did not rush them to Hitler's aid? Then their lives in America wouldn't seem so incongruous.

"No, don't ask them just for me; I am through with searching and ranting. For years I have stood like a naked woman at the North Pole, fruitlessly waiting for a ray of balmy sunshine to shroud her chilly frame, expecting radical changes. Instead, I find the changes weakly entering like the pale, worn, demanding evening of life, bearing a short, dim torch. For years I lived and toiled, and gave honor where honor was not due—for years and years I lived in a land where men proudly display the words *White Only* on the doors of foul-smelling public privies! I am tired, discouraged, and weary of talking. For years I have talked about my people, to those I found willing to listen, and to my people. But what are my returns? Racial obstructions as prominent as the stars and stripes which symbolizes my country as a free nation. Prejudice! and more prejudice!"

The burning words stuck to my tongue as a sudden loud noise filled my ears. Realizing that it was the sound of voices, I jumped to my feet, threw open the door, viewed the spectacle of upraised banners, and listened in horror. He walked a little apart from the surly group, his dark eyes penetrating everything within his view. His broad chest stuck out of his lumberjacket like a sturdy brown breastplate. His thighlike legs moved slowly and steadily. As I started to run into the house, my eyes brought into focus, like a perfectly constructed telescope the letters on the banners: JAKE PINEHILL WAS MURDERED BY A WHITE POLICEMAN. HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN YOUR SON! DOWN WITH PREJUDICE! I was riddled with terror. I caught my rushing breath, and almost screamed at him, "Jake Pinehill was also a thief caught in the act of stealing a car, or so the paper stated. Put down your silly banners! Wait, don't be fools!" As I screamed at the oncoming

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crowd, my eyes beheld men and women running from their doorways like rats from damp holes. I gaped at them as they came nearer. I made one more attempt to halt their ignorant war-march. "My God!" I yelled. "Don't you know that this is not Alabama, Georgia, or Mississippi? Please go home. Break up this silly mess and let's not parade our lack of understanding and"—the world almost choked me—"*prejudice!* In Heaven's name!"

I thought, as I ran from the porch, "The horrible situation balances! Who am I to lament while those silly Judases who are my people display their uncontrolled thinking?"

At that moment I painfully understood what Grandfather had meant about "six in one hand and half a dozen in the other." I slammed the door, covered my face with my hands, fell to my knees, and cried out in silent agony to God. After what seemed like a century had passed, I realized that I had been exaggerating the pathos of one side of the picture, while the other side remained shadowy in the background. I had made myself a biased mouthpiece in my passionate endeavors to remedy the evils of the world, and as soon as the sympathetic veil had been fiercely torn away, I saw the hollowness of my wailing. I saw it plainly in its incompleteness.

I felt as if I had just awakened from a deep sleep in which nightmares had stolen my senses; yet my spirit rose swiftly and calmly. I felt a surge of pride; not just a feeling of well-being, but something far deeper. A smile broke through to my lips as my cleared brain felt a surge of fresh understanding and tolerance. Outside, the night wind stirred in the lone tree, rustling the traffic sign hanging from a leafless branch with its mild whisper.

I walked briskly into my study, leafed through my files for my manuscript, and, turning to the last page, wrote: NO TRAVAIL WASTED. Suddenly I felt a deeper calmness and satisfaction, not as if it were merely the night

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before Easter, nor as if the night had been born just for me, but like someone who had suddenly ended a life of searching and adventure and had arrived safely home.

The End.

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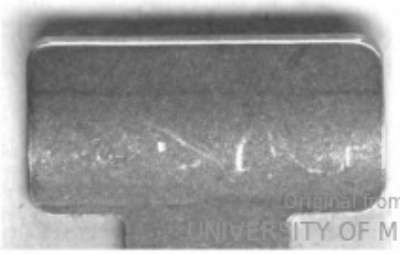

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