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# I N F A N T S O F T H E S P R I N G

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**A**FTER Raymond had gone to his studio and put on his hat and coat, he and Euphoria began the short walk to her own private home.

"Think the house is going to go, Ray?"

"Sure. It's the grandest project, ever."

"It doesn't pay . . ."

"Did you expect it to?"

"I at least expected to collect the rent that's due when it's due."

"Who's behind?"

"Eustace and Pelham. I don't mind about Pelham so much. As long as he's there, I don't have to hire someone to clean the halls or keep the rooms clean or run the furnace. He earns his rent, but Eustace calmly goes on and makes no effort to get hold of money."

"He manages to pick up a few pennies now and

then. And he has so much darn junk that he can pawn, that you needn't worry."

"I guess you're right, but I wonder if the house is going to be productive artistically. None of you seem to be doing much work. All I run into are gin parties."

"That's part of our creativeness."

"And I don't think you ought to let Paul hang around there. He's nothing but a parasite."

"I know it, Euphoria. But he's a most charming parasite, and I'm certain he has more talent than any of us."

"Why doesn't he do something with it then?"

"He's got to be awakened, Euphoria. Give him time. He's still very young. Some day he will surprise us all."

"I hope so, but I don't like unproductive people. Those girls, for instance. They're no good."

"They're decorative," Raymond said.

"Nigger girls ain't got no business being decorative unless it's going to bring them in some coin. They're nothing but chippies. I'm sure they'd sleep with anybody. Look how Aline's playing with Stephen. She's just like her mother. I know the old lady well. She passes for white most of the time and lays up with all the cheap Jews she can find. There's

one she's been living with for the past three years. Spending her nights with him while her darky husband works and her daughter chases the streets."

"At least everybody is satisfied."

"That's the trouble with Negroes. They're too easily satisfied."

"Everyone can't be as energetic as you, Euphoria."

"Maybe not, Ray, but I want that house back there to be a monument to the New Negro. I wish some of the other artists and writers would move in. And I wish they would all work like Pelham does."

"You should be thankful that there is only one Pelham in the house. . . . Now don't start preaching to me about the virtue of his persistence. I know all that. But if this Negro renaissance is going to actually live up to its name and reputation, it's going to be Paul's we need, not Pelham's. We have too many of them now . . . too many like both him and Eustace, striving to make a place for themselves in a milieu to which they are completely alien."

"But, Ray . . ." