Claude McKay (1889–1948)

In 2012, the discovery of a manuscript for an unknown and unpublished Claude McKay novel, titled *Amiable with Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem*, surprised the world of writers and scholars. Packed into that sizeable title are the hallmarks of McKay's career – his conflicting affiliations with Communism and with Harlem, and the sense of political urgency that underpinned his creative writing. The novel added yet another layer to the complex portrait of a man who was both one of the major poets of the New Negro Renaissance and a travel writer and activist of international experience and influence.

Festus Claudius McKay was the youngest of 11 children born to Thomas and Hanna Ann McKay, relatively affluent peasant farmers in Clarendon Parish, Jamaica. He would describe this area, known as Sunnyville, in the autobiography of his youth published posthumously in 1978, *My Green Hills of Jamaica*. His father passed onto his children the Ashanti traditions of his West African ancestors, and also instilled in them, via the story of his own father's enslavement, a deep suspicion of white men and society. When he was a young boy, Claude was sent to live with his older brother Uriah Theodore, a schoolteacher who instructed him in the classics and British literature, philosophy, and theology. In his late teenage years, Claude spent time apprenticing to a wheelwright and furniture maker in Brown's Town, and also served as a police constable in Kingston, the capital of Jamaica.

In 1907, Claude McKay met Walter Jekyll, a white British expatriate and folklorist who would have a tremendous impact on McKay's life. It was at Jekyll's prompting that McKay began to write Jamaican dialect poetry. Jekyll would help with the publication, in 1912, of McKay's first two volumes of poetry, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*. The former celebrated the peasants of McKay's familiar countryside; the latter, drawing on his unhappy time spent as a constable, cast a hard look at the corruption and racism endemic to Kingston. Both collections were well received, and McKay became the first person of African descent to win the Silver Musgrave Medal of the Institute of Jamaica, an organization founded in 1879 to promote and support the country's literature, arts, and sciences.

Interested in the United States and the study of agriculture, McKay put his prize money toward attending the Tuskegee Institute first established by Booker T. Washington. Nonplussed by its "semi-military, machinelike existence," he transferred after two months to Kansas State College in Manhattan, Kansas, where he would remain for two years. Jekyll helped support him financially during his studies, and assisted his next move, to Harlem in 1914, around the time he had a brief, ill-fated marriage to his childhood sweetheart, Eulalie Lewars. Over the next five years, McKay worked a variety of occupations – after a failed stint as a restaurateur, he worked as a porter and dining-car waiter on the Pennsylvania Railroad.

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Claude McKay, "Whe'fe Do?" and "Cudjoe Fresh from de Lecture," from *Songs of Jamaica*, 1912.Claude McKay, "America," "The Tropics in New York," "Harlem Shadows," "The White City," "Africa," "The Tired Worker," "If We Must Die," from *Complete Poems*, ed. William J. Maxwell. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004. Used by permission of the Literary Representative for the Works of Claude McKay, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. From Claude McKay, *Banjo – A Story Without Plot*. San Diego / New York / London: Harper & Bros., 1929 (copyright renewed in 1957). Used by permission of the Literary Representative for the Works of Claude McKay, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

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During these years, he became well connected in the leftist New York literary scene, and grew increasingly radical in politics. He developed strong friendships with Max and Crystal Eastman, the editors of the *The Liberator*, and also Greenwich Village figures such as E.A. Robinson and Waldo Frank, who helped McKay's breakthrough as a poet in the States when he published "The Harlem Dancer" and "Invocation" in a 1917 issue of the avant-garde magazine *The Seven Arts*.

In 1919 McKay left Harlem for England, where he continued to make connections that were both literarily and politically incendiary. McKay was introduced to Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, while I.A. Richards, an especially august English literary critic, wrote the preface for his third volume of poetry, *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920). At the same time, McKay immersed himself in the writing of Karl Marx, frequented an International Socialist Club, and regularly contributed to Sylvia Pankhurst's *Workers' Dreadnoughts*, the newspaper of the Communist Party. This politically charged atmosphere resonates in the contrast between the bucolic *Spring in New Hampshire* and the racially inflected poems in *Harlem Shadows* (1922). The latter volume was an unquestioned triumph, almost singlehandedly serving notice of the imminent New Negro Renaissance. One of its central poems was "If We Must Die," an example of McKay's tendency to wed explosive subject matter to traditional poetic forms, which would later become a World War II rallying cry after Winston Churchill recited it in an anti-Nazi speech.

Relatively flush with cash from *Harlem Shadows* and thoroughly disenchanted with the state of racial discourse and black nationalism in America, McKay set out, in 1923, for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to attend the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. He would later describe the contradictory feelings attendant on this trip in his 1937 autobiography *A Long Way from Home*. During the trip he was an instant celebrity, his opinion eagerly courted. Indeed, the Soviet press published a collection of his essays, under the title *Negroes in America* (1923), in which McKay gave a Marxist interpretation of African Americans' material and political condition. Yet, at the same time, he was distressed by the ideological strictures that the Soviet authorities imposed on art and speech. He left later in the year for France, where he would spend the rest of the 1920s.

In France, McKay wrote *Home to Harlem* (1928), the first novel by an African American to become a best-seller, perhaps in no small part due to widespread curiosity concerning the "Harlem scene" at the time. The novel contrasted two characters, the hedonistic Jake and the cerebral Ray, a Haitian intellectual. It strongly offended W.E.B. Du Bois's particular sense of decorum, creating a tension not unlike the one between McKay and other elder New Negro Renaissance luminaries, such as Alain Locke. McKay referred to Locke's 1925 edited collection *The New Negro* as "a remarkable chocolate soufflé of art and politics." The sequel to *Home to Harlem*, *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* (1929), which followed Ray's travels among sailors and drifters in Marseilles, did not fare well at all in sales. Neither did *Gingertown* (1932), McKay's collection of short stories; nor did *Banana Bottom* (1933), a novel many consider to be his finest. In 1934, impoverished and in ill health, McKay returned to Harlem.

Until the recent discovery of *Amiable with Big Teeth*, *Banana Bottom* appeared to be McKay's last major work of fiction. His known late writings were either autobiographical (*A Long Way from Home*, *My Green Hills of Jamaica*) or sociological (*Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, released in 1940). Increasingly disillusioned with the political causes of his earlier years, McKay became interested in Roman Catholicism at the prompting of his friend Ellen Terry, a Catholic writer. He converted to Catholicism in 1944 and moved to Chicago, where he taught classes for the Catholic Youth Organization. He died in 1948, and his body was returned to Harlem for burial.

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Whe' fe Do?

From Songs of Jamaica

Life will continue so for aye,
Some people sad, some people gay,
Some mockin' life while udders pray;
But we mus' fashion-out we way
An' sabe a mite fe rainy day –
        All we can do.

We needn' fold we han' an' cry,
Nor vex we heart wid groan and sigh;
De best we can do is fe try
To fight de déspair drawin' nigh:
Den we might conquer by an' by –
        Dat we might do.

We hab to batter in de sun,
An' dat isn't a little fun,

For Lard! ’tis hellish how it bu’n:
Still dere’s de big wul’ to live do’n –
So whe’ fe do?

We nigger hab a tas’ fe do,
To conquer prejudice dat due
To obeah, an’ t’ings not a few
Dat keep we progress back fe true –
But whe’ fe do?

We’ve got to wuk wid might an’ main,
To use we han’ an’ use we brain,
To toil an’ worry, ’cheme an’ ’train
Fe t’ings that bring more loss dan gain;
To stan’ de sun an’ bear de rain,
An’ suck we bellyful o’ pain
Widouten cry nor yet complain –
For dat caan’do.

And though de wul’ is full o’wrong,
Dat caan’ prevent we sing we song
All de day as we wuk along –
Whe’ else fe do?

We happy in de hospital;
We happy when de rain deh fall;
We happy though de baby bawl
Fe food dat we no hab at all;
We happy when Deat’ angel call
Fe full we cup of joy wid gall:
Our fait’ in this life is not small –
De best to do.

An’ da’s de way we ought to live,
For pain an’ such we shouldn’ grieve,
But tek de best dat Nature give –
Da’s whe’ fe do.

God mek de wul’ fe black an’ white;
We’ll wuk on in de glad sunlight,
Keep toilin’ on wid all our might,
An’ sleep in peace when it is night:
We must strive on to gain de height,
Aldough it may not be in sight;
An’ yet perhaps de blessed right
Will never conquer in de fight –
Still, whe’ fe do?

We’ll try an’ live as any man,
An’ fight de wul’ de best we can,
E’en though it hard fe understan’
Whe’ we mus’ do.

For da's de way o' dis ya wul';
It's snap an' bite, an' haul an' pull,
An' we all get we bellyful –
But whe' fe do?

Cudjoe Fresh from de Lecture

From Songs of Jamaica

'Top one minute, Cous' Jarge, an' sit do'n 'pon de grass,
An' mek a tell you 'bout de news I hear at las',
How de buccra te-day tek time an' bégin teach
All of us dat was deh in a clear open speech.

You miss somet'ing fe true, but a wi' mek you know,
As much as how a can, how de business a go:
Him tell us 'bout we self, an' mek we fresh again,
An' talk about de wul' from commencement to en'.

Me look 'pon me black 'kin, an' so me head grow big,
Aldough me heaby han' dem hab fe plug an' dig;
For ebery single man, no car' about dem rank,
Him bring us ebery one an' put 'pon de same plank.

Say, parson do de same? Yes, in a diff'ren' way,
For parson tell us how de whole o' we are clay;
An' lookin' close at t'ings, we hab to pray quite hard
Fe swaller wha' him say an' don't t'ink bad o' Gahd.

But dis man tell us 'traight 'bout how de whole t'ing came,
An' show us widout doubt how Gahd was not fe blame;
How change cause eberyt'ing fe mix up 'pon de eart',
An' dat most hardship come t'rough accident o' birt'.

Him show us all a sort o' funny 'keleton,
Wid names I won't remember under dis ya sun;
Animals queer to deat', dem bone, teet', an' head-skull,
All dem so dat did live in a de ole-time wul'.

No 'cos say we get cuss mek fe we 'kin come so,
But fe all t'ings come 'quare, same so it was to go:
Seems our lan' must ha' been a bery low-do'n place,
Mek it tek such long time in tu'ning out a race.

Yes, from monkey we spring: I believe ebery wud;
It long time better dan f'go say we come from mud:
No need me keep back part, me hab not'in' fe gain;
It's ebery man dat born – de buccra mek it plain.

It really strange how some o' de lan' dem advance;
Man power in some ways is nummo soso chance;
But suppose eberyt'ing could tu'n right upside down,
Den p'raps we'd be on top an' givin' some one houn'.

Yes, Cous' Jarge, slabery hot fe dem dat gone befo':
We gettin' better times, for those days we no know;
But I t'ink it do good, tek we from Africa
An' lan' us in a blessed place as dis a ya.

Talk 'bouten Africa, we would be deh till now,
Maybe same half-naked – all day dribe buccra cow,
An' tearin' t'rough de bush wid all de monkey dem,
Wile an' uncibilise', an' neber comin' tame.

I lef' quite 'way from wha' we be'n deh talk about,
Yet still a couldn' help – de wuds come to me mout';
Just like how yeas' get strong an' sometimes fly de cark,
Same way me feelings grow, so I was boun' fe talk.

Yet both horse partly runnin' in de selfsame gallop,
For it is nearly so de way de buccra pull up:
Him say, how de wul' stan', dat right will neber be,
But wrong will eber gwon till dis wul' en' fe we.

1912[1]

America

From Harlem Shadows

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate.
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,

Notes

Songs of Jamaica

[1] Claude McKay's *Songs of Jamaica* is published prior to the periodization of Volume 2's first section, which begins in 1920. Nonetheless it is included here, because the pedagogy it affords links more to his subsequent work and its context than to the African American literature highlighted in the third and final section of Volume 1.

And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

The Tropics in New York

From Harlem Shadows

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

Set in the window, bringing memories
Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes drew dim, and I could no more gaze;
A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

Harlem Shadows

From Harlem Shadows

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
To bend and barter at desire's call.
Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
Go prowling through the night from street to street!

Through the long night until the silver break
Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth's white breast,
The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
In Harlem wandering from street to street.

The White City

From Harlem Shadows

I will not toy with it nor bend an inch.
Deep in the secret chambers of my heart
I muse my life-long hate, and without flinch
I bear it nobly as I live my part.
My being would be a skeleton, a shell,
If this dark Passion that fills my every mood,
And makes my heaven in the white world's hell,
Did not forever feed me vital blood.
I see the mighty city through a mist –
The strident trains that speed the goaded mass,
The poles and spires and towers vapor-kissed,
The fortressed port through which the great ships pass,
The tides, the wharves, the dens I contemplate,
Are sweet like wanton loves because I hate.

Africa

From Harlem Shadows

The sun sought thy dim bed and brought forth light,
The sciences were sucklings at thy breast;
When all the world was young in pregnant night
Thy slaves toiled at thy monumental best.
Thou ancient treasure-land, thou modern prize,
New peoples marvel at thy pyramids!
The years roll on, thy sphinx of riddle eyes
Watches the mad world with immobile lids.
The Hebrews humbled them at Pharaoh's name.
Cradle of Power! Yet all things were in vain!
Honor and Glory, Arrogance and Fame!
They went. The darkness swallowed thee again.
Thou art the harlot, now thy time is done,
Of all the mighty nations of the sun.

The Tired Worker

From Harlem Shadows

O whisper, O my soul! The afternoon
Is waning into evening, whisper soft!
Peace, O my rebel-heart! for soon the moon
From out its misty veil will swing aloft!
Be patient, weary body, soon the night

Will wrap thee gently in her sable sheet,
And with a leaden sigh thou wilt invite
To rest thy tired hands and aching feet.
The wretched day was theirs, the night is mine;
Come tender sleep, and fold me to thy breast.
But what steals out the gray clouds red like wine?
O dawn! O dreaded dawn! O let me rest
Weary my veins, my brain, my life! Have pity!
No! Once again the harsh, the ugly city.

If We Must Die

From Harlem Shadows

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die, 5
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

1922

Extracts from Banjo: A Story without a Plot

First Part[1]

Chapter 1

The Ditch

Heaving along from side to side, like a sailor on the unsteady deck of a ship, Lincoln Agrippa Daily, familiarly known as Banjo, patrolled the magnificent length of the great breakwater of Marseilles, a banjo in his hand.

"It sure is some moh mahvelous job," he noted mentally; "most wonderful bank in the ocean I evah did see."

Notes

Banjo: A Story without a Plot
[1] The complete "First Part" consists of chapters 1–5.

It was afternoon. Banjo had walked the long distance of the breakwater and was returning to the Joliette end. He wore a cheap pair of slippers, suitable to the climate, a kind much used by the very poor of Provence. They were an ugly drab-brown color, which, however, was mitigated by the crimson socks and the yellow scarf with its elaborate pattern of black, yellow, and red at both ends, that was knotted around his neck and hung down the front of his blue-jean shirt.

Suddenly he stood still in his tracks as out of the bottom of one of the many freight cars along the quay he saw black bodies dropping. Banjo knew box cars. He had hoboed in America. But never had he come across a box car with a hole in the bottom. Had those black boys made it? He went down on the quay to see.

The fellows were brushing the hay off their clothes. There were four of them.

"Hello, there!" said Banjo.

"Hello, money!" replied the tallest of the four, who was just Banjo's build.

"Good night, money. What I want to know is ef you-all made that theah hole in the bottom a that box car? I nevah yet seen no hole in the bottom of a box car, and I've rode some rails back home in the States."

"P'raps not. They's things ovah heah diffarant from things ovah theah and they's things ovah theah diffarant from things ovah heah. Now the way things am setting with me, this heah hole-in-the-bottom box car is just *the* thing for us."

"You done deliver you'self of a mouthful that sure sounds perfect," responded Banjo.

"I always does. Got to use mah judgment all the time with these fellahs heah. And you? What you making foh you'self down here on the breakwater?"

"Ain't making a thing, but I know I'd sure love to make a meal."

"A meal! You broke already?"

"Broke already? Yes I is, but what do you know about it?" asked Banjo, sharply.

"Nothing in particular, ole spoht, cep'n' that I bummed you two times when you was strutting with that ofay broad and that Ise Malty Avis, the best drummer on the beach. Mah buddies heah bummed you, too, so if youse really broke and hungry as you say, which can be true, 'causen you' lips am as pale as the belly of a fish, just you come right along and eat ovah theah." He pointed to a ramshackle bistro-restaurant on the quay. "We got a little money between us. The bumming was good last night."

"This is going some, indeed. I gived you a raise yestidday and youse feeding me today," said Banjo as they all walked toward the bistro. "I don't even remember none a you fellahs."

"'Cause you was too swell dressed up and strutting fine with that broad to see anybody else," said the smallest of the group.

They were all hungry. The boys had been sleeping, and woke up with an appetite. Before them the woman of the bistro set five plates of vegetable soup, a long loaf of bread, followed by braised beef and plenty of white beans. Malty called for five bottles of red wine.

Banjo got acquainted over the mess. The shining black big-boned lad who bore such a contented expression on his plump jolly face and announced himself as Malty Avis, was the leader and inspirer of the group. His full name was Buchanan Malt Avis. He was a West Indian. His mother had been a cook for a British missionary and from the labels of his case goods, for which she had had a fondness, she had taken his Christian names. The villagers dropped Buchanan and took Malt, which they made Malty.

Malty's working life began as a small sailor boy on fishing-boats in the Caribbean. When he became a big boy he was taken by a cargo boat on his first real voyage to New Orleans. From there he had started in as a real seaman and had never returned home.

Sitting on Malty's right, the chestnut-skinned fellow with drab-brown curly hair was called Ginger, a tribute, evidently, to the general impression of his make-up. Whether you thought of ginger as a tuber in reddish tropical soil, or as a preserved root, or as the Jamaica liquid, it reminded you oddly of him. Of all the English-speaking Negro boys, Ginger held the long-term record of existence on the beach. He had lost his seaman's papers. He had been in prison for vagabondage and served with a writ of expulsion. But he had destroyed the writ and swiped the papers of another seaman.

Opposite Ginger was Dengel, also tall, but thin. He was a Senegalese who spoke a little English and preferred the company of Malty and his pals to that of his countrymen.

Beside Dengel was the small, wiry, dull-black boy who had sardonically reminded Banjo of his recent high-flying. He was always aggressive of attitude. The fellows said that he was bughouse and he delighted in the name of Bugsy that they gave him.

They were all on the beach, and there were many others besides them – white men, brown men, black men. Finns, Poles, Italians, Slavs, Maltese, Indians, Negroids, African Negroes, West Indian Negroes – deportées from America for violation of the United States immigration laws – afraid and ashamed to go back to their own lands, all dumped down in the great Provençal port, bumming a day's work, a meal, a drink, existing from hand to mouth, anyhow any way, between box car, tramp ship, bistro, and bordel.

"But you ain't broke, man," Malty said, pointing to the banjo, "when you got that theah bit a business. Ain't a one of us here that totes around anything that can bring a little money outa this burg a peddlers."

Banjo caressed his instrument. "I nevah part with this, buddy. It is moh than a gal, moh than a pal; it's mahself."

"You don't have to go hungry round here, either, ef you c'n play a li'l' bit," drawled Ginger. "You c'n pick up enough change foh you'self even as much to buy us all a li'l' red wine to wet our whistle when the stuff is scarce down the docks – jest by playing around in them bars in Joliette and uptown around the Bum Square."

"We'll see what this burg can stand," said Banjo. "It ain't one or two times, but plenty, that mah steady here did make me a raise when I was right down and out. Oncet away back in Montreal, after I done lost every cent to mah name on the racetracks, I went into one swell spohting-place and cleaned up twenty-five dollars playing. But the best of all was the bird uvva time I had in San Francisco with three buddies who hed a guitar and a ukulele and a tambourine between them. My stars! I was living in clovah for six months."

"You'll make yours here, too," said Malty. "Although this heah burg is lousy with pif-formers, doing their stuff in the cafés, it ain't often you come across one that can turn out a note to tickle a chord in you' apparatus. Play us a piece. Let us hear how you sound."

"Not now," said Banjo. "Better tonight in some café. Maybe they won't like it here."

"Sure they will. You c'n do any ole thing at any ole time in this country."

"That ain't a damn sight true," Bugsy jumped sharply in. "But you can play all the time," he said to Banjo. "People will sure come and listen and the boss will get rid a some moh of his rotten wine."

"This wine ain't so bad ——" Ginger began.

"It sure is," insisted Bugsy, whose palate had never grown agreeable to *vin rouge ordinaire*. He drank with the boys, as drinking played a big part in their group life, but he preferred syrups to wine, and he was the soberest among them.

"The wine outa them barrels we bung out on the docks is much better," he declared.

"Why, sure it's better, you black blubberhead," exclaimed Ginger. "Tha's the real best stuff we make down there. Pure and strong, with no water in it. That's why we

get soft on it quicker than when we drink in a café. In all them little cafés the stuff is doctored. That's the profit way."

Banjo played "Yes, sir, that's my baby." He said it was one of the pieces that were going wild in the States. The boys began humming and swaying. What Bugsy predicted happened. Some dockers who were not working were drawn to the bistro. They seated themselves at a rough long table, across from the boys' by the other side of the door, listened approvingly to the music, drank wine, and spat pools.

Malty ordered more wine. Ginger and Bugsy stood up to each other and performed a strenuous movement of the "Black Bottom," as they had learned it from Negro seamen of the American Export Line. The *patrone* came and stood in the door, very pleased, and exhibited a little English, "Good piece you very well play …"

Banjo played another piece, then suddenly stopped, stood up and stretched his arms.

"You finish' already?" demanded Malty.

"Sure; it was just a little exhibition of my accomplishment foh your particular benefit."

"Youse as good a musician as a real artist."

"I *is* an artist."

The workmen regarded Banjo admiringly, drained their glasses, and sauntered off.

"Imagine those cheapskates coming here jest to listen to mah playing and not even offering a man a drink," Banjo sneered. "Why, ef I was in Hamburg or Genoa they woulda sure drownded me in liquor."

"The Froggies am all tight that way," said Malty. "They're a funny people. If you'd a taken up a collection every jack man a them woulda gived you a copper, thinking that you make you' living that way ——"

"Hell with their coppers," said Banjo. "I expected them to stand a round just for expreciation only of a good thing."

"As for that, they ain't the treating kind a good fellahs that you and I am used to on the other side," said Malty …

From the bistro on the breakwater, the boys rocked slowly along up to Joliette. Ginger had a favorite drinking-place on the Rue Forbin, a dingy tramps' den. They stopped there, drinking until twilight. Ginger and Dengel became so staggeringly soft that they decided to go back to the box car and sleep.

Malty said to Banjo and Bugsy, "Let's take our tail up to the Bum Square."

The Place Victor Gelu of the Vieux Port was called by the boys on the beach the "Bum Square" because it was there they gathered at night to bum or panhandle seamen and voyagers who passed through to visit the Quartier Réservé. The Quartier Réservé they called "the Ditch" with the same rough affection with which they likened their ship to an easy woman by calling it the "broad."

Avoiding the populous Rue de la République, Malty, Banjo, and Bugsy followed the little-frequented Boulevard de la Major, passing by the shadow of the big cathedral and the gate of the Central Police Building, to reach the Bum Square. They took two more rounds of red wine on the way, the last in a little café in the Place de Lenche before they descended to the Ditch.

Malty had a dinner engagement with a mulatto seaman from a boat of the American Export Line, whom he was to meet in the Bum Square. The wine had worked so hard on their appetites that all three were hungry again. Malty looked in all the cafés of the square, but did not find his man. A big blond fellow, his clothes starched with dirt, was standing in the shadow of a palm, looking sharply out for customers. Malty asked him if he had seen his mulatto.

"He went up that way with a tart," replied the blond, pointing toward the Canebière.

"Let's go and eat, anyway," Malty said to Banjo and Bugsy. "I got some money yet."

"Latnah musta gived you an extry raise; she is always handing you something," said Bugsy.

"I ain't seen her for ovah three days," replied Malty.

"Oh, you got a sweet mamma helping you on the side?" Banjo asked, laughing.

"Not mine, boh," replied Malty. "Is jest a li'l' woman bumming like us on the beach. I don't know whether she is Arabian or Persian or Indian. She knows all landwidges. I stopped a p-i[2] from treating her rough one day, and evah since she pals out with our gang, nevah passing us without speaking, no matter ef she even got a officer on the string, and always giving us English and American cigarettes and a little change when she got 'em. It's easy for her, you see, to penetrate any place on a ship, when we can't, 'cause she's a skirt with some legs all right, and her face ain't nothing that would scare you."

"And none a you fellahs can't make her?" cried Banjo. "Why you-all ain't the goods?"

"It ain't that, you strutting cock, but she treats us all like pals and don't leave no ways open for that. Ain't it better to have her as a pal than to lose out ovah a li'l' crazy craving that a few sous can settle up here?"

They went up one of the humid, somber alleys, thick with little eating-dens of all the Mediterranean peoples, Greek, Jugo-Slav,[3] Neapolitan Arab, Corsican, and Armenian, Czech and Russian.

When they had finished eating, Malty suggested that they might go up to the gayer part of the Ditch. Bugsy said he would go to the cinema to see Hoot Gibson in a Wild West picture. But Banjo accepted the invitation with alacrity. Every chord in him responded to the loose, bistro-love-life of the Ditch.

Banjo was a great vagabond of lowly life. He was a child of the Cotton Belt, but he had wandered all over America. His life was a dream of vagabondage that he was perpetually pursuing and realizing in odd ways, always incomplete but never unsatisfactory. He had worked at all the easily-picked-up jobs – longshoreman, porter, factory worker, farm hand, seaman.

He was in Canada when the Great War began and he enlisted in the Canadian army. That gave him a glimpse of London and Paris. He had seen a little of Europe before, having touched some of the big commercial ports when he was a husky fireman. But he had never arrived at the sailor's great port, Marseilles. Twice he had been to Genoa and once to Barcelona. Only those who know the high place that Marseilles holds in the imagination of seamen can get the feeling of his disappointment. All through his seafaring days Banjo had dreamed dreams of the seaman's dream port. And at last, because the opportunity that he had long hoped for did not come to take him there, he made it.

Banjo had been returned to Canada after the general demobilization. From there he crossed to the States, where he worked at several jobs. Seized by the old restlessness for a sea change while he was working in an industrial plant, he hit upon the unique plan of getting himself deported.

Some of his fellow workmen who had entered the United States illegally had been held for deportation, and they were all lamenting that fact. Banjo, with his unquenchable desire to be always going, must have thought them very poor snivelers. They had all been thunderstruck when he calmly announced that he was not an American. Everything about him – accent, attitude, and movement – shouted Dixie. But Banjo had insisted that his parentage was really foreign. He had served in the Canadian army. … His declaration had to be accepted by his bosses.

Notes

[2] *p-i* private investigator.

[3] *Jugo-Slav* Yugoslavian.

Banjo was a personality among the immigration officers. They liked his presence, his voice, his language of rich Aframericanisms. They admired, too, the way he had chosen to go off wandering again. (It was nothing less than a deliberate joke to them, for Banjo could never convince any American, especially a Southern-knowing one, that he was not Aframerican.) It was singular enough to stir their imagination, so long insensible to the old ways of ship desertion and stowing away. The officials teased Banjo, asking him what he would ever do in Europe when he spoke no other language than straight Yankee. However, their manner betrayed their feeling of confidence that Banjo would make his way anywhere. He was given a chance to earn some money across and they saw him go regretfully and hopefully, when he signed up on the tramp that would eventually land him at Marseilles.

Banjo's tramp was a casual one. So much so that it was four months and nineteen days after sailing down through the Panama Canal to New Zealand and Australia, cruising cargo around the island continent and up along the coast of Africa, before his dirty overworked "broad" reached the port of Marseilles.

Banjo had no plan, no set purpose, no single object in coming to Marseilles. It was the port that seamen talked about – the marvelous, dangerous, attractive, big, wide-open port. And he wanted only to get there.

Banjo was paid off in francs, and after changing a deck of dollars that he had saved in America, he possessed twelve thousand five hundred and twenty-five francs and some sous. He was spotted and beset by touting guides, white, brown, black, all of them ready to show and sell him everything for a trifle. He got rid of them all.

Banjo bought a new suit of clothes, fancy shoes, and a vivid *cache-col*.[4] He had good American clothes, but he wanted to strut in Provençal style.

Instinctively he drifted to the Ditch, and as naturally he found a girl there. She found a room for both of them. Banjo's soul thrilled to the place – the whole life of it that milled around the ponderous, somber building of the Mairie, standing on the Quai du Port, where fish and vegetables and girls and youthful touts, cats, mongrels, and a thousand second-hand things were all mingled together in a churning agglomeration of stench and sliminess.

His wonderful Marseilles! Even more wonderful to him than he had been told. Unstintingly Banjo gave of himself and his means to his girl and the life around him. And when he was all spent she left him.

Now he was very light of everything: light of pocket, light of clothing (having relieved himself at the hock shop), light of head, feeling and seeing everything lightly.

It was Banjo's way to take every new place and every new thing for the first time in a hot crazy-drunk manner. He was a type that was never sober, even when he was not drinking. And now the first delirious fever days of Marseilles were rehearsing themselves, wheeling round and round in his head. The crooked streets of dim lights the gray damp houses bunched together and their rowdy signs of many colors. The mongrel-faced guides of shiny, beady eyes, patiently persuasive; the old hags at the portals, like skeletons presiding over an orgy, with skeleton smile and skeleton charm inviting in quavering accents those who hesitated to enter. Oh, his head was a circus where everything went circling round and round.

Banjo had never before been to that bistro where Malty was taking him. It had a player-piano and a place in the rear for dancing. It was a rendezvous for most of the English-

Notes

[4] *cache-col* (French) scarf.

speaking beach boys. If they were spending a night in the Vieux Port, they went there (after panhandling the Bum Square) for sausage sandwiches and red wine. And when all their appetites were appeased, they flopped together in a room upstairs.

The mulatto cook from the Export Line boat was there, sitting between a girl and an indefinite Negroid type of fellow. There were two bottles of wine and a bottle of beer before them. The cook called Malty and Banjo to his table and ordered more wine. There were many girls from the Ditch and young touts dancing. One of the girls asked Banjo to play. Another made the mulatto dance with her. Banjo played "Yes, sir, that's my baby." But as soon as he paused, a girl started the player-piano. The banjo was not loud enough for that close, noisy little market. Everybody was dancing.

Banjo put the instrument aside. It wasn't adequate for the occasion. It would need an orchestry to fix them right, he thought, good-humoredly. I wouldn't mind starting one going in this burg. Gee! That's the idea. Tha's jest what Ise gwine to do. The American darky is the performing fool of the world today. He's demanded everywhere. If I c'n only git some a these heah panhandling fellahs together, we'll show them some real nigger music. Then I'd be setting pretty in this heah sweet dump without worrying ovah mah wants. That's the stuff for a live nigger like me to put ovah, and no cheap playing from café to café and a handing out mah hat for a lousy sou.

He was so exhilarated with the thought of what he would do that he felt like dancing. At that moment the girl of his first Marseilles days came in with a young runt of a tout. Banjo looked up at her, smiling expectantly. She was still going round in his head with the rest of the Ditch. She had left him, of course, but he had accepted that as inevitable when he could no longer afford her. Yet, he had mused, she might have been a little extravagant and bestowed on him one spontaneous caress over all that was bought. She had not. Because she only knew one way – the way of the Ditch. She did not know the way of a brown girl back home who could say with sweet exaggeration: "Daddy, we two will go home and spread joy and not wake up till next week sometime and want nothing but loving."

Ah no! Nothing so fancifully real. Nevertheless, she was the first playmate of his dream port.

The girl, seeing Banjo, turned her eyes casually away and went to sit where she could concentrate her charms on the mulatto. Banjo had no further interest for her. He had spent all his money and, like all the beach boys, would never have more for a wild fling as long as he remained in port. It was the mulatto that had brought her there. For as soon as a new arrival enters any of the dens of the Ditch, the girls are made aware of it by the touts, who are always on the lookout. Banjo was vexed. Hell! She might have been more cordial, he thought. The player-piano was rattling out "Fleur d'Amour." He would ask her to dance. Maybe her attitude was only an insolent little exhibition of cattishness. He went over to her and asked, "Danser?"

"No," she said, disdainfully, and turned away. He touched her shoulder playfully.

"*Laissez-moi tranquil, imbecile*." She spat nastily on the floor.

A rush of anger seized Banjo. "You pink sow!" he cried. His eyes caught the glint of the gold watch he had given to her, and wrenching it from her wrist, he smashed it on the red-tiled floor and stamped his heel upon it in a rage. The girl screamed agonizingly, wringing her hands, her wide eyes staring tragically at the remains of her watch. The little tout who had come in with her leaped over at Banjo. "What is it? What is it?" he cried, and hunching up his body and thrusting his head up and out like a comic actor, he began working his open hands up and down in Banjo's face, without touching him. Banjo looked down upon the boy contemptuously and seized his left wrist, intending to twist it and push him outside, for he could not think of fighting with such an undersized antagonist. But in a flash the boy drew a knife across his wrist and, released, dashed through the door.

Banjo wrapped the cut in his handkerchief, but it was soon soaked with blood. It was late. The pharmacies were closed. The *patrone* of the bistro said that there were pharmacies open all night. Malty took Banjo to hunt for one.

As they were passing through the Bum Square a woman's voice called Malty. They stopped and she came up to them. She was a little olive-toned woman of an indefinable age, clean-faced, not young and far from old, with an amorous charm round her mouth. It was Latnah.

"Ain't gone to bed yet?" Malty said to her. "Ise got a case here." He exhibited Banjo's hand.

"It plenty bleed," she said. She looked at Banjo and said, "I see you before around here."

Banjo grinned. "Maybe I seen you, too."

"I no think. Pharmacie no open now," she answered Malty's question. Then she said to Banjo: "Come with me. I see your hand. Tomorrow see you, Malty. Good night." She took Banjo away, while Malty's eyes followed them in a wistful, bewildered gaze.

She took Banjo back in the direction from which he had come, but by way of the Quai du Port. After a few minutes' walk they turned into one of the somber side streets. They went into a house a little southwest of the Ditch. Her room was on the top floor, a quaint, tiny thing, the only one up there, and opened right on the stairs. There was a little shutter-window, the size of a *Saturday Evening Post*, that gave a view of the Vieux Port, where the lights of the boats were twinkling. A bright, inexpensive Oriental shawl covered the cot-bed. On the table was a washbowl, two little jars of cosmetics, and packets of different brands of cigarettes.

There was no water in the room, and Latnah went down two flights of stairs to get a jugful. When she returned she washed Banjo's wound, then, getting a bottle of liquid from a basket against the foot of the cot, she anointed and bandaged it.

Banjo liked the woman's gentle fussing over him. He thanked her when she had finished. "*Rien du tout*," she replied. There was a little silence between them, slightly embarrassing but piquant.

Then Banjo said: "I wonder whereat I can find Malty now? I didn't have a room yet for tonight"

"You sleep here," she said, simply.

He undressed while she found something to do – empty the washbowl, wipe the table – and when at last he caught a glimpse of her between her deshabille and the covers he murmured softly to himself: "Don't care how I falls, may be evah so long a drop, but it's always on mah feets."

Chapter 2

The Breakwater

The quarter of the old port exuded a nauseating odor of mass life congested, confused, moving round and round in a miserable suffocating circle. Yet everything there seemed to belong and fit naturally in place. Bistros and love shops and girls and touts and vagabonds and the troops of dogs and cats – all seemed to contribute so essentially and colorfully to that vague thing called atmosphere. No other setting could be more appropriate for the men on the beach. It was as if all the derelicts of all the seas had drifted up here to sprawl out the days in the sun.

The men on the beach spent the day between the breakwater and the docks, and the night between the Bum Square and the Ditch. Most of the whites, especially the blond ones of northern countries, seemed to have gone down hopelessly under the strength

of hard liquor, as if nothing mattered for them now but that. They were stinking-dirty, and lousy, without any apparent desire to clean themselves. With the black boys it was different. It was as if they were just taking a holiday. They were always in holiday spirit, and if they did not appear to be specially created for that circle, they did not spoil the picture, but rather brought to it a rich and careless tone that increased its interest. They drank wine to make them lively and not sodden, washed their bodies and their clothes on the breakwater, and sometimes spent a panhandled ten-franc note to buy a second-hand pair of pants.

Banjo had become a permanent lodger at Latnah's. His wound was not serious, but it was painful and had given him a light fever. Latnah told him that when his wrist was well enough for him to play, she would go with him to perform in some of the bars of the quarter and take up a collection.

In the daytime Latnah went off by herself to her business, and sometimes the nature of it detained her overnight and she did not get back to her room. Banjo spent most of his time with Malty's gang. He was not altogether one of them, but rather a kind of honorary member, having inspired respect by his sudden conquest of Latnah and by being an American.

An American seaman (white or black) on the beach is always treated with a subtle difference by his beach fellows. He has a higher face value than the rest. His passport is worth a good price and is eagerly sought for by passport fabricators. And he has the assurance that, when he gets tired of beaching, his consulate will help him back to the fabulous land of wealth and opportunity.

Banjo dreamed constantly of forming an orchestra, and the boys listened incredulously when he talked about it. He had many ideas of beginning. If he could get two others besides himself he could arrange with the proprietor of some café to let them play at his place. That might bring in enough extra trade to pay them something. Or he might make one of the love shops of the Ditch unique and famous with a black orchestra.

One day he became very expansive about his schemes under the influence of wine-drinking on the docks. This was the great sport of the boys. They would steal a march on the watchmen or police, bung out one of the big casks, and suck up the wine through rubber tubes until they were sweetly soft.

Besides Banjo there were Malty, Ginger, and Bugsy. After they had finished with the wine, they raided a huge heap of peanuts, filled up their pockets, and straggled across the suspension bridge to lie in the sun on the breakwater.

"I could sure make one a them dumps look like a real spohting-place," said Banjo, "with a few of us niggers pifforming in theah. Lawdy! but the chances there is in a wide-open cat town like this! But everybody is so hoggish after the sous they ain't got no imagination left to see big money in a big thing ——"

"It wasn't a big thing that dat was put ovah on you, eh?" sniggered Bugsy.

"Big you' crack," retorted Banjo. "That theah wasn't nothing at all. Ain't nobody don't put anything ovah on me that I didn't want in a bad way to put ovah mahself. I like the looks of a chicken-house, and I ain't nevah had no time foh the business end ovit. But when I see how these heah poah ole disabled hens am making a hash of a good thing with a gang a cheap no-'count p-i's, I just imagine what a high-yaller queen of a place could do ovah heah turned loose in this sweet clovah. Oh, boy, with a bunch a pinks and yallers and chocolates in between, what a show she could showem!"

"It's a tall lot easier talking than doing," said Bugsy. "Theyse some things jest right as they is and ain't nevah was made foh making better or worser. Now supposing you was given a present of it, what would you make outa one a them joints in Boody Lane?"

Boody Lane was the beach boys' name for the Rue de la Bouterie, the gut of the Ditch.

"Well, that's a forthrightly question and downrightly hard to answer," said Banjo. "For I wasn't inclosing them in mah catalogory, becausen they ain't real places, brother; them's just stick-in-the-mud holes. Anyway, if one was gived to me I'd try everything doing excep'n' lighting it afire."

At this they all laughed. "Don't light it afire" was the new catch phrase among the beach boys and they passed it on to every new seaman that was introduced to the Ditch. When the new man, curious, asked the meaning, they replied, laughing mysteriously, "Because it is six months."

The phrase was the key to the story of an American brown boy who went on shore leave and would not keep company with any of his comrades. At the Vieux Port he was besieged by the black beach boys, but he refused to give them anything and told them that they ought to be ashamed to let down their race by scavengering on the beach. When he started to go up into the Ditch the boys warned him that it was dangerous to go alone. He went alone, replying that he did not want the advice or company of bums.

He went proud and straight into one of the stick-in-the-mud places of Boody Lane. And before he could get out, his pocketbook with his roll of dollars was missing. He accused the girl by signs. She replied by signs and insults that he had not brought the pocketbook there. She mentioned "police" and left the box. He thought she had gone to get the police to help him find his money. But he waited and waited, and when she did not return, realizing that he had been tricked, he struck a match and set the bed on fire. That not only brought him the police, but also the fire brigade and six months in prison where he was now cooling himself.

Ginger said: "I ain't no innovation sort of a fellah. When I make a new beach all I want is to make mah way and not make no changes. Just make mah way somehow while everything is going on without me studying them or them studying me."

He was lying flat on his back on one of the huge stone blocks of the breakwater. The waves were lapping softly around it. He had no shirt on and, unfastening the pin at the collar of his old blue coat, he flung it back and exposed his brown belly to the sun. His trousers waist was pulled down below his navel. "Oh, Gawd, the sun is sweet!" he yawned and, pulling his cap over his eyes, went to sleep. The others also stretched themselves and slept.

Along the great length of the breakwater other careless vagabonds were basking on the blocks. The day was cooling off and the sun shed down a warm, shimmering glow where the light fell full on the water. Over by l'Estaque, where they were extending the port, a P. L. M. coal ship stood black upon the blue surface. The factories loomed on the long slope like a rusty-black mass of shapes strung together, and over them the bluish-gray hills were bathed in a fine, delicate mist, and further beyond an immense phalanx of gray rocks, the inexhaustible source of the cement industry, ran sharply down into the sea.

Sundown found the boys in the Place de la Joliette. In one of the cafés they found a seaman from Zanzibar among some Maltese, from whom they took him away.

"Wese just in time for you," Malty declared. "What youse looking for is us. Fellahs who speak the same as you speak and not them as you kain't trust who mix up the speech with a mess of Arabese. Them's a sort of bastard Arabs, them Maltese, and none of us likes them, much less trusts them."

The new man was very pleased to fall in with fellows as friendly as Banjo and Malty. He was on a coal boat from South Shields and had a few pounds on him. He was generous and stood drinks in several cafés. From the Place de la Joliette, they took the quiet way of the Boulevard de la Major to reach the Ditch. It was the best way for the beach

boys. Some of them had not the proper papers to get by the police and tried to evade them always. By way of the main Rue de la République they were more likely to be stopped, questioned, searched, and taken to the police station. Sometimes they were told that their papers were not in order, but they were only locked up for a night and let out the next morning. Some of them complained of being beaten by the police. Ginger thought the police were getting more brutal and strict, quite different from what they were like when he first landed on the beach. Then they could bung out a cask of wine in any daring old way and drink without being bothered. Now it was different. It was not very long since two fellows from the group had got two months each for wine-stealing. Happily for them, Malty, Ginger, and Bugsy all had passable papers.

On the way to the Ditch they stopped in different bistros to empty in each a bottle of red wine. These fellows, who were used to rum in the West Indies, gin and corn liquor in the States, and whisky in England, took to the red wine of France like ducks to water. They never had that terribly vicious gin or whisky drunk. They seemed to have lost all desire for hard liquor. When they were drunk it was always a sweetly-soft good-natured wine drunk.

They had a big feed in one of the Chinese restaurants of the Rue Torte. The new man insisted on paying for it all. After dinner they went to a little café on the Quai du Port for coffee-and-rum. The newcomer took a mouth organ from his pocket and began playing. This stimulated Banjo, who said, "I guess mah hand c'n do its stuff again," and so he went up to Latnah's room and got his banjo.

They went playing from little bistro to bistro in the small streets between the fish market and the Bum Square. They were joined by others – a couple of Senegalese and some British West Africans – and soon the company was more than a dozen. They were picturesquely conspicuous as they loitered along, talking in a confused lingo of English, French, and native African. And in the cafés the bottles of beer and wine that they ordered and drank indiscriminately increased as their number increased. Customers were attracted by the music, and the girls, too, who were envious and used all their wiles to get away the newly arrived seaman from the beach boys …

"Hot damn!" cried Banjo. "What a town this heah is to spread joy in!"

"And you sure did spread yours all at once," retorted Bugsy. "Burn it up in one throw and finish, you did."

"Muzzle you' mouf, nigger," replied Banjo. "The joy stuff a life ain't nevah finished for this heah strutter. When I turn mahself loose for a big wild joyful jazz a life, you can bet you' sweet life I ain't gwine nevah regretting it. Ise got moh joy stuff in mah whistle than you're got in you' whole meager-dawg body."

"And I wouldn't want to know," said Bugsy.

At midnight they were playing in one of the cafés of the Bum Square, when an oldish man came in wearing faded green trousers, a yellowy black-bordered jacket, with a wreath of flowers around his neck and began to dance. He manipulated a stick with such dexterity that it seemed as if his wrist was moving round like a wheel, and he jigged and hopped from side to side with amazing agility while Banjo and the seaman played.

When they stopped, the garlanded dancer said he would bet anybody a bottle of *vin blanc supérieur* that he could stand on his head on a table. A youngster in proletarian blue made a sign against his head and said of the old fellow, "*Il est fada*." And the old man did indeed look a little mad in his strange costume and graying hair, and it seemed unlikely that his bones could support him in the feat that he proclaimed he could perform. But nobody took up the bet.

Somebody translated what was what to the new seaman, who said, carelessly, "May as well bet and have a little fun outa him."

"*Très bien*," said the old man. He made several attempts at getting headdown upon the table and failed funnily, like professional acrobats in their first trials on the stage, and the café resounded with peals of laughter and quickly filled up. Suddenly the old fellow cried: "*Ça y est!*" and spread his hands out, balancing himself straight up on his head on the table. In a moment he jumped down and, twisting his stick and executing some steps, went round with his hat and took up a collection before the crowd diminished. The beach boys threw in their share of sous and the seaman promptly paid for the bottle of white wine. The old man took it and left the café, followed by a woman.

Latnah, passing through the Bum Square and seeing Banjo playing, had entered the café just when the old man stopped dancing and asked who would take up his bet. The good collection he took up and the bottle of wine in addition awakened all her instincts of acquisitiveness and envious rivalry. She turned on Banjo.

"All that money man take and gone is you' money. You play and he take money. You too proud to ask money and you no have nothing. You feel rich, maybe."

"Leave me be, woman," said Banjo.

"And you make friend pay wine for man. Man make nothing but bluff. You colored make the white fool you all time ——"

"I didn't tell him to bet nothing. But even then, what is a little lousy bet? Gawd bless mah soul! The money I done bet in *my* life and all foh big stakes on them race tracks in Montreal. What do you-all know about life and big stakes?" Banjo waved his hand in a tipsy sweep as if he saw the old world of race-track bettors before him.

"This no Montreal; this Marseilles," replied Latnah, "and you very fool to play for nothing. You need money, you bitch-commer ——"

"Now quit you' noise. Ise going with you, but I ain't gwine let you ride me. Get me? No woman nevah ride me yet and you ain't gwine to ride me, neither."

He stood up, resting the banjo on a table.

"And it not me doing the riding, I'm sure," said Latnah.

"Come on, fellahs; let's get outa this. Let's take our hump away from here," said Banjo.

Chapter 3

Malty Turned Down

Banjo had taken Latnah as she came, easily. It seemed the natural thing to him to fall on his feet, that Latnah should take the place of the other girl to help him now that he needed help. Whatever happened, happened. Life for him was just one different thing of a sort following the other.

Malty was more emotional and amorously gentle than Banjo. He was big, strong, and jolly-natured, and everybody pronounced him a good fellow. He had made it easy for the gang to accept Latnah, when she came to them different from the girls of the Ditch. But there was just the shadow of a change in the manner of the gang toward her since she had taken up steadily with Banjo.

"Some of us nevah know when wese got a good thing," said Malty to Banjo as they sat up on the breakwater, waiting to be signaled to lunch on a ship. "I think youse the kind a man that don't appreciate a fust-rate thing because he done got it too easy."

"Ise a gone-fool nigger with any honey-sweet mamma," replied Banjo, "but I ain't gwina bury mah head under no woman's skirt and let her cackle ovah me."

"All that bellyaching about a skirt," retorted Malty. "We was all made and bohn under it."

Banjo laughed and said: "Easy come, easy go. Tha's the life-living way. We got met up easy and she's taking it easy, and Ise taking it easy, too."

A black seaman came on deck and signaled them. They hurried down from the breakwater and up the gangway.

Latnah was the first woman that Malty and his pals had ever met actually on the beach. Malty first became aware of her one day on the deck of a ship from which he and Bugsy and Ginger had been driven by a Negro steward.

"G'way from here, you lazy no-'count bums," the steward had said. "I wouldn't even give you-all a bone to chew on. Instead a gwine along back to work, you lay down on the beach a bumming mens who am trying to make a raspactable living. You think if you-all lay down sweet and lazy in you' skin while we others am wrastling with salt water, wese gwine to fatten you moh in you' laziness? G'way from this heah white man's broad nigger bums."

The boys were very hungry. For some days they had been eating off a coal boat with a very friendly crew. But it had left the moorings and anchored out in the bay, and now they could not get to it. Irritated, but rather amused by the steward's onslaught, they shuffled off from the ship a little down the quay. But Malty happened to look behind him and see Latnah waving. He went back with his pals and they found a mess of good food waiting for them. Latnah had spoken in their behalf, and one of the mates had told the chief steward to feed them.

The boys saw her often after that. They met her at irregular intervals in the Bum Square and down the docks. One day on the docks she got into a row with one of the women who sold fancy goods on the boats. The woman was trying to tempt one of the mates into buying a fine piece of Chinese silk, but the mate was more tempted by Latnah.

"Go away from me," the mate said. "I don't want a bloody thing you've got."

The woman was angry, but such rebuffs were not strange to her. To carry on her business successfully she had to put up with them. She had seen at once that the officer was interested in Latnah, and in passing she swung her valise against Latnah's side.

"Oh, you stupid woman!" cried Latnah, holding her side.

"You dirty black whore," returned the woman.

"You bigger white whore," retorted Latnah. "I know you sell everything you've got I see you on ship." And Latnah pulled open her eye at the woman and made a face.

Later, when Latnah left the ship, she again met the woman with her man on the dock. The man was a slim tout-like type, and he tried to rough-handle Latnah. But Malty happened along then and bounced the fellow with his elbow and said, "Now what you trying to do with this woman?" The man muttered something in a language unfamiliar to Malty and slunk off with his woman. He hadn't understood what Malty had said, either, but his bounce and menacing tone had been clear enough.

"I glad you come," said Latnah to Malty. "I thank you plenty, plenty, for if you no come I would been in big risk, I would stick him."

She slipped from her bosom a tiny argent-headed dagger, exquisitely sharp-pointed, and showed it to Malty. He recoiled with fear and Latnah laughed. A razor or a knife would not have touched him strangely. But a dagger! It was as if Latnah had produced a serpent from her bosom. It was not an instrument familiar to his world, his people, his life. It reminded him of the strange, fierce, fascinating tales he had heard of Oriental strife and daggers dealing swift death.

Suddenly another side of Latnah was revealed to him and she stood out more clearly, different from the strange creature of quick gestures and nimble body who panhandled the boats and brought them gifts of costly cigarettes. She was different from the women of his race. She laughed differently, quietly, subtly. The women of his

race could throw laughter like a clap of thunder. And their style, the movement of their hips, was like that of fine, vigorous, four-footed animals. Latnah's was gliding like a serpent. But she stirred up a powerfully sweet and strange desire in him.

She made him remember the Indian coolies that he had known in his West Indian Island when he was a boy. They were imported indentured laborers and worked on the big sugar plantation that bordered on his seaside village. The novelty of their strangeness never palled on the village. The men with their turbans and the loin-cloths that the villagers called coolie-wrapper. The women weighted down with heavy silver bracelets on arms, neck and ankles, their long glossy hair half hidden by the cloth that the natives called coolie-red. Perhaps they had unconsciously influenced the Negroes to retain their taste for bright color and ornaments that the Protestant missionaries were trying to destroy.

Every 1st of August, the great native holiday, anniversary of the emancipation of the British West Indian slaves in 1834, the Negroes were joined by some Indians in their sports on the playground. The Indians did athletic stunts and sleight-of-hand tricks, such as unwinding yards of ribbon out of their mouths, cleverly making coins disappear and finding them in the pockets of the natives, and fire-eating.

Some of the Indians were regarded as great workers in magic. The Negroes believed that Indian magic was more powerful than their Obeah. Certain Indians had given up the laborious hoeing and digging of plantation work to practice the black art among the natives. And they were much more influential and prosperous than the Negro doctors of Obeah.

The two peoples did not mix in spite of the friendly contact. There were, however, rare instances of Indians who detached themselves from their people and became of the native community by marrying Negro women. But the Indian women remained more conservative. Malty remembered one striking exception of a beautiful Indian girl. She went to the Sunday-evening class that was conducted by the wife of the Scotch missionary. And she became a convert to Christianity and was married to the Negro schoolmaster.

He also remembered a little Indian girl who was for some time in his class at grade school. Her skin was velvet, smooth and dark like mahogany. She was the cleverest child in the class, but always silent, unsmiling, and mysterious. He had never forgotten her.

Malty's boyhood memories undoubtedly played a part in his conduct toward Latnah. He could not think of her as he did about the women of the Ditch. He felt as if he had long lost sight of his exotic, almost forgotten schoolmate, to find her become a woman on the cosmopolitan shore of Marseilles.

After her encounter with the peddling woman, Latnah attached herself more closely to the beach boys. Maybe (not being a woman of the Ditch, with a tout to fight for her) she felt insecure and wanted to belong to a group or maybe it was just her woman's instinct to be under the protection of man. She was accepted. With their wide experience and passive philosophy of life, beach boys are adepts at meeting, understanding, and accepting everything.

Latnah was following precisely the same line of living as they. She came as a pal. She was made one of them. Whatever personal art she might use as a woman to increase her chances was her own affair. Their luck also depended primarily on personality. Often they traveled devious and separate routes in pursuit of a "handout," and sometimes had to wander into strange culs-de-sac to obtain it. It did not matter if Latnah was not inclined to be amorous with any of them. Perhaps it was better so. She was more useful to them as a pal. Love was cheap in the Ditch. It cost only the price of a bottle of red wine among the "leetah" girls, as the beach boys called the girls of Boody Lane, because their short-time value was fixed at about the price of a liter of cheap red wine.

Malty had wanted Latnah for himself. But she had never given him any chance. She remained just one of the gang.

The boys were rather flattered that she stayed with them and shunned the Arab-speaking men, with whom she was identified by language and features. When Banjo arrived at Marseilles, Latnah's place on her own terms among the boys was a settled thing. But when, falling in love with Banjo at first sight, she took him as her lover, they were all surprised and a little piqued. And the latent desire in Malty was stirred afresh.

After their lunch, Banjo and Malty went across the suspension bridge to the docks on the other side. They were joined by Dengel, who approached them rocking rhythmically, now pausing a moment to balance himself in his tracks. He was much blacker than Malty, a shining anthracite. And his face was moist and his large eyes soft with liquor.

Dengel was always in a state of heavenly inebriety; sauntering along in a soft mist of liquor. He was never worried about food. The joy of his being was the wine of the docks. He always knew of some barrel conveniently placed that could be raided without trouble.

"Come drink wine," he said, "if you like sweet wine. We find one barrel, good, good, very sweet."

Banjo and Malty followed him. In a rather obscure position against a freight car they found Ginger and Bugsy and three Senegalese armed with rubber tubes and swilling and swaying over a barrel of sweet wine. Malty got his tube out of the knapsack that he always toted with him, and Ginger handed Banjo his. Banjo bent over the barrel, spreading his feet away the better to imbibe. He was a long time sucking up the stuff. And when he removed his mouth from the tube, he brought up a long rich and ripe sound from belly to throat, smacked his lips, and droned, "Gawd in glory, ef this baby ain't some sweet boozing!"

"Tell it to Uncle Sam," said Bugsy.

"Tell it and shout nevah no moh," added Ginger.

"Nevah no moh is indeed mah middle name," said Banjo, "but brown me ef I'm a telling-it-too-much kind a darky. I ain't got no head for remembering too much back, nor no tongue for long-suffering delivery. I'm just a right-there, right-here baby, yestiday and today and tomorraw and forevah. All right-there right-here for me now."

"Hallelujah! Lemme crown you. You done said a mou'ful a nigger stuff," said Ginger.

After they had quenched their craving they returned to the far, little-frequented end of the breakwater and lay lazily in the sun. There Latnah, her morning's hustling finished, found them. Her yellow blouse was soiled and she slipped it off and began washing it. That was a sign for the boys to clean up. All except Dengel, the only Senegalese that had crossed over to the breakwater; he was feeling too sweet in his skin for any exertion. The boys stripped to the waist and began to wash their shirts. Bugsy went down between two cement blocks and brought up a can he had secreted there with a hunk of white soap. Finished washing, they spread the clothes on the blocks. Soon the vertical burning rays of the sun would suck them dry.

Malty suggested that they should swim. The beach boys often bathed down the docks, making bathing-suits of their drawers. And sometimes, when they had the extreme end of the breakwater to themselves, they went in naked. They did this time, cautioning Dengel to keep watch for them.

Latnah went in too. Malty was the best swimmer. He made strong crawl strokes. He was also an excellent diver. When he was a boy in the West Indies, he used to dive from the high deck railings for the coins that the tourists threw into the water. When he got going about wharf life in the West Indian ports of Kingston, Santiago, Port of Spain, he told stories of winning dollar bills in competition with other boys diving for coins

from the bridges of ships. Of how he would struggle under water against another boy while the coin was whirling down away from them. How the cleverest boy would get it or both lose it when they could not stay down under any longer and came up breathless, blowing a multitude of bubbles.

Latnah was a beautiful diver and shot graceful like a serpent through the water. A thrill shivered through Malty's blood. He had never dreamed that her body was so lovely, limber, and sinewy. He dived down under her and playfully caught at her feet. She kicked him in the mouth, and it was like the shock of a kiss wrestled for and stolen, flooding his being with a rush of sweetly-warm sensation.

Latnah swam away and, hoisting herself upon a block, she gamboled about like a gazelle. Malty and Banjo started to swim round to her, bantering and beating up heaps of water, with Malty leading, when Dengel called: "Attention! Police!" His sharp native eye had discerned two policemen far away up the eastern side of the breakwater, cycling toward them. The swimmers dashed for their clothes.

In a few moments the policemen rode down and, throwing a perfunctory glance at the half-dressed bathers, they circled round and went off again. "*Salauds!*" Dengel said. "Always after *us*, but scared of the real criminals."

For the rest of the afternoon they basked in the sun on the breakwater. With its cooling they returned to the Place de la Joliette, where the group broke up to forage separately for food.

They came together again in the evening in a rendezvous bar of a somber alley, just a little bit out of the heart of the Ditch. Banjo had his instrument and was playing a little saccharine tune that he had brought over from America:

"I wanna go where you go, do what you do,
Love when you love, then I'll be happy …"

The souvenir of Latnah's foot in his mouth was a warm fever in Malty's flesh. And the red wine that he was drinking turned the fever sweet. It was a big night. The barkeeper, a thin Spanish woman, was busy setting up quart bottles of wine on the tables. Only black drinkers filled the little bar, and their wide-open, humorous, frank white eyes lighted up the place more glowingly than the dirty dim electric flare.

Senegalese, Sudanese, Somalese,[5] Nigerians, West Indians, Americans, blacks from everywhere, crowded together, talking strange dialects, but, brought together, understanding one another by the language of wine.

"I'll follow you, sweetheart, and share your little love-nest.
I wanna go where you go …"

Malty had managed to get next to Latnah, and put his arm round her waist so quietly that it was some moments before she became aware of it. Then she tried to remove his arm and ease away, but he pressed against her thigh.

"Don't," she said. "I no like."

"What's the matter?" murmured Malty, thickly. "Kaint you like a fellah a lil'l' bit?"

He pressed closer against her and said, "Gimmie a kiss."

She felt his strong desire. "*Cochon*, no. Go away from me." She dug him sharply in the side with her elbow.

Notes

[5] *Somalese* Somali.

"You' mout' it stink. I wouldn't kiss a slut like you," said Malty, and he got up and gave Latnah a hard push.

She fell off the bench and picked herself up, crying. She was not hurt by the fall, but by Malty's sudden change of attitude. Malty glowered at her boozily. Banjo stopped playing, went up to him, and shook his fist in his face.

"Wha's matter you messing around mah woman?"

"Go chase you'self. I knowed her long before you did, when she was running after me."

"You're a dawggone liar!"

"And youse another!"

"Ef it's a fight youse looking for, come on outside."

Banjo and Malty staggered off. At the door, Malty stumbled and nearly fell, and Banjo caught his arm and helped him into the street. All the boys crowded to the door and flowed out into the alley, to watch. The antagonists sparred. Malty hiccoughed ominously, swayed forward, and, falling into Banjo's arms, they both went down heavily, in a helpless embrace, on the paving-stones.

Second Part[6]

Chapter 16

The "Blue Cinema"

Ray had met a Negro student from Martinique, to whom the greatest glory of the island was that the Empress Josephine was born there. That event placed Martinique above all the other islands of the Antilles in importance.

"I don't see anything in that for *you* to be so proud about," said Ray." She was not colored."

"Oh no, but she was Créole, and in Martinique we are rather Créole than Negro. We are proud of the Empress in Martinique. Down there the best people are very distinguished and speak a pure French, not anything like this vulgar Marseilles French."

Ray asked him if he had ever heard of René Maran's *Batouala*. He replied that the sale of *Batouala* had been banned in the colony and sniggered approvingly. Ray wondered about the truth of that; he had never heard any mention of it.

"It was a naughty book, very strong, very strong," said the student, defending the act.

They were in a café on the Canebière. That evening Ray had a rendezvous at the African Bar with another student, an African from the Ivory Coast, and asked the Martiniquan to go with him to be introduced. He refused, saying that he did not want to mix with the Senegalese and that the African Bar was in the *bas-fonds*. He warned Ray about mixing with the Senegalese.

"They are not like us," he said. "The whites would treat Negroes better in this town if it were not for the Senegalese. Before the war and the coming of the Senegalese it was splendid in France for Negroes. We were liked, we were respected, but now ——"

"It's just about the same with the white Americans" said Ray. "You must judge civilization by its general attitude toward primitive peoples, and not by the exceptional cases. You can't get away from the Senegalese and other black Africans any more than

Notes

[6] The complete "Second Part" consists of chapters 6–17.

you can from the fact that our forefathers were slaves. We have the same thing in the States. The Northern Negroes are stand-offish toward the Southern Negroes and toward the West Indians, who are not as advanced as they in civilized superficialities. We educated Negroes are talking a lot about a racial renaissance. And I wonder how we're going to get it. On one side we're up against the world's arrogance – a mighty cold hard white stone thing. On the other the great sweating army – our race. It's the common people, you know, who furnish the bone and sinew and salt of any race or nation. In the modern race of life we're merely beginners. If this renaissance we're talking about is going to be more than a sporadic and scabby thing, we'll have to get down to our racial roots to create it."

"I believe in a racial renaissance," said the student, "but not in going back to savagery."

"Getting down to our native roots and building up from our own people," said. Ray, "is not savagery. It is culture."

"I can't see that," said the student.

"You are like many Negro intellectuals who are bellyaching about race," said Ray. "What's wrong with you all is your education. You get a white man's education and learn to despise your own people. You read biased history of the whites conquering the colored and primitive peoples, and it thrills you just as it does a white boy belonging to a great white nation.

"Then when you come to maturity you realize with a shock that you don't and can't belong to the white race. All your education and achievements cannot put you in the intimate circles of the whites and give you a white man's full opportunity. However advanced, clever, and cultivated you are, you will have the distinguishing adjective of 'colored' before your name. And instead of accepting it proudly and manfully, most of you are soured and bitter about it – especially you mixed-bloods.

"You're a lost crowd, you educated Negroes, and you will only find yourself in the roots of your own people. You can't choose as your models the haughty-minded educated white youths of a society living solid on its imperial conquests. Such pampered youths can afford to despise the sweating white brutes of the lower orders.

"If you were sincere in your feelings about racial advancement, you would turn for example to whites of a different type. You would study the Irish cultural and social movement. You would turn your back on all these tiresome clever European novels and read about the Russian peasants, the story and struggle of their lowly, patient, hard-driven life, and the great Russian novelists who described it up to the time of the Russian Revolution. You would learn all you can about Ghandi and what he is doing for the common hordes of India. You would be interested in the native African dialects and, though you don't understand, be humble before their simple beauty instead of despising them."

The mulatto student was not moved in his determination not to go to the African Bar, and so Ray went alone. He loved to hear the African dialects sounding around him. The dialects were so rich and round and ripe like soft tropical fruit, as if they were fashioned to eliminate all things bitter and harsh to express. They tasted like brown unrefined cane sugar – Sousou, Bambara, Woloff, Fula, Dindie …

The *patron* of the African Bar pointed out men of the different tribes to Ray. It was easy to differentiate the types of the interior from those of the port towns, for they bore tribal marks on their faces. Among civilized people they were ashamed, most of them, of this mutilation of which their brothers of the towns under direct European administration were free; but, because tattooing was the fashion among seamen, they were not ashamed to have their bodies pricked and figured all over with the souvenirs of the brothels of civilization.

It was no superior condescension, no feeling of race solidarity or Back-to-Africa demonstration – no patriotic effort whatsoever – that made Ray love the environment of the common black drifters. He loved it with the poetical enthusiasm of the vagabond black that he himself was. After all, he had himself lived the rough-and-tumble laboring life, and the most precious souvenirs of it were the joyful friendships that he had made among his pals. There was no intellectual friendship to be compared with them.

It was always interesting to compare the African with the West Indian and American Negroes. Indeed, he found the Africans of the same class as the New World Negroes less "savage" and more "primitive." The Senegalese drunk was a much finer and more tractable animal than the American Negro drunk. And although the Senegalese were always loudly quarreling and fighting among themselves, they always made use of hands, feet, and head (butting was a great art among them) and rarely of a steel weapon as did the American and West Indian Negroes. The colored touts that were reputed to be dangerous gunmen were all from the French West Indies. The few Senegalese who belonged to the sweet brotherhood were disquietingly simple, as if they had not the slightest comprehension of the social stigma attaching to them.

At the African Bar the conversation turned on the hostile feeling that existed between the French West Indians and the native Africans. The *patron* said that the West Indians felt superior because many of them were appointed as petty officials in the African colonies and were often harder on the natives than the whites.

"*Fils d'esclaves! Fils d'esclaves!*" cried a Senegalese sergeant. "Because they have a chance to be better instructed than we, they think we are the savages and that they are 'white' Negroes. Why, they are only the descendants of the slaves that our forefathers sold."

"They got more advantages than we and they think they're the finest and most important Negroes in the world," said the student from the Ivory Coast.

"They're crazy," said the *patron*. "The most important Negroes in the world and the best off are American Negroes."

"That's not true! That can't be true!" said a chorus of voices.

"I think Negroes are treated worse in America than in any other country," said the student. "They lynch Negroes in America."

"They do," said the *patron*, "but it's not what you imagine it. It's not an everyday affair and the lynchings are pulled off in the Southern parts of the country, which are very backward."

"The Southern States are a powerful unit of the United States," said Ray, "and you mustn't forget that nine-tenths of American Negroes live in them."

"More people are murdered in one year in Marseilles than they lynch in ten years in America," said the *patron*.

"But all that comes under the law in spite of the comedy of extenuating circumstances," said Ray, "while lynch law is its own tribunal."

"And they Jim Crow all the Negroes in America," said the student.

"What is Jim Crow?" asked the Senegalese sergeant.

"Negroes can't ride first class in the trains nor in the same tramcars with white people, no matter how educated and rich they are. They can't room in the same hotels or eat in the same restaurants or sit together in the same theaters. Even the parks are closed to them ——"

"That's only in the Southern States and not in the North," the *patron* cut in.

"But Ray has just told us that ninety per cent of the Negroes live in those states," said the student, "and that there are about fifteen millions in America. Well then, the big majority don't have any privileges at all. There is no democracy for them. Because

you went to New York and happened to make plenty of money to come back here and open a business, you are over-proud of America and try to make the country out finer than it is, although the Negroes there are living in a prison."

"You don't understand," said the *patron*. "I wasn't in the North alone. I was in the old slave states also. I have traveled all over America and I tell you the American Negro is more go-getting than Negroes anywhere else in the world – the Antilles or any part of Africa. Just as the average white American is a long way better off than the European. Look at all these fellows here. What can they do if they don't go to sea as firemen? Nothing but stay here and become *maquereaux*.[7] The Italians hog all the jobs on the docks, and the Frenchman will take Armenians and Greeks in the factories because they are white, and leave us. The French won't come straight out and tell us that they treat us differently because we are black, but we know it. I prefer the American white man. He is boss and he tells you straight where he can use you. He is a brute, but he isn't a hypocrite."

The student, perplexed, realizing that from the earnestness of the café proprietor's tone there was truth in what he said, appealed to Ray in face of the contradictory facts.

"You are both right," Ray said to the student. "All the things you say about the Negro in the States are facts and what he says about the Negro's progress is true. You see race prejudice over there drives the Negroes together to develop their own group life. American Negroes have their own schools, churches, newspapers, theaters, cabarets, restaurants, hotels. They work for the whites, but they have their own social group life, an intense, throbbing, vital thing in the midst of the army of whites milling around them. There is nothing like it in the West Indies nor in Africa, because there you don't have a hundred-million-strong white pressure that just carries the Negro group along with it. Here in Europe you have more social liberties than Negroes have in America, but you have no warm group life. You need colored women for that. Women that can understand us as human beings and not as wild over-sexed savages. And you haven't any. The successful Negro in Europe always marries a white woman, and I have noticed in almost every case that it is a white woman inferior to himself in brains and physique. The energy of such a Negro is lost to his race and goes to build up some decaying white family."

"But look at all the mulattoes you have in America," said the student. "White men are continually going with colored women."

"Because the colored women like it as much as the white men," replied Ray.

"Ray!" exclaimed Goosey who had entered the café, "you are scandalous and beneath contempt."

"That's all right, Goosey. I know that the American Negro press says that American colored women have no protection from the lust and passion of white men on account of the Southern state laws prohibiting marriage between colored and white and I know that you believe that. But that is newspaper truth and no more real than the crackers shouting that white women live in fear and trembling of black rapists. The days of chivalry are stone dead, and the world today is too enlightened about sex to be fooled by white or black propaganda.

"In the West Indies, where there are no prohibitory laws, the Europeans have all the black and mulatto concubines they need. In Africa, too. Woman is woman all over the world, no matter what her color is. She is cast in a passive rôle and she worships the active success of man and rewards it with her body. The colored woman

Notes

[7] *maquereaux* (French) mackerels.

is no different from the white in this. If she is not inhibited by race feeling she'll give herself to the white man because he stands for power and property. Property controls sex.

"When you understand that, Goosey, you'll understand the meaning of the struggle between class and class, nation and nation, race and race. You'll understand that society chases after power just as woman chases after property, because society is feminine. And you'll see that the white races today are ahead of the colored because their women are emancipated, and that there is greater material advancement among those white nations whose women have the most freedom.

"Understand this and you will understand why the white race tries so hard to suppress the colored races. You'll understand the root of the relation between colored women and white men and why white men will make love to colored women but will not marry them."

"But white women marry colored men, all the same," said Goosey. "White women feel better toward colored people than white men."

"You're a fool," replied Ray. "White men are what their women make them. That's plain enough to see in the South. White women hate Negroes because the colored women steal their men and so many of them are society wives in name only. You know what class of white women marry colored men."

"There are Negroes in America who had their fortunes made by white women," said Goosey.

"There *are* exceptions – white women with money who are fed up. But the majority are what I said a while ago. … Show me a white woman or man who can marry a Negro and belong to respectable society in London or New York or any place. I can understand these ignorant black men marrying broken-down white women because they are under the delusion that there is some superiority in the white skin that has suppressed and bossed it over them all their lives. But I can't understand an intelligent race-conscious man doing it. Especially a man who is bellyaching about race rights. He is the one who should exercise a certain control and self-denial of his desires. Take Senghor and his comrades in propaganda for example. They are the bitterest and most humorless of propagandists and they are all married to white women. It is as if the experience has over-soured them. As if they thought it would bring them closer to the white race, only to realize too late that it couldn't.

"Why marry, I ask? There are so many other ways of doing it. Europe can afford some of its excess women to successful Negroes and that may help to keep them loyal to conventional ideals. America 'keeps us in our place' and in our race. Which may be better for the race in the long run.

"The Jews have kept intact, although they were scattered all over the world, and it was easier for them than for Negroes to lose themselves.

"To me the most precious thing about human life is difference. Like flowers in a garden, different kinds for different people to love. I am not against miscegenation. It produces splendid and interesting types. But I should not crusade for it because I should hate to think of a future in which the identity of the black race in the Western World should be lost in miscegenation."

Six distinguished whites entered the café, putting an end to the conversation. They were the two gentlemen bums, three other men and one woman. The woman saw Ray and greeted him effusively with surprise.

"Oh, Ray, this is where you ran away to hide yourself, leaving all the artists to mourn for their fine model."

"But she is American," the Ivory Coast student, pop-eyed at the woman's friendly manner, whispered to the *patron*.

"Sure," he answered, in malicious triumph. "Did you think there were no human relations between white and black in America, that they were just like two armies fighting against each other all the time?"

Ray did not know who the woman was, whether she was American or European. She spoke French and German as readily as she spoke English. He had met her at the studio of a Swiss painter in Paris (a man who carried a title on his card) when he was posing there, and she had made polite and agreeable conversation with him while he posed. Later, he saw her twice at cabarets in Montmartre, where he had been taken by bohemian artists, and she had not snubbed him.

The gentlemen bums were as surprised as the Ivory Coast student (but differently) when the woman greeted Ray. They had met the group and were going through the town with them. The leading spirit of the party had desired to stop in the bar when he was told that it was a rendezvous for Negroes.

He was a stout, audacious-looking man, a tireless international traveler, who liked to visit every country in the world except the unpleasantly revolutionary ones. The accidental meeting was a piquant thing for Ray, because he had heard strange talk of the man before. Of celebrations of occult rites and barbaric saturnalia with the tempo of nocturnal festivities regulated by the crack of whips. A bonfire made of a bungalow to show the beauties of the landscape when the night was dark. And a splendid stalwart, like one of the Sultan of Morocco's guards, brought from Africa, as a result of which he had been involved in trouble with governmental authorities in Europe.

Certainly, Ray had long been desirous of seeing this personage who had been gossiped about so much, for he had a penchant for exotic sins. Indeed, a fine Jewish soul with a strong Jeremiah flame in him had warned Ray in Paris about what he chose to call his cultivation of the heathenish atavistic propensities of the subterranean personality. The Jewish idealist thought that Ray had a talent and a personality so healthily austere at times that they should be fostered for the uplift of his race to the rigorous exclusion of the dark and perhaps damnable artistic urge. But …

Well, here was this bold, bad, unregenerate man of whom he had heard so much, and who did not make any deeper impression than a picturesque woman of Ray's acquaintance, who carried her excessive maternal feelings under a cloak of aggressive masculinity.

The two other men were Americans. The party was bound for any place in the Mediterranean basin that the leader could work up any interest for. They were spending the night in Marseilles and wanted to see the town. The gentlemen bums had taken them through Boody Lane where they had had their hats snatched and had paid to get them back. The hectic setting of Boody Lane with the girls and painted boys in pyjamas posing in their wide-open holes in the wall, the soldiers and sailors and blue-overalled youths loitering through, had given the party the impression that there were many stranger, weirder and unmentionable things to see in the quarter.

"I tell them there is nothing else to show," said the Britisher, speaking generally and to Ray in particular. "Paris is a show city. This is just a rough town like any other port town, where you'll see rough stuff if you stick round long enough. I can take you to the *boîtes de nuit*, but they're less interesting than they are in Paris."

"Oh no, not the cabarets. They bore me so," said the woman. "We're just running away from them."

She was tall and of a very pale whiteness. She seated herself on a chair in a posture of fatigue. Ray remembered that strange tired attitude of hers each time he had seen her. Yet her eyes were brimful of life and she was always in an energetic flutter about something.

"There's nothing else here," the Britisher apologized to the leader of the party, "but the *maisons fermées* and the 'Blue Cinema' and they are all better in Paris."

"The 'Blue Cinema,'" the leader repeated casually. "I've never seen the thing. We might as well see it."

He ordered some drinks, cognac and port wine, which they all had standing at the bar. A white tout drifted into the bar. Three girls from Boody Lane followed. Another tout, this time a mulatto from the Antilles, and after him two black ones from Dakar. More girls of the Ditch. The news had spread round that there were distinguished people at the café.

"We'll go and have dinner and see the 'Blue Cinema' afterward," said the leader.

Sitting on the terrace, a Senegalese in a baboon attitude was flicking his tongue at everything and everybody that passed by. He reclined, lazily contented, in a chair tilted against the wall. One of the girls, following the party as they came out, called him by name and, leaning against the chair, fondled him. He smiled lasciviously, his tongue strangely visible in his pure ebony face.

Ray, turning his head, saw in the face of the woman the same disgust he felt. Those monkey tricks were the special trade-marks of the great fraternity of civilized touts and gigolos, born and trained to prey on the carnal passions of humanity.

A primitive person could not play the game as neatly as they. During a winter spent at Nice, he had found the cocottes and gigolos monkeying on the promenade more interesting to watch than the society people. The white monkeys were essential to the great passion play of life to understudy the parts of those who were holding the stage by power of wealth, place, name, title, and class – everything but the real thing.

And as there were civilized white monkeys, so were there black monkeys, created by the conquests of civilization, learning to imitate the white and even beating them at their game. He recalled the colored sweetmen and touts and girls with whom he had been familiar in America, some who lived in the great obscure region of the boundary between white and black. Following as they did their own shady paths, he had never been strongly repelled by their way of living, because it was a rôle that they played admirably, scavengers feeding on the backwash of the broad streaming traffic of American life. They were not very different from the monkeys of the French Antilles who carried on their antics side by side with the Provençals and Corsicans and others of the Mediterranean breed. They had acquired enough of civilized tricks to play their parts fittingly.

But not so the Africans, who were closer to the bush, the jungle, where their primitive sex life had been controlled by ancient tribal taboos. Within those taboos they had courted their women, married and made families. And so it was not natural for them, so close to the tradition of paying in cash or kind or hard labor for the joy of a woman, to live the life of the excrescences attaching like mushrooms to the sexual life of civilization. Released from their taboos, turned loose in an atmosphere of prostitution and perversion and trying to imitate the white monkeys, it was no wonder they were very ugly.

After the dinner the younger American created a problem. He was of middle build, wearing a fine New York suit, reddish-brown stuff. He was the clean-shaven, clean-cut type that might have been either a graduate student looking at the world with the confident air of one who is able to go anywhere, or a successful salesman of high-class goods. He wore no horn-rimmed glasses to hide his clear-seeing eyes, and his jaw was developing into the kind common to the men who are earnest, big, and prosperous in the ideals of Americanism.

"But this 'Blue Cinema,' what is it, really?" he demanded.

"I suppose it is a cinematic version of the picture cards the guides try to sell you in the street," the leader answered. "You don't have to go, you know."

"Oh, I'd like to see the thing, all right," replied the young man, "but – are there colored or white persons in the picture?"

"White, I suppose. The colored people are not as advanced and inventive as we in such matters. Excepting what we teach them," the leader added, facetiously; "they often beat us at our game when they learn."

"But she isn't going, is she?" The American indicated the young woman. "They won't let her in a *maison de rendezvous*."

"Most certainly I am. Am I not one of the party? There isn't anything I am not old enough to see, if I want to. Do you want to discriminate against me because I am a woman?"

"They'll let her in in any place if we pay the price," said the Britisher.

"But she can't go if he is going." The young man looked at Ray.

"Oh, Ray!" The young woman laughed. "That's what it's all about. You needn't worry about him. He has posed in the nude for my friends and he was a perfectly-behaved *sauvage*." She stressed the word broadly.

"That's all right," said Ray to the young man. "I am not going if you go. I am full of prejudices myself."

"Well, good night," the young man said. Abruptly he left the party.

"My friend has done his bit for the honor of the Great Nordic race," the remaining American remarked.

Nobody thought that the "Blue Cinema" would be really entertaining. The leader was blasé and desired anything that was merely different. But they were all curious, except the gentlemen bums, who had seen the show several times as guides and were indifferent. It was very high-priced, costing fifty francs for each person.

The fee of admission was paid. In the large dim hall they were the only audience. …

Before the first reel had finished the leader asked the young woman if she preferred to go.

"No, I'd rather see it out," she said.

There was no brutal, beastly, orgiastic rite that could rouse terror or wild-animal feeling. It was a calculating, cold, naked abortion.

The "Blue Cinema" struck them with the full force of a cudgel, beating them down into the depths of disgust. Ray wondered if the men who made it had a moral purpose in mind: to terrify and frighten away all who saw it from that phase of life. Or was it possible that there were human beings whose instincts were so brutalized and blunted in the unsparing struggle of modern living that they needed that special stimulating scourge of ugliness. Perhaps. The "Blue Cinema," he had heard, was a very flourishing business.

He was sitting against a heavy red velvet curtain. Toward the end of the show the curtain was slightly agitated, as if someone[8] on the other side had stirred it. He caught the curtain aside and saw some half a dozen Chinese, conspicuous by their discolored teeth and unlovely bland smiles, standing among a group of girls in a kind of alcove-room which the curtain divided from the cinema hall. The woman of the party saw them too, before Ray could pull the curtain back, and gave a little scream. The Chinese there did not surprise Ray. He knew that they were hired to perform, like monkeys. There were other houses that specialized in Arabs, Corsicans, and Negroes when they were in demand.

Notes

[8] *Original reads*: some one [ed.].

As they were leaving the lady president of affairs appeared and suggested their seeing also the tableaux vivants.

"Oh no, the dead ones were enough," replied the leader.

"Why did you scream?" the leader asked, roughly, when the party was in the street again.

"It was my fault," said Ray. "I pulled the curtain back and she suddenly saw a roomful of people behind it."

"That was nothing. I saw them, too, as you did, but I didn't scream." He turned on her again. "You say you want to go to any place a man goes and stand anything a man can stand, and yet you scream over a few filthy Chinese."

"I'm sorry," she said. "It was out before I could check myself."

"I suggested leaving in the beginning, but you insisted on staying it out; I didn't expect you to scream. Did you enjoy it?"

"It was *so* ugly," she said, adding: "I think I'll go to the hotel. You men can stay, but I'm finished for tonight."

The leader laughed and asked the American to take her home.

"Oh, I don't need an escort. I'll just take a taxi," she said.

"You'd better not go alone. The taxis are not safe this time of night," said Ray.

"I don't care whether you need an escort or not. *I* am taking you to the hotel," said the American.

They walked to the main street and Ray hailed a green Mattei taxicab. "They are run by a big company and are safe," he said. "The unsafe ones here hang around the shady places – just as in New York and Chicago. Some of the private drivers are touts, and as you never know which is which, I always recommend my friends to ride with the Trust."

"Where shall I find you fellows afterward?" the American asked.

"Where now?" said the leader. "After this 'blue' refinement I should like to go to the roughest and dirtiest place we can find."

"I think Banjo's hangout down Bum Square way is just the place we are looking for," said Ray.

"That's the place," the Britisher agreed.

They told the American how to find it.

"Whether it is blue or any other color of the rainbow, the cinema is for the mob," said the leader. "It will never be an art."

"I don't agree," said Ray. "Pictorial pantomime can be just as fine an art as any. What about Charlie Chaplin?"

"He's an exception. A conscientious artist with a popular appeal."

"All real art is an exception," said Ray. "You can't condemn an art wholesale because inartistic people make a bad business of it. The same condition exists in the other arts. Everybody is in a wild business race and the conscientious workers are few. It's a crazy circle of blue-cinema people, poor conscientious artists, cynical professionals and an indifferent public."

"You know I like the cinema for exactly the reverse of its object," said the leader. "Because it's about the easiest way to see what people really are under the acting."

Ray laughed and said: "The 'Blue Cinema' was just that," and he added: "Some of us don't need the cinema, though, to show us up. We are so obvious."

In the Bum Square they ran into Banjo with his instrument.

"Where you coming from?" Ray asked.

"Just finish performing and said *bonne nuit* to a kelt."

The leader was curious to know what "kelt" meant.

Banjo and Ray exchanged glances and grinned.

"That's a word in black freemasonry," explained Ray, "but I don't object to initiating you if Banjo doesn't."

"Shoot," said Banjo.

"In the States," said Ray, "we Negroes have humorous little words of our own with which we replace unpleasant stock words. And we often use them when we are among white people and don't want them to know just what we are referring to, especially when it is anything delicate or taboo between the races. For example, we have words like ofay, pink, fade, spade, Mr. Charlie, cracker, peckawood, hoojah, and so on – nice words and bitter. The stock is always increasing because as the whites get on to the old words we invent new ones. 'Kelt' I picked up in Marseilles. I think Banjo brought it here and made it popular among the boys. I don't know if it has anything to do with 'keltic.'"

"Oh no," said the leader. "Kelt is a real word of Scottish origin, I think."

"That might explain how Banjo got it, then. He used to live in Canada."

The party went to Banjo's hangout and the whole gang was there drinking and dancing.

The American joined them very late, worried about his younger friend. A panhandling Swede had accosted him in the Bum Square and told him that he had seen his friend in Joliette, helplessly drunk and getting into a taxicab with a couple of mean-looking touts. The American had gone at once to his friend's hotel, to Joliette, and then had searched in all the bars of the quarter, but could not obtain any information about him.

The next day he was found in a box car on a lonely quay beyond Joliette, stripped of everything and wearing a dirty rag of a loin-cloth for his only clothing. The sudden and forced reversal to a savage state had shocked him temporarily daft.

Chapter 17

Breaking-up

When the dawn came filtering down through the Ditch, Ray left the party and staggered through Boody Lane to find his bunk. Dengel and Ginger had left the place before him, knocking their heads together in a drowsy roll. Malty had sprawled in a corner over a table. The bistro man helped him to a room upstairs. Banjo was full and tight as a drum, but he kept right on playing and drinking as if he were just beginning a performance. Goosey was tired out, but he was curious about the distinguished company and his desire to keep up with it kept him awake. The gentlemen guides had tried to persuade Ray to go with the party to an all-night café off the Canebière for a big breakfast, but he had declined. All the nourishment Ray needed then was to lay his body down and rest.

Boody Lane showed no stir of life as he passed through it. All the holes in the wall and the cafés were closed. Not a dog, not a cat prowled through the alley. A strange clinical odor rose from the heaps of rubbish in the gutters, communicating to his wine-fogged senses an unpleasant sensation as if he were in quarantine. He had remarked that strange odor in the Ditch at regular intervals and he could not account for it. The big hospital was just on the hill above. That could not be the source of the smell, he argued, for he had often walked through the street right under the hospital without detecting it.

Ray's head was pounding with the tom-tom of savage pain and his brain was in a maze, reacting against himself. For weeks he had been purposelessly boozing and lazing and shutting his mind against a poem in his heart and a story in his head, both clamoring to be heard. There was no reason why be shouldn't do something, and yet he couldn't do anything.

He could not sleep, although he was so tired. The racket in his head left him unstrung. The drinking-bout after the cinema was a stupid thing, he knew. Couldn't expect anything but a mess from mixing myself up like that. Every time he dozed off he woke up with a broken dream of some vivid experience, as if his real self did not want to go to sleep.

However, repose was so good, even though sleep played the imp, that he had no idea how many hours he had lain there until Banjo broke into the room, demanding if he was going to sleep through the night after sleeping all day.

"You can carry on sleeping forevah," said Banjo. "I'm gwine to leave you-all. I'm gwine away to the Meedy."

"Which Midi and who are you going away with?" Ray asked. "You're right in the Midi now, don't you know that?"

"Oh, I gwina away to the real Meedy down the coast whar the swell guys hang out at."

Ray guessed at once that the leader of the party had proposed to take Banjo along, and he said: "You'd better stay here in Marseilles. It's no use you running off with those people. They're no good for you."

"Ain't nothing bad foh mine, pardner. I was bohn on the go same like you is, and Ise always ready for a change."

"Where they taking you?"

"Nice, Monte Carlo, some a them tony raysohts. I don't care which one. But I'm going there and don't you fear. You hold mah place for me in Boody Lane till I come back, mah friend."

"Boody Lane in your seat. You're a damn fool to go. What about the orchestra? Aren't you going to fool with that any more?"

"The orchestry! What you wanta remember it now for? You'd fohgotten it as well as I and everybody did, becausen theah was so many other wonderful things in this sweet poht to take up our time. All the same, pardner, Ise jest right in with the right folkses now to hulp me with an orchestry."

"Help my black hide. You'll get nothing but a drunken bath outa those people, and it's better you get that way in the Ditch than where you're going. They can't help themselves, much less you. You can think about an orchestra, but they can't think about anything. They don't want to. I know it's no good your going with them. I'm sorry I introduced you to them."

"Hi, pardner, what's eating you? You jealous of a fellah just becausen they done took me instead a you?"

"You big bonehead. He wanted me to go, and it was after I refused he asked you. I know those people. I'm sure I can stand them better than you by being a charming, drunk, unthinking fool. But I couldn't stand them sober and thinking just a little bit. You won't be able to stand them drunk or sober. I know it. You'll cut a hell of a hog before you know what's happening.

"How do you think I've been traveling round so much without having any money? I wasn't a steady seaman like you. I did it by getting on to people like those for a while. I could carry on – *for a while*. But I aways got tired and quit. I can't see you carrying on with them for any time at all – can't imagine you ever being funny with that big lump of a buffalo."

"Well, I'm gwina try it, all the same, pardner. I know them folks mahself just like you does. I been around Paree with one a them once, a dandy hoojah. Didn't I tell you about it?"

"Yes, but he was different."

"Why don't you come with us, and ef we didn't like it we could come back together?"

"I don't want to go and they wouldn't want two of us, crazy. One black boy is just odd enough for a little diversion. But what do you want to quit us for? What about Latnah?"
"You know she is mad at me. Nearly stick me with a dagger. I leave her to Malty and you."

Perhaps Banjo did not know how great his influence was over the beach boys. His going away with his instrument left them leaderless and they fell apart. And as a psychological turn sometimes foreshadows a material change, or *vice versa*, even in obscure isolated cases, the boys felt that something was happening and realized that it was becoming very difficult for them to gain their unmoral bohemian subsistence as before.

They did not know that the Radical government had fallen, that a National-Union government had come into power, and that the franc had been arrested in its spectacular fall and was being stabilized. They knew very little about governments, and cared less. But they knew that suddenly francs were getting scarce in their world, meals were dearer in the eating-sheds and in the bistros, and more sous were necessary to obtain the desirable red wine and white, so indispensable to their existence.

However, some of them had an imperfect commonsense knowledge of some of the things that were taking place in the important centers of the world, and that those things were threatening to destroy their aristocratic way of life. Great Britain's black boys, for example. They observed that colored crews on British ships west of Suez were becoming something of a phenomenon. Even the colored crews on the Mediterranean coal ships, of which they had a monopoly in the past, were being replaced by white crews. The beach boys felt the change, for the white crews would not feed them the left-over food.

The beach boys were scattered and broke. Goosey and Bugsy had joined a gang of Arab and Mediterranean laborers and were sent by a municipal agency to work in an up-country factory. Ray had no money. He owed rent on his room and could not obtain any money by either begging, beseeching, versifying, or storytelling.

Latnah solved the situation by proposing that she, Ray, and Malty should go to the vineyards to work. The agencies wanted hands. The pay was about thirty francs a day, with free board and lodging and plenty of wine. They could save their wages to return to Marseilles. The harvesting would last about a month.

Ray jumped at the idea. He had been just about fed up with the Vieux Port when he met Banjo. The meeting and their friendship had revived his interest. Now that Banjo was gone and the group dispersed, the spell was broken and he felt like moving on. He tried to get Ginger to go along. But Ginger, as an old-timer on the docks, preferred to stay and take his chances with Dengel.

Third Part[9]

Chapter 23

Shake That Thing Again

Ray returned to the Ditch, and at the African Bar Banjo was treating Malty, Ginger, Dengel, and some West African boys. Banjo had received notice from the consulate to prepare to leave in a day or two. Ray was boisterously welcomed. Girls and their touts

Notes

[9] The complete "Third Part" consists of chapters 18–25.

were dancing to the continuous racket from the pianola. Banjo suggested that the gang should go to his old hangout, where he would play and they could kick up their own racket.

The long back room in the rear of the bistro was the boys' for spreading joy. Banjo revived "Shake That Thing" for the party. Malty joined him blowing a little horn or whistling, while the boys kept up a humming monotone of accompaniment as they danced.

> Old folks doing it, and young folks too,
> The young folks learning the old how to do,
> Shake That Thing, Shake That Thing.
> *I'm getting sick and tired, but* … OH, SHAKE THAT THING!

Front and rear the bistro was jammed – girls and touts and beach boys. The girls helped themselves liberally to the boys' wine on the tables. Dengel, who rarely danced, was dogging it with a boy from Grand Bassam. A vivacious girl pointed at them and cried: "Look at that Dengel dancing. I thought he didn't do anything but booze."

She cut in between them and, her feminine curiosity rising over her passion for gain, she ignored the boy from Grand Bassam, who was new to the Ditch and supposed to have money, and, taking hold of Dengel, said "Dance with me." Tall and very slim, Dengel looked like a fine tree fern. He bent over to the girl in that manner of swaying inebriation peculiar to him, and executed an African jig so wildly that space had to be cleared for them. Surprised at Dengel's rough wildness, the girl laughed and shrieked and wiggled excitedly.

When Banjo stopped playing, she rushed up to him and asked for the same thing again. Just at that moment a tout entered and whispered something to the Jelly-roll *patrone* of the bistro, who held up her hand and called: "Listen! If any of you have guns or any other weapons, give them to me, for there's going to be a *rafle*[10] tonight."

The touts handed over their guns and knives to her. Of the colored men, only a mulatto, a Martiniquan, had a revolver, which he gave to the woman. She put the weapons in a drawer of the counter and locked it. A boy who was a stranger to the quarter asked her: "You always know when the police are going to operate down here?"

"Sure. That's understood," she said. She was near the entrance, and stepping out into the narrow alley she said, with a raucous laugh, "That for the police."

She reentered the bistro heaving with laughter and, patting one of the Senegalese who was standing white-eyed by the door, said: "*Tu as vu le clair de lune*?"

Hearing that the police were coming, Ray felt that he could not stand being handled by them again just then. He might do something crazy and get into serious trouble. So he quietly slipped off. Just as he reached the corner the police entered the bistro. He had to cut across Boody Lane to reach the Bum Square, and as he was passing he saw a policeman coming out of one of the holes-in-the-wall and finger-wiping his long mustache as if he had just finished the most appetizing *hors-d'œuvre* in the world. Maybe.

In the Bum Square he met Latnah. Her manner was strangely preoccupied. Ray asked her if she knew the boys were celebrating in the Ditch. She knew, but did not care to go.

"I think you're blue like me," said Ray. "Maybe what we need to fix us up is a pipe dream."

"You do that, too?" Latnah asked.

Notes

[10] *rafle* (French) round-up.

"I do anything that is good for a change. All depends on the place and the time and the second person singular?"

"Then I have stuff," Latnah said. "We go." They went up to her little place. She spread the colored coverlet on the floor and threw down two little cushions for pillows. She brought out a basket of oranges and dates. And they sat down together on the rug. A little brass plate, lamp, tube, and the iodine-like paste strangely fascinating in its somnolent thickness. Latnah prepared for the ritual.

"Take fruit. It good with fruit," she said.

"I know that," Ray replied.

"You know all about it," she smiled subtly. "I think is leetle Oriental in you."

"Maybe. There's a saying in my family about some of our people coming from East Africa. They were reddish, with glossy curly hair. But you have the same types in West Africa, too. You remember the two fellows that used to be at the African Bar during the summer? They looked like twins and they were heavy-featured like some Armenians."

"I think they were *mulattres*," said Latnah.

"No, they weren't mixed – not as we know it between black and white today. Perhaps way back. I heard they were Fulahs."

"We all mixed up. I'm so mixed I don't know what I am myself."

"You don't? I always wonder, Latnah, what you really are. Except for the Chinese, I don't feel any physical sympathy for Orientals, you know. I always feel cold and strange and far away from them. But you are different. I feel so close to you."

"My mother was Negresse," said Latnah. "Sudanese or Abyssinian – I no certain. I was born at Aden. My father I no know what he was nor who he was."

Latnah picked an orange clean of its white covering and handed a half of it to Ray. He put his tube down and slipped a lobe into his mouth. The incense of the rite rose and filled the little chamber, drifting on its atmosphere like a magic canopy. Drowsily Ray remembered Limehouse and those days of repose in the quiet dens there.

Latnah must have captured his thoughts psychically, for she suddenly said, "It no never haunt you?"

"No. I remember it as one of the strange and pleasant things in my life, just as another person might recall any interesting event. But when I quit I just put it out of my mind – forgot it and started in living differently."

"You beaucoup Oriental," said Latnah. "Banjo never touch anything strange like us. *Il est un pur sauvage du sang*." She sighed.

Ray locked her to him in his elbow. Peace and forgetfulness in the bosom of a brown woman. Warm brown body and restless dark body like a black root growing down in the soft brown earth. Deep dark passion of bodies close to the earth understanding each other. Dark brown bodies of the earth, earthy. Dark … brown … rich colors of the nourishing earth. The pinks bring trouble and tumult and riot into dark lives. Leave them alone in their vanity and tigerish ambitions to fret and fume in their own hell, for terrible is their world that creates disasters and catastrophes from simple natural incidents.

A little resting from the body's aching and the mind's trouble in sweet dreaming. Ray's hankering was for scenes of tropical shores sifted through hectic years. Salty-warm blue bays where black boys dive down deep into the deep waters, where the ships shear in on foamy waves and black youths row out to them in canoes and black pilots bring them in to anchor. Cocoanut palms like sentinels on the sandy shore. Black draymen coming from the hilltops, singing loudly – rakish chants, whipping up the mules bearing loads of brown sugar and of green bunches of bananas, trailing along the winding chalky ways down to the port.

Oh, the tropical heat of earth and body glowing in the same rhythm of nature … sun-hot warmth wilting the blood-bright hibiscus, drawing the rich creaminess out of

the lush bell-flowers, burning green fields and pasture lands to crispy autumn color, and driving the brown doves and pea doves to cover cooing under the fan-broad cooling woodland leaves.

But he dreamed instead of Harlem … the fascinating forms of Harlem. The thick, sweaty, syrup-sweet jazzing of Sheba Palace. … Black eyes darting out of curious mauve frames to arrest the alert prowler … little brown legs hurrying along … with undulating hips and voluptuous caressing motion of feminine folds.

Chapter 25

Banjo's Ace of Spades

A funeral was winding its way through the Ditch. It was not the chauffeur's, but a policeman's. He had been shot a day before the chauffeur by a Ditch-dweller just let out of prison. In the Ditch they said it was a story of revenge. It was a large funeral. All the big city officials were there or represented, black-bearded, gray-haired men, black-clothed, decorated, beribboned and medaled. The most important ones had orated valiantly over the corpse, praising the valor and virtues of the force.

Obseques solenelles.

A full turnout of the force. And dutiful comrades in service actively making the way clear for the mourning officials and the immense crowd. Wreath-covered hearse and carriages following, chockful of flowers. From the church on the hill above the quarter, slowly, pompously, and solemnly the mournful army went marching through the Ditch and all the girls along the way crossed themselves and all the touts uncovered.

Directly in the line of march, Ray was sitting on the terrace of the African Bar. Not wanting to salute, nor be conspicuous by not saluting, a show stinking with insincerity and more loathsome to see than the obscene body of a crocodile, he got up and went inside, turning his back on the lugubriously-comic procession.

When the noble company had passed far and away out of the Ditch, Ray started off for Joliette to find Banjo and Goosey and give them the farewell hand. But in the Bum Square he met Goosey, who had spent all the morning hunting for Banjo. He had the consular letter from the captain of Jake's ship on which they were to go home. But Banjo was missing. He had not returned to the hotel after last night's feasting and merrymaking. Goosey had gone by all the familiar box-holes of the place, but Banjo was not to be found in any.

"Only thing to do is go back to Joliette and wait for him at the hotel," suggested Ray. "Then if he doesn't show up in time, you'll have to go alone."

They went to the hotel in Joliette and waited on the terrace over a couple bottles of beer. And when the impatient Goosey was becoming unbearably fidgety as the time of the boat's departure approached, Banjo came rocking leisurely up to them.

"Good God, man, get some American pep into you and don't act so *African*," cried Goosey. "Don't you know we've got to move by the white folks' schedule time now? You think the skipper's going to wait on us?"

"Don't excite you'se'f, yaller boy. Go you' ways without me. I ain't gwine no place."

"Not going!" cried Goosey. "After the consul paid for your board and lodging and gave you a free passage back home? You sure joking. You remember Lonesome Blue?"

Lonesome Blue had finally disappeared from the scene. When a ship was found for him he had vanished. The police could not have picked him up again, for he had been furnished papers that gave him immunity. Nobody knew where he had gone.

"Remember you'self, you," said Banjo. "I ain't studying you nor Lonesome nor no consuls when I done finish make up mah mind. There is many moh Gawd's own consuls than theah is in Marcelles and this heah Lincoln Agrippa, call him Banjo, has got moh tricks in his haid than a monkey."

Goosey looked bewildered and scared of going alone. He was shocked by Banjo's sudden desertion and felt cheated of his strong support. His lower lip hung down in a mournful way.

"Well, I guess I've got to go back alone," he said. "I've been sick near death's door and would have been in the boneyard like Bugsy if the consul hadn't helped me out. I'm going home."

"Sure gwine back this time, eh?" Banjo grinned aloud. "Won't take no chances telling another skipper to chase himse'f. Yo' gwine back home to what you call them United Snakes after you done sweahs offer them. You was so bellyaching about race I knowed you'd bust. Ise a gutter-snipe as you said, all right, and mah pardner done bury his brains in the mud and we ain't singing no Gawd's own blues ——"

"That hasn't got a thing to do with my going back," said Goosey. "I still hold to my opinion. I know what my race has got to buck up against in this white man's world, if you don't know and Ray with his talent don't want to. I know what I was running away from and if I couldn't make it over here ——"

"Couldn't make the point of mah righteous nose!" exclaimed Banjo. "Red-nigger, you kain't make nothing at all but the stuff you was made foh. You done got carried ovah heah by accident. And a li'l' French luck carried you along upstate. But you done flopped so soon as you got left on you' own, 'causen you ain't got no self-makings in you. Get me? You go right on back to them United Snakes that you belongs to with you li'l' pot a French dirt."

"And you'll hear from me, too, some day," said Goosey. Some day you'll hear about me orating for my race and telling them about the soil of liberty."

With a kind of prayerful gesture Goosey held up his sacred souvenir.

"And you think we don't care a damn about race, eh?" Banjo turned seriously on Goosey. "Listen and hear me, Goosey. You evah seen a lynching?"

"No."

"I guess you hadn't. Well, I seen one down in Dixie. And it was mah own li'l' brother. Jest when he was a-growing out of a boy into a man and the juice of life was ripening a pink temptation kept right on after him and wouldn't let be until he was got and pulled the way of the rope. You didn't go through the war, neither?"

"No, I didn't."

"I knowed. Because you was too young. I did because I was jest young enough. I was in Kenada when I joined up and I remember a buddy a mine calling me a fool for it. I remember he said that he would only wanta fight if they was calling him to go to Dixie to clean up foh them crackers. But I joined up all the same, and went through that war, for I was just crazy for a change. And the wul' did, too. And one half of it done murdered the other half to death. But the wul' ain't gone a-mourning forevah because a that. Nosah. The wul' is jazzing to fohgit."

"Except the bloody politicians," said Ray.

"They ain't in our class, pardner. Yessah. The wul' is just keeping right on with that nacheral sweet jazzing of life. And Ise jest gwine on right along jazzing with the wul'. The wul' goes round and round and I keeps right on gwine around with it. I ain't swore off nothing like you. United Snakes nor You-whited Snakes that a nigger jest gotta stand up to everywhere in this wul', even in the thickest thicket in the Congo. I know that theah's a mighty mountain a white divilment on this heah Gawd's big ball. And niggers will find that mountain on every foot a land that the white man done step on. But we niggers am no angels, neither. And I guess that if evah I went down in the bushes in the

Congo, even the canninbals them would wanta mess with mah moon if I leave me careless, and if I runned away to the Nothanmost pole, the icebugs would squash me frozen stiff if I couldn't prohtect mahself. I ain't one accident-made nigger like you, Goosey. Ise a true-blue traveling-bohn nigger and I know life, and I knows how to take it nacheral. I fight when I got to and I works when I must and I lays off when I feel lazy, and I loves all the time becausen the honey-pot a life is mah middle name.

"You got a li'l' book larnin', Goosey, but it jest make you that much a bigger bonehead. You don't know nothing when to use it right from when you should fold it up and put it away like you does a dress suit after a dickty party. You got a tall lot yet to larn, Goosey boy. You go right on back to them theah United Snakes and makem shoot a li'l' snake-bite wisdom into you and take somathat theah goosiness outa you' moon."

The noisy honk-honking of a horn dispersed an idly-gossiping group in the middle of the streets as a taxicab dashed through them and swerved to a stop before the hotel. Out of it jumped Jake.

"I done took it in mah haid to come and get you fellahs," he said. "Because after that theah goodest of time last night, I got to thinking you-all might be feeling too sweet in you' skin to get outa it for that unrighteous sea change. So here I is with taxi and everything to make sure you-all don't get left."

"Youse one most faithful[II] buddy," Banjo grinned. "But Ise jest finish explaining to Goosey heah that Ise most gratiate to the consul foh hulping me this far along, but I ain't gwine no further. And I was a-telling him like a wise old-timer to dust his feets and make that boat alone befoh it miss him, foh this nigger ain't gwine no place."

"Ain't going!"

Jake grinned. Banjo grinned. Ray grinned. Goosey only was glum. Jake understood Banjo too thoroughly to ask any questions. He enjoyed the situation. For a moment he felt strangely moved to throw himself in with Banjo and send Goosey back alone to the ship. But the next moment he reflected that he was no longer a wild stallion, but a draft horse in harness now with the bit in his mouth and the crupper under his tail, and – that he liked it.

The taxicab slowly trailing them, the boys crossed down the street and into the Seamen's Bar, where they stood at the counter, *à l'Américaine*, for the final drink together,

"When is you coming back to look us over?" Jake asked Ray.

"When the train puts me off," said Ray. "I like this rolling along, stopping anywhere I'm put off or thrown off. Like Banjo. I may get off to see you one a these days if the train pass your way."

"Well, when youse tired a rowling, if evah a broad evacuate you on any a them Gawd's own beach, you point you' nose straight foh Harlem. And if it is even in the middle of the night you get theah, we'll put out that elevator runner that lodging with us and make room to take you on."

They drove from the Joliette square down the docks to the ship, where they said good-bye. As Goosey went up the gang-plank after Jake, Banjo called out again:

"Go'-by, Gawd blimey you, Goosey, and don't fohgit what I done told you. Put it in you' flute and blow it."

Banjo and Ray wandered casually along the docks. Workmen were busy completing the big new American warehouse. The hand trucks were noisy on the paving stones with the shifting of boxes and barrels and the loading and unloading of ships. The eternal

Notes

[II] *Original reads*: faithfully [ed.].

harvest of the world on the docks. African hard wood, African rubber, African ivory, African skins. Asia's gifts of crisp fragrant leaves and the fabled old spices with grain and oil and iron. All floated through the oceans into this warm Western harbor where, waiting to be floated back again, were the Occident's gifts. Immense crates, barrels, cases of automobiles, pianos, player-pianos, furniture; sand-papered, spliced, and varnished wood; calico print, artificial silk; pretty shoes and boots; French wines, British whiskeys, and a thousand little salesmen-made goods. Composite essence of the soil of all lands.

Commerce! Of all words the most magical. The timbre, color, form, the strength and grandeur of it. Triumphant over all human and natural obstacles, sublime yet forever going hand in hand with the bitch, Bawdy. In all relationships, between nations, between individuals, between little peoples and big peoples, progressive and primitive, the two lovers spread and flourish together as if one were the inevitable complement of the other.

Ray was wondering if it could have been otherwise – if it were madness to imagine the gorgeous concourse of civilization, past, present and to be, without these two creatures of man's appetites spreading themselves together, when Banjo said:

"Wha's working on you, pardner?"

"Me? Oh, just when are we going to get outa here?"

"Fed up with the ole poht, eh, scared of it gitting you now?"

"No fear. I've got this burg balled up with a mean hold on 'em."

"Nuts is good dessert, pardner, but I ain't seen no monkey antics yet."

"You will when the exhibition is open."

A Peninsular and Oriental boat had entered a basin farther up the docks and the boys rounded some warehouses to reach it. When they got there they found Malty and Ginger panhandling. The crew was Indian.

"Ain't nevah nothing doing on a coolie-jabbering boat," said Malty, deprecatingly, "but it ain't costing us nothing noways to hang around."

"The A-rabs am the best of them people for a handout on a broad," said Banjo.

There was a company of British soldiers on board and on the upper decks groups of tall, svelte, dignified Indians were conspicuous among the European passengers.

A knot of Senegalese were gathered a little way off to themselves, with their eyes on the galley. Three Indian boys of the beach were signaling to the Indian cooks against the railing above. The cooks seemed unheeding, looking down unsympathetically on the dark rabble beneath them. At last one of them went to the kitchen, returning with a paper packet which he threw down to the three Indian boys. The packet burst, scattering a mess of curried food in the dust. With nervous eagerness the boys seized the packet and scraped up the food from the ground.

The knot of Senegalese began stirring with excitement as their eyes turned the other way from the boat and saw a little cart rumble by them. It bore two scavenger-like whites and came to a halt near the gangway. They had come to get the garbage of the great liner, that was not dumped overboard, but brought into port and sold for the feeding of pigs.

Kitchen boys, two to each can, toted the garbage down the gangplank to dump it in the cart. The rank stuff was rushed and raided by the hungry black men. Out of the slime, the guts of game and poultry, the peelings of vegetables, they fished up pieces of ham, mutton, beef, poultry, and tore savagely at them with their teeth. They fought against one another for the best pieces. One mighty fellow sent a rival sprawling on his back from a can and dominated it until he had extracted some precious knuckles of bones with flesh upon them. Another brought up a decomposed rat which he dashed into the water, and wiping his hand on the sand, dived back again into the can. There were also two white men in the rush. A small Southern European was worsted in the struggle and knocked down, while a big Swede, with the appearance of a great mass of hard mildewed putty, held his own.

"Look at the niggers! Look at the niggers!" the passengers on deck cried, and some of them went and got cameras to photograph the scene.

Once when Ray was badly broke he had gone with Bugsy to sell an American suit and shirt to a young West African called Cuffee. Many of them, British and French black boys, clubbed together in a big room that took up half of a floor, for which each paid two francs a day. They were cooking when Ray got there; the smell of the stuff was good and he was hungry. They offered him some, but Bugsy whispered to him not to eat, because he had seen them picking over the garbage of the docks.

The Africans did not understand the art of panhandling as did the American and West Indian Negroes. When they could get no work on the docks they would not beg food of any ship that was not manned by their own countrymen speaking their language. Seamen who came in with money would help their fellows ashore. But outside of their own primitive circle the African boys were helpless.

"Ain't you ashamed a you' race?" Banjo asked Ray.

"Why you think? We've been down to the garbage-line ourselves."

"Not to eat it, though. I'd sooner do some'n' inlegal and ketch jail."

"It's just a difference a stomach," said Ray. "Some stomachs are different from others." He remembered the time he had worked as a waiter in hotels and how the feeding of certain of the guests was always an interesting spectacle for him. They were those pink-eared, purple-veined, respectable pillars of society who in a refined atmosphere of service always stirred up in him an impression of obscenity. Their bellies seemed to him like coarse sacks that needed only to be filled up and rammed down with a multitude of foodstuffs.

It was a long way from them to these stranded and lost black creatures of colonization who ate garbage to appease the insistent demands of the belly. At night they would go to the African Bar and dance it away.

"Taloufa is right heah with us again," said Malty.

"Taloufa back in this burg?" exclaimed Banjo.

"You betchyu he sure is. And ef you got anything foh helping him, git it ready, for he ain't nothing this time more'n a plumb broke nigger."

The boys found Taloufa at the Seamen's Bar in Joliette with his guitar, and a bow of colored ribbons decorating it, broke but unbroken. He was talking to an Indian, a thin, gray-haired man.

"I thought you were in England," said Ray.

"Wouldn't let me in," replied Taloufa.

"How you mean wouldn't let you in?"

From a set of papers in his pocketbook Taloufa extracted a slip and handed it to Ray. The paper bore Taloufa's name and fingerprint and read:

"The above-named is permitted to land at this port on condition that he proceeds to London in the charge of[12] an official of the Shipping Federation, obtains document of identity at the Home Office, and visa (if required), and leaves the United Kingdom at the earliest opportunity.

(Signed) ....

Immigration Officer."

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[12] *Original reads*: in charge of [ed.].

When Taloufa arrived in England, the authorities would not permit him to land, but wanted him to go home direct to West Africa. Taloufa did not want to go there. Christian missionaries had educated him out of his native life. A Christian European had uplifted him out of and away from his people and his home. His memory of his past was vague. He did not know what had become of his family.

He tried to convince the authorities that he had a right to land in England. He had friends in Limehouse and in Cardiff. He had even a little property in the shape of a trunk and suitcase and clothes that he had left behind when he failed to return from his last American voyage. Nevertheless, he was permitted to land only to see about his affairs and under supervision.

Colored subjects were not wanted in Britain.

This was the chief topic of serious talk among colored seamen in all the ports. Black and brown men being sent back to West Africa, East Africa, the Arabian coast, and India, showed one another their papers and held sharp and bitter discussions in the rough cafés of Joliette and the Vieux Port.

The majority of the papers were distinguished by the official phrase: Nationality Doubtful.

Colored seamen who had lived their lives in the great careless tradition, and had lost their papers in low-down places to touts, hold-up men, and passport fabricators, and were unable or too ignorant to show exact proof of their birthplace, were furnished with the new "Nationality Doubtful" papers. West Africans, East Africans, South Africans, West Indians, Arabs, and Indians – they were all mixed up together. Some of the Indians and Arabs were being given a free trip back to their lands. Others, especially the Negroes, had chosen to stop off in French ports, where the regulations were less stringent. They were agreed that the British authorities were using every device to get all the colored seamen out of Britain and keep them out, so that white men should have their jobs.

Taloufa, under supervision, had crossed from England to Havre, had gone to Paris and, his money exhausted, had come to Marseilles to get a ship in any way he could. The Indian conversing with him was a unique case. Gray-haired, with a fine, thin, ancient, patient face, he was brown and brittle like a reed. He had left India as a ship's boy when he was so small that he could not recall anything of his people or his home. He had been a steward on English ships for years, before and all during the war.

One day, he said, he came in from a voyage and the medical officer for the local Seamen's Union put him on the sick list and took him off his ship. He said he was not ill, but he knew that the union officials were replacing colored seamen with white by any means. He went to a reputable private doctor and received a certificate attesting that he was not ill. He took it to the local official of his union, but that official ignored him. He had already put a white man in the Indian's place as steward. In a fit of anger the Indian foolishly tore up his union card and left the local office.

Weeks and months passed and he did not get another job. One day he was persuaded to take a place on a boat that was going out to stay in service in the East. But when he reached Marseilles, where the crew was to sign on, the steward changed his mind about going to the Far East on a "Nationality Doubtful" paper. Then he came up against the fact that he could not get back into England where he had lived for over forty years. He was six weeks on the beach in Marseilles. He had a pile of foolscap correspondence with the British Home Office. He was a "Nationality Doubtful" man with no place to go.

This was the way of civilization with the colored man, especially the black. The happenings of the past few weeks from the beating up of the beach boys by the police

to the story of Taloufa's experiences, were, to Ray, all of a piece. A clear and eloquent exhibition of the universal attitude, which, though the method varied, was little different anywhere.

When the police inspector said to Ray that the strong arm of the law was against Negroes because they were all criminals, he really did not mean just that. For he knew that the big and terror-striking criminals were not Negroes. What he unconsciously meant was that the police were strong-armed against the happy irresponsibility of the Negro in the face of civilization.

For civilization had gone out among these native, earthy people, had despoiled them of their primitive soil, had uprooted, enchained, transported, and transformed them to labor under its laws, and yet lacked the spirit to tolerate them within its walls.

