

Cobb Irvin Shrewsbury

J. Poindexter, Colored



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Irvin Shrewsbury Cobb

J. Poindexter, Colored

Chapter I

Down Yonder

MY name is J. Poindexter. But the full name is Jefferson Exodus Poindexter, Colored. But most always in general I has been known as Jeff, for short. The Jefferson part is for a white family which my folks worked for them one time before I was born, and the Exodus is because my mammy craved I should be named after somebody out of the Bible. How I comes to write this is this way:

It seems like my experiences here in New York is liable to be such that one of my white gentleman friends he says to me I should take pen in hand and write them out just the way they happen and at the time they is happening, or right soon afterwards, whilst the memory of them is clear in my brain; and then he'll see if he can't get them printed somewheres, which on top of the other things which I now is, will make me an author with money coming in steady. He says to me he will fix up the spelling wherever needed and attend to the punctuating; but all the rest of it will be my own just like I puts it down. I reads and

writes very well but someway I never learned to puncture. So the places where it is necessary to be punctual in order to make good sense and keep everything regulation and make the talk sound natural is his doings and also some of the spelling. But everything else is mine and I asks credit.

My coming to New York, in the first place, is sort of a sudden thing which starts here about a month before the present time. I has been working for Judge Priest for going on sixteen years and is expecting to go on working for him as long as we can get along together all right, which it seems like from appearances that ought to be always. But after he gives up being circuit judge on account of him getting along so in age he gets sort of fretful by reasons of him not having much to do any more and most of his own friends having died off on him. When the state begins going Republican about once in so often, he says to me, kind of half joking, he's a great mind to pull up stakes and move off and go live somewheres else. But pretty soon after that the whole country goes dry and then he says to me there just naturally ain't no fitten place left for him to go to without he leaves the United States.

The old boss-man he broods a right smart over this going-dry business. Being a judge and all, he's always been a great hand for upholding the law. But this here is one law which he cannot uphold and yet go on taking of his sweetening drams steady the same as he's been used to doing all his life. And from the statements which he lets fall from time to time I gleans that he

can't hardly make up his mind which one of the two of them – law or liquor – he's going to favor the most when the pinch comes and the supply in the dineroom cupboard begins running low. Every time he starts off for a little trip somewheres and has to tote a bottle along in his hip pocket instead of being able to walk into a grocery and refresh himself over the bar like he's been doing for mighty nigh sixty years, I hears him speaking mumbling¹ words to himself. I hears him saying it's come to a pretty pass when a Kentucky gentleman has either got to compromise with his conscience or play a low-down trick on his appetite. Off and on it certainly does pester him mightily.

But just about the middle of the present summer he gets a letter from his married niece, her which used to be Miss Sally Fanny Priest but is now married to a Yankee gentleman named Fairchild and living in Denver, Colorado. Miss Sally Fanny is the closest kin-folks the old judge has got left in the world; and she ups and writes to him and invites him to come on out there where she lives and stay a spell with them and then toward winter go along with her to a place called Bermuda which it seems like from what she says in the letter, Bermuda is one of these here localities where you can still keep on having a toddy when you feels like it without breaking the law.

So he studies about it awhile and then he says to me one night

¹ Note by Jeff's amanuensis. – In the part of the Union from which Jeff hails and among his race the word *mumbling* denotes complaint, peevishness, a querulous utterance.

he believes he'll go, which he does along about four weeks ago, leaving me behind to sort of look out for the home place out on Clay Street. My wages goes on the same as if he was there, and I has but little to do, but the place seems mighty lonesome to me without the old boss-man pottering 'round doing this and that and the other thing. I certainly does miss seeing the sight of him. Every time I walks through the front part of the house, and it all empty and closed up and smelling kind of musted, and sees his old umbrella hanging on the front hall hat-rack where he forgot and left it there the day he went away, I gets a sort of a low feeling in my mind. It's like having the toothache in a place where there ain't no tooth to have it in.

And I keeps on thinking about the old days when he'd be setting out on the front porch as night-time come on, with some of them old-time friends of his dropping in on him, and me bringing them drinks from the sideboard, and them laughing and smoking and joking and carrying on; or else maybe talking about the Confederate War and the Battle of Shiloh and all. But most of them is now dead and gone and the old judge is away out yonder in Denver, Colorado, a-many and a-many a mile from me; and all I can hear as I comes up the walk from the front gate after dark is the katy-dids calling in the silver-leaf trees and all I can hear when I unlocks the door and goes inside is one of them old chimney swifts up the chimney, going: "*Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!*" I've took notice before now that an empty house which it has always been empty ain't half so lonesome for you to be in

it as one which has been lived in by people you knowed but they have now gone entirely away.

So, after about two weeks of being alone, I gets so restless I feels like I can't stand it very much longer without breaking loose someway. So one Sunday about half past two o'clock in the evening, I'm going on past a young white gentleman by the name of Mr. Dallas Pulliam's house and he comes out on his front porch and calls over to me and tells me to come on in there 'cause he wants to talk to me about something. So I crosses over from the other side of the street and walks up to the porch steps and takes off my hat and asks him how he is getting along and he says he ain't got no complaint and he asks me how is I getting along my own self and I tells him just sort of toler'ble so-and-so, and then he says to me how would I like to take a trip to New York City? I thinks he must be funning. But I says to him, I says:

"How come New York City, Mr. Dallas?"

So he tells me that here lately he's been studying a right smart about going to New York and staying there a spell on a sort of a vacationlike, and if he likes it maybe he'll settle there and go into business. He says he's about made up his mind to take some likely black boy along with him for to be his body-servant and look after his clothes and things and everything and he's thinking that maybe I might be the one to fill the bill; and then he says to me:

"How about it, Jeff – want to go along and give the big town the once-over or not?"

I then sees he is not funning but is making me a straight business proposition. I thanks him and says to him that I has ever had the crave to travel far and wide and that I likewise has often heard New York spoke of as a very pleasant place to go to, by them which has done so, and also a place where something or other is going on most of the time. But I says to him I'm afraid I can't go on account I'm under obligations to Judge Priest by reasons of us having been together so long and him having left me in complete utter charge of our house. He says, though, he thinks maybe he can attend to that part of it all right; he says he'll write a letter to the Judge specifying about what's come up and he's pretty sure it can be fixed up so's I can go. He says if I don't like the job after I gets there, he'll pay my way back home again any time I wants to come, or when the old judge needs me, either one. He says he ain't adopting me, he's just borrowing me.

I always has liked Mr. Dallas Pulliam, him being one of the most freehanded young white gentlemen in town. Of course, off and on, I've heard the rest of the white folks hurraing him behind his back about the way he's handled all that there money which was left to him here a few years back when his paw died. There was that time when he bought a sugar plantation down in Louisiana, sight onseen, and when he went down to see it, couldn't do so without he'd a-done a whole heap of bailing-out first, by reason of its being under three feet of standing water. Anyway, that's what I heard tell; thought I reckon it wasn't noways as bad as what some of the white folks let on. And there

was that other time only a few months back when he decided to start up a buggy-factory. I overhears Judge Priest speaking about that one day to Dr. Lake.

"That young man, Dallas Pulliam, certainly is a sagacious and a farseein' person," he says. "Jest when automobiles has got so cheap that every hill-billy in the county kin afford to own at least one, he's fixin' to go into the buggy-factory business on an extensive scale. Next time I run into him I'm goin' to suggest to him that when the buggy trade seems to sort of slack up, ez possibly it may, that instid of layin' off his hands he might start in to turnin' out flint-lock muskets fur the U. S. Army."

I suspicions that Judge Priest or somebody else must have spoke to Mr. Dallas along those lines because he didn't go into the buggy business after all. For the past several months he ain't been doing much of anything, so far as I knows of, except pranking 'round and courting Miss Henrietta Farrell.

Well, white folks may poke their fun at him unbeknownst, but he's got manners suitable to make him popular with me. He's the kind of a white gentleman that's this here way: He'll wear a new necktie or a fancy vest about three or four times and then he'll get tired of it and pass it on to the first one which comes along. Moreover, him and me is mighty near the same size and I knows full well in advance, just from looking at him that Sunday evening standing there on his porch, that the very same suit of clothes which he's got on then will fit me without practically no alterations. It's a checked suit, too, and mighty catchy to the eye.

So right off I tells him if Judge Priest gives his free will and consent I'll certainly be down at the depot when that there old engine whistle blows for to get aboard for New York City. Which he then asks me for Miss Sally Fanny's address and promises he'll write out there that very night to find out can I go.

It's curious how news does travel 'round in a place that's the right size for everybody in it to know everybody else's business. Before night it has done leaked out somehow that I is seriously considering accepting going to New York with young Mr. Dallas Pulliam; and by next morning, lo and behold, if it ain't all over town! Wherever I goes, pretty near everybody I meets, whites and blacks alike, asks me how about it and allows I'm powerful lucky to get such a chance. Mostly, in times gone by, when my race goes North they heads for Chicago, Illinois, or maybe Detroit, Michigan, or Indianapolis, Indiana. No sooner do they get there than they begins writing back saying that up North is the only fitten place for colored folks to be at; wages high, times easy, and white folks calling you "Mister" and everything pleasant like that. They writes that there is not no Jim Crow cars nor separate seats for colored at the moving-pictures nor nothing like that. But I has taken notice that after awhile most of 'em quits writing back and starts coming back. Some stays but more returns – and is verging on shouting-happy when they crosses the Ohio River coming in. From what I hears some of 'em say after they gets home and has got a full meal of vittles inside of them, and so is got more time to talk, I has made up my mind that so far as my own color is

concerned, the main difference from the South is this: Up North they calls you "Mister" but they don't feed you!

Still, New York City ain't Chicago, Illinois, nor yet it ain't Detroit, Michigan; and besides, working for Mr. Dallas Pulliam, I won't have to be worrying about when does I eat next. Still, even so, I says to myself that it won't be no harm to inquire round now that the word is done leaked out anyhow, and learn something more than what little I knows about New York City. But it seems like, outside of some few white folks, there is not nobody I knows who's ever been there, excusing a few head of draft-boys which went there enduring of the early part of the war; and they wouldn't scarcely count neither on account of them just passing through and not staying over only just a short time whilst waiting for the boat to start. Howsomever, they tells me, one and all, that from what they did see of it they is willing to recommend it very highly.

One or two of the white gentlemen which I is well acquainted with, they tells me the same, too. Mr. Jere Fairleigh he takes me into his law office when I meets him on the street and speaks to him about it; and he gets a book all about New York down off of one of his shelves and he reads to me where the book says that in New York there is more of these here Germans than there is in any German city except one, and more Russians than there is in any Russia city except none, and more Italians than there is in any Italy city except one, and more Hungarians than there is in any Hungry city at all, and so on and so forth. I says to him, I says:

"Mr. Jere, it seems lak they is mo' of ever' nation in Noo Yawk 'en whut they is anywhars else. But they does not 'pear to be nothin' said 'bout 'Merikins. How come, suh?"

He says he reckons there's so few of them there that the man which wrote the book didn't figure it was worth while putting them in. Still, he says I'll probably run into somebody once in awhile which speaks the United States language.

"Most every policeman does," he says, "I understand it's the law that they have to be able to speak it before they'll let 'em go on the force, so as they can understand the foreigners that come over from the mainland of North America to visit in New York."

The way he looks – so sort of serious – when he says that, I can't tell if he's in earnest or not. I judges, though, that he's just having his fumdiddles with me. And then he goes on and tells me that the biggest of everything and the tallest and the richest and the grandest is found there and if I don't believe it is, I can just ask any New Yorker after I gets there and he'll tell me the same.

So, taking one thing with another, I'm mighty much pleased when the word comes along in about a week from then that the old judge says I can go and sends me his best wishes and a twenty-dollar bill as a parting gift and friendship offering. He says in the letter, which Mr. Dallas reads to me, to tell me to be sort of careful about sampling the stock of liquor and cigars on the sideboard of any New York family when I'm in their house, and also not to start in wearing a strange Yankee gentleman's clothes without telling him about it first. He says people up

there probably don't understand local customs as they have ever prevailed down our way, and if I ain't careful, first thing I know there'll be a skinny black nigger named Jeff locked up in the county jail hollowing for help and not no help handy.

But that's just the old boss-man's joke. He always is been the beatenest one for twitting me about little things around the house! Mr. Dallas he knows how to take what the Judge says and so does I and we has quite a laugh together over the letter.

And lessen twenty-four hours from that time we is both all packed up and on our way, New York bound, me wearing one of Mr. Dallas' suits of clothes which I figures he ain't had it on his back more than five or six times before altogether. It's a suit of a most pleasing pattern, too. And cut very stylish, with a belt in the back.

Chapter II

North Bound

NEXT morning after we gets across into Ohio, Mr. Dallas he fetches me into the Pullman car where he's riding. I finds myself more comfortable there than I has been riding up front in the colored compartment, but lesser easy in my mind. I enjoys the feel of them soft seats and yet I gets sort of uneasy setting amongst so many strange white folks. Still, there ain't nobody telling me to roust myself out from there and after a while I gets more used to being where I now is. Also I gets acquainted with two of the porters, the one on our car and the one on the car which is hitched on next to us. When they ain't busy, we all three gets out in the little porches betwixt the cars and confabs together. 'Course I don't let on to them, but all the time I studies them two boys. The one on our car, which his given name is Roscoe, is short and chunky and kind of fatted out; he's black as the pots and powerful nappy-headed besides. His head looks like somebody has done dipped it in a kettle of grease and then throwed a handful of buckshot at it and they all stuck. But he's smart; he knows what's service. I sees that plain.

With Roscoe it's this way: A lady gets on board the car. No sooner does she sit down and begin to fumble with the hat-pins than there's old Roscoe standing right alongside of her holding a

big paper bag in his hands all opened out for her to put her hat in it and keep it out of the dust. A gentleman setting in the smoking-room reaches in his pocket and gets a cigar out. Before he rightly can bite the end of it off, here is this here same Roscoe at his elbow with a match ready. Roscoe he ain't hanging back waiting for folks to ask him for something and then have them getting all fretful whilst he's running to find whatever 'tis they wants. No sir, not him. He's there with the materials almost before they is made up their minds what it is they craves next. He just naturally beats 'em to it; which I'll tell the world that's service.

He's powerful crafty about his tips, too. When he does something for a passenger and the passenger reaches in his pocket to get a little piece of chicken-feed out to hand over to Roscoe, he smiles and holds up his hand.

"No, suh," he says to him, "keep yore funds whar they now is, please, suh. There ain't no hurry – we're goin' travel quite a piece together. W'en we gits to whar you gits off, ef you is puffec'ly satisfied wid all whut has been done in yore behalf then you kin slip me a lil' reward, ef you's a-mind to."

He tells me in confidences that working it that-a-way he gets dollars where he would a-got dimes. He calls it his deferred payment plan. He says some months his tips run three times what his wages is. I'll say that old tar-baby certainly is got something in his head besides sockets for his teeth to set in.

The other porter, the one which is on the car next behind, is as different from Roscoe as day is from night. He calls himself

Harold. But I knows just from looking at him that he's too old for such a fancy entitlement as that. 'Cause Harold is a new-issue name amongst us colored, and this here boy must be rising of forty years old, if he's a day. This Harold is yellow-complected and yet he ain't the pure high yellow, neither; he's more the shade of a slice of scorched sponge cake. He's plenty uppidity. And I takes notice that the further North the train goes the more uppidity he gets. He quits saying "No, ma'am," and "Yas, suh," almost before we leaves Cincinnati. He quits saying "Thanky, *suh*," and he starts saying "*I* thank you," in such a way it sounds like he was actually doing you a favor to accept your two bits. He starts talking back to passengers which complains about something. He acts more and more begrudgeful until it looks like it must actually hurt him to step along and do something which somebody on the train wants done. Along about Pittsburgh he's got so brash that I keeps watching for some white man to rise up and knock that boy's mouth so far round from the middle of his face it'll look like his side-entrance. But nothing like that don't happen and I is most deeply surprised and marvels greatly. I says to myself, I says:

"Harold," I says, "I aims to git yore likeness well fixed in my mind 'cause I got a presentermint 'at you ain't goin' be 'round yere so very much longer an' I wants to be able to remember how you looked, after you is gone frum us. Some these times you is goin' git yore system mixed an' start bein' biggotty on yore way South an' 'en you is due to wake up at the end of yore run all organized

to attend yore own fune'l. Yas, suh, man, w'en you comes to in Newerleans you'll a-been daid fully twelve hours. I kin jest shut my eyes right now an' see the cemetery sexton pattin' you in the face wid a spade."

I talks to him about the way he acts. Course I does not come right out and ask him about it; but I leads him up to it gentle and roundabout. He tells me he don't aim to let nobody run over him. He tells me he considers himself just as good as they is, if not better. He says he lives in a place called Jersey City where the colored race gets their bounden rights and if they don't get 'em they up and contends for 'em until they do. I says to him, I says:

"Harold," I says, "I ain't never been about nowhars much till this present trip an' I ain't never seen much, so you must excuse of my ign'ence but the way it looks to me, I'd ruther be happy amongst niggers then miser'ble amongst w'ite folks."

He says to me ain't I got no respect for my color? I says to him I's got so much respect for it that I ain't aiming to jam myself into places where I ain't desired. He says that ain't the point; he says the point is that I is got to stand up for the entitled rights and privileges of the colored race. I says where I comes from I also has got to think about keeping from getting my head all peeled. He says to me I'll find out before I has been long up North that there is a sight of difference betwixt Kentucky and New Jersey. I says to him that most doubtless he is right. And then he says I should also be careful about speaking the word "nigger." He says the word ain't never used no more amongst colored folks which

respects themselves. I says to him, I says:

"Huh!" I says. "Well, then, whut does you call a boy w'en you's blabbin' 'long wid him friendly-lak?"

He says it is different when I is strictly amongst my own color, but that I mustn't never speak the word "nigger" in front of white folks nor never allow no white man to call me that and get away with it.

I says:

"Not even ef you is wu'kin' fur him an' he don't call it to you to hurt yore feelin's nor to demean you but jest sez it sociable an' so-an'-so?"

He says:

"Not under no circumstances whutsomever."

I says:

"How is I goin' stop him?"

He says:

"Wid yore fists. Or half of a loose brick. Or somethin'."

I says to Harold:

"Harold," I says, "you shore wuz right jest now w'en you norrated 'at they wuz a diff'ience betwixt Kintucky an' up-North. Well, live an' learn," I says, "live an' learn. Only, ef I aims to learn from you I has doubts whether I'll live so ver' much longer."

We talks some more about making money, too. It seems like the closer you gets to New York City the more you thinks about money. I noticed it then and I notices it since, frequent. He says to me that some of the boys in the sleeping-car portering business

don't depend just on their wages and their tips alone. He says they has another way for to pick up loose change. He says he don't follow after it himself; he says he has got one or two other boys in mind which he has talked with 'em and knows how they does it.

I says to him, I says:

"Specify?"

He says:

"The way these yere boys gits they money is 'at they gits it late at night after ever'body has done went to baid. Most gin'elly a man 'at's travelin' he don't keep track of his loose change. Anyhow, he don't keep near ez close track of it ez he do w'en he's home. He's buyin' hisse'f a cigar yere an' a paper-back book there an' a apple in this place an' a sandwitch in 'at place, an' he jest stick the change in his pants pocket an' goes on 'bout his bus'ness. Well, come baid-time, he turns in. We'll say you is the porter on his car. You goes th'ough the car till you comes to his berth. You parts the curtains jest ez easy ez you kin an' you peeps in th'ough the crack an' see ef he's sleepin' good. Ef his pants is all folded up smooth you better ramble along an' leave 'at man be. Folded pants is most gine'lly a sign of a careful man w'ich the chances is he knows how much he's got to a cent. But ef his pants is kind of wadded-up in the lil' hammock or flung to one side sort of keerless-lak, you reaches in an' you lifts 'em out. But fust you wants to be shore he's sleepin' sound. Them w'ich sleeps on the back wid the mouth open is the safestest."

I says to him, I says:

"Yes, but s'posen' he do wake up an' ketch you fumblin' 'round insides of his berth. Whut then?"

"Oh," he says, "tha's all purvided fur in the ritual. You sez to him: "Scuse me, mister, I med a mistake. I thought you wuz the gen'lman 'at lef' a early call fur to git off at Harrisburg.' But most in gine'l he don't wake up. So you gits his pants out into the aisle an' goes th'ough 'em. Ef he's got somewhars 'round five dollars in loose change in his pockets, you teks fifty cents, no mo' an' no less, an' 'en you slips his pants back whar you found 'em an' go 'long. Ef he's got somewhars 'round ten dollars in chicken-feed an' in ones an' twos, you assesses him dues of jest one dollar even. Ef you plays yore system right an' don't git greedy they ain't one chanc't in a thousand 'at he'll miss the money w'en he wakes up. But," he says, "they's one fatal exception to the rule. W'en you come to him, don't touch a cent of his money no matter how much he's carryin' on him. 'Cause ef you do he's shore to mek a hollow the very fust thing in the mornin' an' next thing you know you's in trouble an' they's beckonin' you up on the cyarpet."

I says to him, I says:

"Wait a minute," I says. "Lemme see ef I can't name you the exception my own se'f. The exception," I says, "is the w'ite man w'ich he carries all his small change in one of these yere lil' screwed-up leather purses. Ain't it?"

And he says yes, for a fact, that's so. But he says how come I is knowing so much when I ain't never done no portering my own self. And I says to him, a man don't need to be wearing

railroading clothes to know that any white man which totes around one of them little tight patent purses knows at all times, sleeping or waking, just exactly how much money he's got.

Well, when we gets to New York City it's morning again. When we comes out of the depot onto the street I takes one look round and I allows to myself that these here New York folks certainly is got powerfully behind someway with their hauling. Excusing the time we had the cyclone down home, I ain't never in my whole life seen so much truck and stuff and things moving in all different directions at the same time. And people —*who-ee!* Every which-a-way I looks all I can see is a multitude of strangers. And I says to myself there certainly must be a big convention going on in this town for the streets to be so full of visiting delegates and it's a mighty good thing for us Mr. Dallas is done sent a telegram on ahead for rooms at the hotel, else we'd have to camp out with some private family same as they does down home in county-fair week or when the district Methodist conference meets.

The white gentleman that's going to fix up what I writes, he told me that I should set down my first impressions of New York before I begins to forget 'em. He says they'll make good local color, whatever that is. Which I will now do so:

The thing which impresses me first and foremost is a steamboat I sees on the river which runs alongside New York City on the side nearest to Paducah. She is not no side-wheeler nor yet she ain't no stern-wheeler, which all the steamboats I has

ever seen before is naturally bound to be one or the other. As near as I can tell, she has not got no wheel at all, side- or stern-. It would seem that what runs her is a kind of a big hump-back timber which sticks up out of the middle of her hurricane deck and works up and down, and which Mr. Dallas tells me is known as a walking-beam. But it seems like to me that's certainly a most curiousome way to run a steamboat and I says to myself that wonders will never cease!

And the thing which impresses me next most is a snack-stand on a sidewalk where they is selling watermelons by the slice – and it the middle of August!

And next to that the most impressiveness is when I sees a gang of black fellows working on a levee down by this same river, only it's mighty flat-looking for a levee. These boys is working there roustabouting freight, and there ain't a single one of 'em which is singing as he goes back and forth. When a river-nigger down our way don't sing whilst he's loading, it's a sign something is wrong with him and next thing he knows he don't know nothing by reason of the mate having lammed him across the head with a hickory gad. But this here gang is going along just as dumb as if they was white. I wonders to myself if thereby they is hoping to fool somebody into believing they is white?

I will therefore state that these three things is the things which impresses me the most highly on my first arrival in New York. I also takes notice of the high buildings. They strikes me as being quite high; but of course when you starts in to build a high

building, highness is naturally what you aims for, ain't it?

Chapter III

Manhattan Isle

THE day we gets to New York is the day before yesterday and we has been on the go so constant ever since and I has seen so much it seems like my ideas is all mixed up together same as a mess of scrambled eggs. The way it looks to me, the mainest difficulty with an author, especially if he's kind of new at the authorizing business, is not so much to find something to write up as 'tis to pick out the special things which should be wrote up and just leave the rest be. So it is now my aim to set forth the main points which sticks out in my mind.

Well, first off, soon as we gets in, we goes to the hotel. Beforehand, Mr. Dallas he says to me it's a quiet hotel up-town; but when we arrives at it I takes a look around and I says to myself that if this here is a quiet hotel they shore must have to wear ear-mufflers at one of the noisy ones if they hopes to hear themselves think. To begin with, she don't look like no hotel I've ever been used to. She rears herself away up in the air, same as a church steeple, only with windows all the way up, and although the weather is pleasant there is not no white folks setting in chairs under the front gallery. In the first place, there is not nothing which looks like a gallery, excusing it's a little glass to-do which sticks out over the pavement at the main entrance, and if anybody

was to try setting there the only way he could save his feet from being mashed off by people trampling on 'em would be for him to have both legs sawed off at the ankles. You'd think that, being up-town, the neighborhood would be kind of quiet, with shade trees and maybe some vacant lots here and there, but, no, sir; it's all built up solid and the crowds is mighty near as thick as what they was down around the depot and in just as much of a hurry to get to wherever it is they is bound for.

Even with all the jamming and all the excitement going on they must a-been expecting us. The way they fusses over Mr. Dallas is proof to my mind that somebody must a-told 'em in advance that he belongs to the real quality down where we comes from, and I certainly is puffed up with pride to be along with him. Because if he had been the King of Europe they could not have showed him no higher honors than what they does.

No sooner does we pull up at the curb-stone in front than a huge big tall white man dressed up something like a Knights of Templar is opening the taxihack door for us to get out; and two or three white boys in militia suits comes a-running at his call and snatches the baggage away from me; and another member of the Grand Lodge, in full uniform, is standing just inside the front door to give us the low bow of welcome as we walks into a place which it is all done up with marble posts and with red wallpaper on the walls and gold chicken-coops on every side until it puts me in mind of a country nigger's notion of Heaven. Over at the clerk's enclosure three white men is waiting very eager to

receive us, which each and every one of 'em is wearing his dress-up clothes with a standing collar and long-tailed coat the same as though he was fixing to be best man at a wedding or pall-bearer at a funeral or something else extra special and fancy. For all it's summer-time there is not nobody loafing round there in his shirt sleeves – I bet you there ain't!

One of the pall-bearing gentlemen shoves the book round for Mr. Dallas to write his name in it and the second one he reaches for the keys and the third one he looks to see if there is not some mail or telegrams for him. It takes no lessen a number than three of them white boys in the soldier clothes to escort Mr. Dallas upstairs and a fourth one he grabs up my valise and takes me on an elevator to the servants' annex. He don't have to run the elevator himself, neither. There's another hand just to do that alone and all my white boy is got to do is wrestle my baggage. It's the first time in my life ever I has had a white person toting my belongings for me and it makes me feel kind of abovish and important. Also, I takes notice that when he gets to my room he keeps hanging round fussing with the window shade and first one thing and then another, same as if he was one of the bell-boys at the hotel down home waiting on a traveling man. Course he's lingering round till he gets his tip. For quite a spell I lets him linger on and suffer. I lets on like I don't suspicion what he's hanging about that-a-way for. Then I slips him two-bits and I don't begrudge it to him, neither, account of it giving me such a satisfactory feeling to be high-toning a white boy.

I says to myself that if this here is the annex where they boards the transom² help, what must the main part of the hotel where the regular guests stays at be like? Because my room certainly is mighty stylish-looking and full of general grandeur. But I ain't got no time to be staying there and enjoying the furniture, because I knows Mr. Dallas will be needing me for to come and wait on him. So I starts right out to find him and it seems like I travels half a mile through them hallways before I does so. He's got a big setting-room all to himself and a fashionable bedroom and a special bath and a little special hall and all.

I says to him, I says:

"Mr. Dallas, they shore must be monstrous set-up over havin' you pick out they hotel fur us to stop at. Look how the reception committee turned out fur you downstairs in full regalia? Look how they mouty nigh broke they necks fur to usher you in in due state? And now ef they ain't done gone an' 'sign you to the bridal chamber an' give you the upstairs parlor fur yore own use, mo' over! It p'intedly indicates to me 'at they sets a heap of store by you."

He sort of laughs at that.

"Why, Jeff," he says, "if you think this is a fine lay-out you should see some of the other *suites* they have here."

I says:

"I ain't cravin' to see 'em. I done seen sweetness 'nuff ez 'tis. They su'ttinly is usin' us noble."

² It is believed that Jeff meant "transient."

He says they should ought to use us noble seeing what the price is they charges us. He says:

"Do you know what I'm paying here for the accommodations for the two of us? I'm paying twenty-seven dollars and a half."

I says to him if that's the case he better let me clear out of there right brisk and skirmish round and find me a respectable colored boarding house somewheres handy by, so's to cut down the expenses, because, I don't care what anybody says, twenty-seven dollars and a half is a sight of money to be paying out every week.

He says:

"Twenty-seven and a half a week – huh! Remember, Jeff, we are in New York now where everything runs high. This stands me twenty-seven and a half a day."

I says to him, I says:

"*Who-ee!*" I says. "No wonder they kin purvide fancy garments fur all the hands an' buy solid gold bars fur the cage whar they keeps them clerks penned up. Mr. Dallas," I says, "it shore is behoovin' on us to eat hearty th'ee times a day in awder fur to git our money's worth whilst we's boardin' yere."

He says, though, for me not to overtax my appetite just on that account because the eating is besides; he says we pays twenty-seven dollars and a half a day just for our rooms.

I says to him, I says:

"Mr. Dallas, let's git out of yere befo' they begins chargin' us up fur the air we breathes!"

He says:

"You're too late with your suggestion; they do charge us for that. The air is all cleaned and cooled before it comes into these rooms."

Then I knows for sure he is burlesqueing me. Who's going to hold the air whilst they cleans it? And the Good Lord Himself can't chill air to order in the middle of a August hot spell, let alone a lot of folks running a hotel – can He? I asks Mr. Dallas them questions.

But he just laughs and say to me that there's not no need to worry, because he won't be staying there only just a day or so. He says Mr. H. C. Raynor, which is his principalest friend in New York and the one which he's thinking about maybe going into business with, has done devised for us to hire some ready-furnished quarters still higher up-town. He says something about 'em being Sublette quarters in a department-house; leastwise that's what I makes out of what he says. That's news to me in more ways than one because, in the first place, I didn't know any of the Sublettes, which is a very plentiful white connection in our county, had done moved up here to live, and in the second place it seemed like to me there just naturally couldn't be no more up-town to New York City than what I already had done observed coming from the train.

He goes on to say he is expecting to hear from the gentleman almost any minute now and then he'll know better what the program is. Almost before he gets the words out of his mouth the

telephone bell rings and sure enough, it is this here Mr. Raynor which is on the wire, and it turns out that the place where we're going is ready for us now on account of the folks which owns it having gone away sooner than what they expected, and the further tidings is that we can move up there that same day, which we does – along about an hour before supper-time. I notices they don't make near as much fuss over us going thence from there as they did whilst ushering of us in. I judges the man what owns the hotel must be feeling kind of put-out about losing of all that there money which we'd be paying him had we a-stayed on.

We gets into a taxihack and we rides for what seems like to me it's several miles and still are not nowheres near the outskirts as far as I can judge, and when finally we gets to the new location I has another astonishment. For here all day I've been expecting we'd land at a private residence but this place to which we've come at don't look like no private residence to me. It's more like the hotel we just left only more bigger and mighty near as tall. In all other respects additional it certainly is a grand establishment.

It's got a kind of a private road so's carriages can drive in under shelter off the sidewalk and 'way back inside is a round piece of ground all fixed up with solid marble benches and little cedar trees and flowerbeds, like a cemetery. I thinks to myself that maybe this here is the private burying-plot for the owner's family; but still there ain't no tombstones in sight excepting one over the front door with words cut on it, and since I figures I has done showed ignorance enough for one day, I don't ask no fool

questions about it. The help here also wears fancy clothes, but is my own color. I'm glad of that because I counts now on having some black folks to get acquainted with and to talk to; but just as soon as one of 'em opens his mouth and speaks I knows they is not my kind even if they is my complexion. Because he don't talk like no white folks ever I knowed and yet he don't talk like none of the black folks does at home. Still, just from his conversation I can place him. There was two just like him which was brought along once by a Northern family staying in our town but they didn't linger long amongst us. They didn't like the place and no more the place didn't like them. They claimed they was genuine West Indians, whatever that is, and they made their brags constant that they also was British subjects. But Aunt Dilsey Turner she always said they looked more like objects to her. Aunt Dilsey, which she was Judge Priest's cook for going on twenty years, is mighty plain-spoken about folks and things which she don't fancy. And she did not fancy these two none whatsoever.

When we gets upstairs to our section I'm sort of disappointed in it. The furniture ain't new and shiny like what I naturally expected 'twould be. Most of it is kind of old and dingy and hacked-up-looking. The curtains at the setting-room windows is all frayed-like and mighty near wore through in spots. And the Sublette family must a-run out of money before they got round to buying the carpets because they is not no carpets at all but only a passel of old faded rugs scattered about the floor here and there. Some of the chairs – the best company chairs, too – is so

old they is actually decrepit. I'd say that by rights they belonged in a second-hand store, or leastways up in the attic. Moreover, they ain't no upstairs to our department nor yet there is not no downstairs nor no cellar, but instead, everything, kitchen, pantry, and the rooms for the help and all, runs on one floor. But Mr. Dallas he deports himself like he is satisfied and it ain't for me to be finding fault if he sees fitten not to find any.

Anyway, I is so busy for a little while flying round and getting things unpacked that I has no time to utter complaints. Pretty soon, though, I has to knock off hanging up Mr. Dallas' suits to mix a batch of cocktails from the private stock he has brought along with him in one of his trunks, because this here Mr. Raynor he telephones he's bringing some of his friends for a round of drinks with Mr. Dallas and then Mr. Raynor says they'll ride out in his motor-car to a road-house to get 'em some dinner. I takes his message off the telephone and I knows that's what he says, surprising though it do sound.

That's a couple of new ones on me – eating dinner when it's already mighty near past supper-time and eating it at a road-house, too! I says to myself that New York City is getting to act more curiouser to me every minute I stays in it. Because the only road-house ever I knowed of by that name used to stand alongside the toll-gate just outside the corporation limits on the Mayfield road and the old white man which collected the tolls lived in it, his name being Mr. Gip Bayless. But the gate is done torn down since the public government taken over the gravel roads,

and anyhow, even in its most palmiest days, none of the quality wouldn't never think of stopping there at that little old rusty house for their vittles. They'd mighty near as soon think of having a picnic at the pest-house.

Still and notwithstanding, Mr. Dallas ain't indicating no surprise when I conveys to him what Mr. Raynor says, so I reflects to myself that if toll-gate houses up here is in proportion to everything else this one which they're aiming to go to, must probably be about the size of a county courthouse, with a slate roof on it and doubtless a cupola. So I just gets busy and mingles up a batch of powerful tasty cocktails in the shaker. I knows they is tasty from a couple of private samples which I pours off for myself out in the pantry. My experience has been that the only way you can tell is a cocktail just right is to taste it from time to time as you goes along.

Immediately soon here comes Mr. Raynor with his friends which there is four of them, besides himself – one other gentleman named Bellows and three ladies. One of the ladies is older than the other two, but decorated more younger, if anything, than what they is. Introducing her to Mr. Dallas, Mr. Raynor says her name is Mrs. Gaylord but they all calls her Jerry. She's pretty near entirely out of eyebrows, but she has got more than a bushel of hair which is all kind of frozen-looking and curled up tight on her head. It don't look natural to me and I knows it ain't natural a little bit later when Mr. Raynor sets down on the arm of her chair and throws his arm around her sort of

offhand and sociable-like, and she up and tells him for Heaven's sake to be careful and not muss her up because she says she's only just that day spent forty dollars and four hours getting a permanent wave put in.

At that I says to myself, I says:

"Well, betwixt w'ites an' blacks we su'ttinly is mekin' the world safe fur them beauty doctors. Niggers down South spendin' all the money they kin rake an' scrape together gittin' the kinkiness tuck out of they haids an' fashionable ladies up yere spendin' their'n gittin' it put in! It's a compliment to one race or the other, but jest w'ich I ain't purpared to say."

The other ladies is named Miss O'Brien and Miss DeWitt but it's kind of hard for me at first to remember which from which seeing that the rest of the party scarcely ever calls 'em anything except Pat and Bill-Lee. They is both mighty nice and friendly but they is exclusively different one from the other. Miss Pat she's got her hair chopped off short like a little boy's and she acts kind of like a boy does, too – free and easy and laughing a lot and smoking a cigarette so natural that it's like as if she must a-been born with one in her mouth and it lighted. And yet for all that, I seems to get the impression that way down underneath she's kind of tired of herself and everything around her.

But this here Miss DeWitt she is tall and slender and kind of quiet. She must a-been feeling poorly lately because her face is just dead-white and her lips is still bright red from the fever and when she sets down in a chair she just seems to kind of fall back

into it, all limp-like. She ain't saying much with her mouth but she does a sight of talking with her eyes which is big and black and sort of lazy-like most of the time. She sure is decked up with jewelry like the Queen of Sheba, too. She's got big heavy necklaces round her neck and great long ear-rings in her ears and many bracelets on both her arms. She's even got two big bracelets clamped round one of her ankles, which I judges she didn't have room for 'em nowheres else and so put 'em there to keep from losing 'em; and when she moves the jewelry all jingles freely and advertises her. She walks with a kind of a limber swimming gait, soft and glideful; of course it ain't exactly like swimming and yet that's the only way I can designate what her walking puts me in mind of. She wears dead black clothes and that makes her paleness seem all the more so.

Right from the first jump I can see that Mr. Dallas is drawed to her powerful, and I thinks to myself that if he's fixing to favor this here languid lady with his attentions it proves he's got a changeable taste because she ain't nothing at all similar to Miss Henrietta Farrell, which she is the one that he's been courting these past few months down in Kentucky. In fact, she's most teetotally unsimilar.

This Mr. Bellows which came with Mr. Raynor he don't detain my attention much. If he wasn't there you wouldn't scarcely miss him; and when he is there you don't scarcely observe him. He makes me think of a neat haircut and nothing else. You just appreciate him being present and that's all. But I studies Mr.

Raynor every chance I gets, the more especially because he's the one which is more or less responsible for us having come North. He's very cheering in his ways; laughing and whooping out loud at everything and poking fun and telling Mr. Dallas that he must be good friends with Mr. Bellows and the three ladies because they is all four of 'em his friends. But I takes note that when he laughs he don't laugh with his eyes but only with his mouth, and when he sort of smiles to himself, quiet-like, it puts me in mind of a man drawing a knife. I can't keep from having a kind of a feeling when I looks at him!

Well, they imbibes up all the cocktails that I has waiting for them and a batch more which I makes by request and then they packs up a couple of bottles – one Scotch and one Bourbon – to take along with 'em for to refresh themselves with at the road-house and off they puts. And the last thing I hears as they goes down the hall is Mr. Raynor still laughing from off the top of his palates and the sickly one, Miss DeWitt's necklaces and things all jingling like a road-gang. Mr. Dallas he calls back to me from the elevator that I needn't wait up for him because it is liable to be pretty late when he gets in. But it's a good thing I does wait up, dozing off and on between times, because when he arrives back, along about half past three in the morning, he certainly does need my assistance getting his clothes off of him. Not since Dryness come in has I seen a young white gentleman more thoroughly overtaken than what he is. And we got a-plenty vigorous drinkers down our way, too! And always did have!

So then I goes to bed myself and that's the end of our first day. And the following day, which it was yesterday, is the day I gets lost.

Which I will tell about that, next.

Chapter IV

Harlem Heights

WELL, in the morning I arranges a snack of nuturious breakfast on a tray and takes it in to Mr. Dallas. But he ain't craving nothing solid to eat. He's just craving to lay still and favor his headache. Soon as he opens his eyes he starts in groaning like he's done got far behind with his groaning and is striving for to catch up. And I knows he must a-felt powerful good last night to be feeling so bad this morning. Misery may love company, as some say it do, but I takes notice that very often she don't arrive till after the company is gone.

He tells me to take them vittles out of his sight and fix him up about a gallon of good cold ice-water and set it alongside his bed in easy reach and then I can leave him be where he is and go on out for awhile and seek amusement looking at the sights and scenes of New York City. But when I gets to the door he calls out to me I better make it two gallons. Which I knows by that he ain't so far gone but what he still can joke.

So I goes on out, just strolling along in a general direction, a-looking at this and admiring of that; and there certainly is a heap for to see and for to admire. The houses is so tall it seems like the sky is resting almost on the tops of 'em and it's mighty near the bluest sky and the clearest ever I seen. It makes you want to get up

there and fly round in it. But down below in the street there ain't so very much brightness by reasons of the buildings being so high they cuts off the daylight somewhat. It's like walking through a hollow betwixt steep hills.

People is stirring around every which-a-way, both on foot and in automobiles; and most of the automobiles is all shined up nice and clean like as if the owners was going to take part in an automobile parade in connection with the convention. Everybody is extensively well-dressed, too, but most all is wearing a kind of a brooding look like they had family troubles at home or something else to pester 'em. And they ain't stopping one another when they meets and saying ain't it a lovely morning and passing the time of day, like we does down home. Even some of them which comes out of the same house together just goes bulging on without a word to nobody, and I remarks to myself that a lot of the neighbors in this district must a-had a falling-out amongst themselves and quit speaking. The children on the sidewalk ain't playing much together, neither. Either they plays off by themselves or they just walks along with their keepers.

And there is almost as many dogs as there is children, mostly small, fool-looking dogs; and the dogs is all got keepers, too, dragging 'em on chains and jerking 'em up sharp when they tries to linger and smell round for strange smells and confab with passing dogs. Near as I can make out, the dogs here ain't allowed to behave like regulation dogs, and the children mainly tries to act like as if they was already growed-up, and the growed-up ones

has caught the prevailing glumness disease and I is approximately almost the only person in sight that's getting much enjoyment out of being in New York.

All of a sudden I hears the dad-blamedest *blim-blamming* behind me. I turns round quick and here comes the New York City paid fire department going to a fire. The biggest fire-engine ever I sees goes scooting by, tearing the road wide open and making a most awful racket. Right behind comes the hook-and-ladder wagon with the firemen hanging onto both sides of it, trying to stick fast and put their rubber coats on at the same time; and right behind it comes a big red automobile, *licketty-split*. Setting up alongside the driver of it is a gentleman in blue clothes and brass buttons, which he's got a big cigar clamped betwixt his teeth and looks highly important. But he ain't wearing a flannel shirt open at the throat, but has got his coat on and it buttoned up, so I assumes it can't be the chief of the department but probably must be the mayor. And in less'n no time they all has swung off into a side street, two squares away, with me taking out after 'em down the middle of the street fast as I can travel.