That this primitive child, this kinky-headed, big-laughing black boy of the world, did not go down and disappear under the serried crush of trampling white feet; that he managed to remain on the scene, not worldly-wise, not "getting there," yet not machine-made, nor poor-in-spirit like the regimented creatures of civilization, was baffling to civilized understanding. Before the grim, pale rider-down of souls he went his careless way with a primitive hoofing and a grin.

Thus he became a challenge to the clubbers of helpless vagabonds – to the despised, underpaid protectors of property and its high personages. He was a challenge of civilization itself. He was the red rag to the mighty-bellowing, all-trampling civilized bull.

Looking down in a bull ring, you are fascinated by the gay rag. You may even forget the man watching the bull go after the elusive color that makes him mad. The rag seems more than the man. If the bull wins[13] it, he horns it, tramples it, sniffs it, paws it – baffled.

As the rag is to the bull, so is the composite voice of the Negro – speech, song and laughter – to a bawdy world. More exasperating, indeed, than the Negro's being himself is his primitive color in a world where everything is being reduced to a familiar formula, this remains strange and elusive.

From the rear room of the café came sounds of music, shuffling of feet, shrill feminine cackle, and Malty's deep, far-carrying laughter. Banjo was at his instrument again. Presently Malty dashed in.

"For the love a life, Taloufy, come on in heah and play that holy wonderful new thing you done bring back heah with you."

"Wait a minute ——"

"Wait you' moon! You come right along and make that mahvelous music and fohgit the white man's crap."

Taloufa followed Malty with his guitar. His new piece was a tormenting, tantalizing, tickling, tintinnabulating thing that he called "Hallelujah Jig" and it went like this:

"Jigaway, boy, jig … jig, jig, jig, jig, jig, jig, jig
Jig, jig. Jig, black boy … jig away … jig away. …

"Lay off the coal, boy, and scrub you' hide,
Jigaway … jigaway.
Bring me a clean suit and show some pride,
Jigaway … jigaway.

Notes

[13] *Original reads*: win [ed.].

"Step on the floor, boy, and show me that stuff
Jigaway … jigaway,
Strutting you' business and strutting it rough,
Jigaway … jigaway.

"Show me some movement and turn 'em loose,
Jigaway … jigaway,
Powerfulways like electric juice,
Jigaway … jigaway.

"Up the ole broad, boy; good nite to the bunk,
Jigaway … jigaway,
What you say, fellahs? I say hunky-tunk,
Jigaway … jigaway.

"When the lights go out until the stars fade,
Jigaway … jigaway,
For that's the bestest thing in the life of a spade,
Jigaway … jigaway.

"Jigaway, boy, jig, jig, jig, jig, jig, jig, jig, jig,
Jig, jig, jig, black boy … jig away … jig away. …"

Above the sound of the music the Indian was emphasizing the necessity for all colored people to wake up and get together, for, he said, although Indians belonged to the white stock according to science – the white people, particularly the British, were treating them like black people.

But Ray could not hear any more. The jigaway music was pounding in his ears. The dancing and singing and sugary laughter of the boys. It filled his head full and poured hot fire through his veins, tingling and burning. Such a sensual-sweet feeling. There was no resisting it.

"Pardon me," he said to the Indian, and hurried into the rear room.

Slowly the Indian gathered up his bundle of foolscaps methodically assorting the letters according to date. Then he went to the partition and looked in on the boys. Against the glass pane he looked like an ancient piece of broken bronze, a figure from an Oriental temple leaning among indifferent objects in the window of a dealer in antiques.

It was dismaying to him that those boys with whom he had just been conversing so earnestly should in a moment become forgetful of everything serious in a drunken-like abandon of jazzing.

"Just like niggers," he muttered, turning away. "The same on the ships. Always monkeying and never really serious about anything."

Yet the next day Taloufa stowed away safely for America, leaving the Indian on the beach, making his pathetic appeals to the English gentleman's Home Office.

"It was Taloufa bring that cargo a good luck," declared Banjo. "It's the same with humans like with them stars ovah us. Good and bad luck ones. Now Lonesome Blue was sure hard luck. But Taloufa is a good-luck baby."

It was indeed in every way a cargo of good luck that the boys were handling. They were no longer "on the beach." A wealthy shipowner from the Caribbean basin, profiting by the exchange rate, had bought a boat, which he was overhauling to take back to the West Indies. And the boys were on the boat.

It was a formidable polyglot outfit. The officers represented five European nations. The crew were supposed to be Caribbean. Malty was chosen to find and recommend the men. He got his gang in first, including Dengel, who wished to cross the Atlantic by any means.

"Though youse French," Malty told him, "you masticate that Englishman's langwitch bettah than a lottah bush niggers back home."

Malty also took West African boys, a "colored" South African, a reed-like Somali lad, and another Aframerican besides Banjo. They were all "going on the fly" and none of them was thinking of staying with the boat after the trip, but rather of getting to Cuba, Canada, and the United States. Ray worked with them, but said he was not going to sign up, as the very thought of returning to the Caribbean made him jumpy.

Ray teased Banjo about going as a seaman to the West Indies so soon after he had turned down a free trip to the United States. He predicted that Banjo would follow his nose to the States in quick time, for he would find the islands too small and sleepy for him.

"I'm gwine along with the gang, pardner, and tha's a different thing from going back with Goosey. This heah is like a big picnic for all of us. If youse wise, you'll join in with us."

The boys scraped, scrubbed, painted. They got only twenty francs a day, although the regular wage for such work was over thirty francs. But they were beach boys and not union men. And the union bosses had no knowledge of what was going on on the little boat. There is sometimes much free-for-all work on the docks. However, the boys did not allow *their* work to push them hard. They made shift to get through it. It would be different when they signed on. Then they would get the union wages of British seamen.

The African Café, The Rendezvous Bar, The bistro-cabaret in the Rue Coin du Reboul – all of them nightly did well with the boys. The Ditch looked at them differently, for they measured up to and above the "leetah" standards.

At last the boat was shipshape and ready to sail. The day came when the boys were called to sign on. Ray could have had an easy place, but he would not take it and he watched Banjo sign a little wistfully. They all had the right, under British Seamen's Regulations, to take part of their month's wages in advance. Each of the boys availed himself of this, that he might buy needful articles. Banjo took a full month's wages.

They cashed their cheques with a seamen's broker, in Joliette. That night they had a big celebration. But Banjo was not with them. Nor had he used any of his money to buy new things. He invited Ray to go with him to a quiet little café in Joliette, and there he announced that he was not going to make the trip.

"And Ise gwine beat it outa this burg some convenient time this very night, pardner. Tha's mah ace a spades so sure as Ise a spade. You come along with me?"

Not going on the ship. … Beat it. … Come along with me.

"But you've signed on and taken a month's wages" protested Ray. "You can't quit now."

"Nix and a zero for what I kain't do. Go looket that book and you won't find mah real name no moh than anybody is gwine find this nigger when I take mahself away from here. I ask you again. Is you going with me?"

Ray did not reply, and after a silence Banjo said: "I know youse thinking it ain't right. But we kain't afford to choose, because we ain't born and growed up like the choosing people. All we can do is grab our chance every time it comes our way."

Ray's thoughts were far and away beyond the right and wrong of the matter. He had been dreaming of what joy it would be to go vagabonding with Banjo. Stopping here and there, staying as long as the feeling held in the ports where black men assembled

for the great transport lines, loafing after their labors long enough to laugh and love and jazz and fight.

While Banjo's words brought him back to social morality, they brought him back only to the realization of how thoroughly he was in accord with them. He had associated too closely with the beach boys not to realize that their loose, instinctive way of living was more deeply related to his own self-preservation than all the principles or social-morality lessons with which he had been inculcated by the wiseacres of the civilized machine.

It seemed a social wrong to him that, in a society rooted and thriving on the principles of the "struggle for existence" and the "survival of the fittest" a black child should be brought up on the same code of social virtues as the white. Especially an American black child.

A Chinese or Indian child could learn the stock virtues without being spiritually harmed by them, because he possessed his own native code from which he could draw, compare, accept, and reject while learning. But the Negro child was a pathetic thing, entirely cut off from its own folk wisdom and earnestly learning the trite moralisms of a society in which he was, as a child and would be as an adult, denied any legitimate place.

Ray was not of the humble tribe of humanity. But he always felt humble when he heard the Senegalese and other West African tribes speaking their own languages with native warmth and feeling.

The Africans gave him a positive feeling of wholesome contact with racial roots. They made him feel that he was not merely an unfortunate accident of birth, but that he belonged definitely to a race weighed, tested, and poised in the universal scheme. They inspired him with confidence in them. Short of extermination by the Europeans, they were a safe people, protected by their own indigenous culture. Even though they stood bewildered before the imposing bigness of white things, apparently unaware of the invaluable worth of their own, they were naturally defended by the richness of their fundamental racial values.

He did not feel that confidence about Aframericans who, long-deracinated, were still rootless among phantoms and pale shadows and enfeebled by self-effacement before condescending patronage, social negativism, and miscegenation. At college in America and among the Negro intelligentsia he had never experienced any of the simple, natural warmth of a people believing in themselves, such as he had felt among the rugged poor and socially backward blacks of his island home. The colored intelligentsia lived its life "to have the white neighbors think well of us," so that it could move more peaceably into nice "white" streets.

Only when he got down among the black and brown working boys and girls of the country did he find something of that raw unconscious and the-devil-with-them pride in being Negro that was his own natural birthright. Down there the ideal skin was brown skin. Boys and girls were proud of their brown, sealskin brown, teasing brown, tantalizing brown, high-brown, low-brown, velvet brown, chocolate brown.

There was the amusing little song they all sang:

"Black may be evil,
But Yellow is so low-down;
White is the devil,
So glad I'm teasing Brown."

Among them was never any of the hopeless, enervating talk of the chances of "passing white" and the specter of the Future that were the common topics of the colored

intelligentsia. Close association with the Jakes and Banjoes had been like participating in a common primitive birthright.

Ray loved to be with them in constant physical contact, keeping warm within. He loved their tricks of language, loved to pick up and feel and taste new words from their rich reservoir of niggerisms. He did not like rotten-egg stock words among rough people any more than he liked colorless refined phrases among nice people. He did not even like to hear cultured people using the conventional stock words of the uncultured and thinking they were being free and modern. That sounded vulgar to him.

But he admired the black boys' unconscious artistic capacity for eliminating the rotten-dead stock words of the proletariat and replacing them with startling new ones. There were no dots and dashes in their conversation – nothing that could not be frankly said and therefore decently – no act or fact of life for which they could not find a simple passable word. He gained from them finer nuances of the necromancy of language and the wisdom that any word may be right and magical in its proper setting.

He loved their natural gusto for living down the past and lifting their kinky heads out of the hot, suffocating ashes, the shadow, the terror of real sorrow to go on gaily grinning in the present. Never had Ray guessed from Banjo's general manner that he had known any deep sorrow. Yet when he heard him tell Goosey that he had seen his only brother lynched, he was not surprised, he understood, because right there he had revealed the depths of his soul and the soul of his race – the true tropical African Negro. No Victorian-long period of featured grief and sable mourning, no mechanical-pale graveside face, but a luxuriant living up from it, like the great jungles growing perennially beautiful and green in the yellow blaze of the sun over the long life-breaking tragedy of Africa.

Ray had felt buttressed by the boys with a rough strength and sureness that gave him spiritual passion and pride to be his human self in an inhumanly alien world. They lived healthily far beyond the influence of the colored press whose racial dope was characterized by pungent "bleach-out," "kink-no-more," skin-whitening, hair-straightening, and innumerable processes for Negro culture, most of them manufactured by white men's firms in the cracker states. And thereby they possessed more potential power for racial salvation than the Negro *litterati*, whose poverty of mind and purpose showed never any signs of enrichment, even though inflated above the common level and given an appearance of superiority.

From these boys he could learn how to live – how to exist as a black boy in a white world and rid his conscience of the used-up hussy of white morality. He could not scrap his intellectual life and be entirely like them. He did not want or feel any urge to "go back" that way.

Tolstoy, his great master, had turned his back on the intellect as guide to find himself in Ivan Durak.[14] Ray wanted to hold on to his intellectual acquirements without losing his instinctive gifts. The black gifts of laughter and melody and simple sensuous feelings and responses.

Once when a friend gave him a letter of introduction to a Nordic intellectual, he did not write: I think you will like to meet this young black intellectual; but rather, I think you might like to hear Ray laugh.

His gift! He was of course aware that whether the educated man be white or brown or black, he cannot, if he has more than animal desires, be irresponsibly happy like the ignorant man who lives simply by his instincts and appetites. Any man with an obser-

Notes

[14] *Ivan Durak* Ivan the Fool, in Russian folklore.

vant and contemplative mind must be aware of that. But a black man, even though educated, was in closer biological kinship to the swell of primitive earth life. And maybe his apparent failing under the organization of the modern world was the real strength that preserved him from becoming the thing that was the common white creature of it.

Ray had found that to be educated, black and his instinctive self was something of a big job to put over. In the large cities of Europe he had often met with educated Negroes out for a good time with heavy literature under their arms. They toted these books to protect themselves from being hailed everywhere as minstrel niggers, coons, funny monkeys for the European audience – because the general European idea of the black man is that he is a public performer. Some of them wore hideous parliamentary clothes as close as ever to the pattern of the most correctly gray respectability. He had remarked wiry students and Negroes doing clerical work wearing glasses that made them sissy-eyed. He learned, on inquiry, that wearing glasses was a mark of scholarship and respectability differentiating them from the common types. … (Perhaps the police would respect the glasses.)

No getting away from the public value of clothes, even for you, my black friend. As it was, ages before Carlyle wrote *Sartor Resartus*,[15] so it will be long ages after. And you have reason maybe to be more rigidly formal, as the world seems illogically critical of you since it forced you to discard so recently your convenient fig leaf for its breeches. This civilized society is classified and kept going by clothes and you are now brought by its power to labour and find a place in it.

The more Ray mixed in the rude anarchy of the lives of the black boys – loafing, singing, bumming, playing, dancing, loving, working – and came to a realization of how close-linked he was to them in spirit, the more he felt that they represented more than he or the cultured minority the irrepressible exuberance and legendary vitality of the black race. And the thought kept him wondering how that race would fare under the ever tightening mechanical organization of modern life.

Being sensitively receptive, he had as a boy become interested in and followed with passionate sympathy all the great intellectual and social movements of his age. And with the growth of international feelings and ideas he had dreamed of the association of his race with the social movements of the masses of civilization milling through the civilized machine.

But traveling away from America and visiting many countries, observing and appreciating the differences of human groups, making contact with earthy blacks of tropical Africa, where the great body of his race existed, had stirred in him the fine intellectual prerogative of doubt.

The grand mechanical march of civilization had leveled the world down to the point where it seemed treasonable for an advanced thinker to doubt that what was good for one nation or people was also good for another. But as he was never afraid of testing ideas, so he was not afraid of doubting. All peoples must struggle to live, but just as what was helpful for one man might be injurious to another, so it might be with whole communities of peoples.

For Ray happiness was the highest good, and difference the greatest charm, of life. The hand of progress was robbing his people of many primitive and beautiful qualities. He could not see where they would find greater happiness under the weight of the machine even if progress became left-handed.

Notes

[15] *Sartor Resartus* 1836 novel by Thomas Carlyle; title translates as "The Tailor Retailored."

Many apologists of a changed and magnified machine system doubted whether the Negro could find a decent place in it. Some did not express their doubts openly, for fear of "giving aid to the enemy." Ray doubted, and openly.

Take, for example, certain Nordic philosophers, as the world was more or less Nordic business: He did not think the blacks would come very happily under the super-mechanical Anglo-Saxon-controlled world society of Mr. H. G. Wells. They might shuffle along, but without much happiness in the world of Bernard Shaw. Perhaps they would have their best chance in a world influenced by the thought of a Bertrand Russell, where brakes were clamped on the machine with a few screws loose and some nuts fallen off. But in this great age of science and super-invention was there any possibility of arresting the thing unless it stopped of its own exhaustion?

"Well, what you say, pardner?" demanded Banjo. "Why you jest sidown theah so long studying ovah nothing at all? You gwine with a man or you ain't?"

"Why didn't you tell me before, so I could have signed on like you and make a getaway mahself?"

"Because I wasn't so certain sure a you. Youse a book fellah and you' mind might tell you to do one thing and them books persweahs you to do another. So I wouldn't take no chances. And maybe it's bettah only one of us do this thing this time. Now wese bettah acquainted, theah's a lotta things befoh us we'll have to make together."

"It would have been a fine thing if we could have taken Latnah along, eh?"

"Don't get soft ovah any one wimmens, pardner. Tha's you' big weakness. A woman is a conjunction. Gawd fixed her different from us in moh ways than one. And theah's things we can git away with all the time and she just kain't. Gome on, pardner. Wese got enough between us to beat it a long ways from here."

1929