Now, every town where I've been at heretofore to this, when the fire-bell rings everybody drops whatever they is doing and goes to the fire. Elsewhere from New York, enjoying fires is one of the main pleasures of people; but soon I is surprised to see that I'm pretty near the only person which is trailing along after the department. Whilst I'm still wondering over this circumstance, but still running also, a police grabs me by the arm and asks me

where is I going in such a big hurry?

I tells him I is going to the fire. And he says to me that I might as well slow up and save my breath because it's liable to be quite a long trip for me. I asks him how come, and he says the fire is probably three or four miles from here and maybe even considerable further than that. And I says to him, that must make it mighty inconvenient for all concerned, having the fires so far away from the engine-house. At that he sort of chuckles and tells me to be on my way, but to keep my eyes open and not let the cows nibble me. Well, as I says to myself going away from him, I may be green, but I is getting some enjoyment out of being here which is more'n I can say for some folks round these parts, judging by what I has seen up to this here present moment.

So I meanders along, looking at this and that, and turning corners every once in awhile; and after a spell it comes to me that I has meandered myself into an exceedingly different neighborhood from the one I started out from. The houses is not so tall and is more or less rusty-looking; and there's a set of railroad tracks running through, built up on a high trestle; and whilst there has been a falling-off in dogs there has been an ample increase in children; the place just swarms with 'em. These here children is running loose all over the sidewalks and out in the streets, too, but it seems like to me they spends more time quarreling than what they does playing. Or maybe it sounds like quarreling because they has to hollow so loud on account of all the noises occurring round 'em.

I decides to go back, but the trouble is I don't rightly know which is the right way to turn. I've been sashaying about so, first to the right and then to the left, that I ain't got no more sense of direction than one of these here patent egg-beaters. So I rambles on, getting more and more bewildered-like all the time, till I comes to another police and I walks up to him and states my perdicterment to him very polite and tells him I needs help getting back to where I belongs at.

He looks at me very strict, like he can't make up his mind whether he'd better run me in for vagromcy or let me go, and then he says, kind of short:

"Make it snappy, then. Where d'ye live?"

I tells him I has done forgot the name of the street, if indeed I ever heard it, but from the looks of it I judges it must be the chief resident street where the best families resides. I tells him we has just moved in there, Mr. Dallas Pulliam and me, and has started up housekeeping in the department-house which stands on the principal corner. I tells him it's the department-house where the inmates all lives in layers, one upon top of the other, like martins in a martin box.

"You mean apartment-house," he says; "department store, but apartment-house. Well, what's the name of this apartment-house, then, if you can't remember the street?"

That makes me scratch under my hat, too. 'Cause I pointedly doesn't know that neither.

"Nummine the name, boss," I says, "jest you, please suh, tell

me whar'bouts is the leadin' apartment-house of this yere city of Noo Yawk; that'll be it – the leadin'est one. 'Cause Mr. Dallas Pulliam he is accustom' to the best whar'ever he go."

But he only acts like he's getting more and more impatient with me.

"Describe it," he says, "describe it! There's one chance in a thousand that might help. What does it look like?"

So I tells him what it looks like – how a little private road winds in and circles round a little place which is like a family-burying-ground, and about the hands downstairs at the front door all being from West Indiana, and about there being two elevators for the residenters and one more for the help, and about us having took over the Sublette family's outfit and all.

"No use," he says, when I gets through, "that sounds just like most of the expensive ones." He starts walking off like he has done lost all interest in my case. Then he calls back to me over his shoulder:

"I'll tell you what's the matter with you," he says; "you're lost."

"Yas, suh," I says; "thanky, suh – tha's whut I been suspicionin' my own se'f," I says, "but I'm much oblige' you agrees wid me."

Still, that ain't helping much, to find out this here police thinks the same way I does about it. Whilst I is lingering there wondering what I better do next, if anything, I sees a street-car go scooting by up at the next crossing, and I gets an idea. If street cars in New York is anything like they is at home, sooner or later they all turns into the main street and runs either past the City

Hall or to the Union Depot. So I allows to myself that go on up yonder and climb aboard the next car which comes along and stay on her, no matter how far she goes, till she swings back off the branch onto the trunk-line, and watch out then, and when she goes past our corner drop off. Doing it that-a-way I figures that sooner or later I'm bound to fetch up back home again.

Anyhow, the scheme is worth trying, 'specially as I can't seem to think of no better one. So I accordingly does so.

But I ain't staying on that car so very long; not more than a mile at the most. The reason I gets off her so soon is this: All at once I observes that I is skirting through a district which is practically exclusively all colored. On every side I sees nothing but colored folks, both big and little. Seemingly, everything in sight is organized by and for my race – colored barber-shops, colored undertaking parlors, colored dentists' offices, colored doctors' offices. On one corner there is even a colored vaudeville theatre. And out in the middle of the streets stands a colored police. Excusing that the houses is different and the streets is wider, it's mighty near the same as being on Plunkett's Hill of a Saturday evening. I almost expects to see that there Aesop Loving loafing along all dressed up fit to kill; or maybe Red Hoss Shackelford setting in a door-way following after his regular business of resting, or old Pappy Exall, the pastor of Zion Chapel, rambling by, with that big stomach of his'n sticking out in front of him like two gallons of chitterlings wrapped up in a black gunny-sack. It certainly does fill me with the homesickness longings!

And then a big black man on the pavement opens his mouth wide, nigger-like, and laughs at something till you can hear him half-a-mile, pretty near it; which it is the first sure-enough laugh I has heard since I hit New York. And right on top of that I catches the smell of fat meat frying somewheres.

I just naturally can't stand it no longer. Anyhow, if I'm predestinated to be lost in New York City it's better I should be lost amongst my own kind, which talks my native language, rather than amongst plumb strangers. I give the conductor the high sign and I says to him, I says:

"Cap'n, lemme off, befo' I jumps off!"

So he rings the signalling bell and she stops and lets me off. And verily, before I has went hardly any distance at all, somebody hails me. I is wandering along, sort of miscellaneous, looking in the store windows and up at the tops of the buildings, when a brown-complected man steps up to me and sticks out his hand and he says:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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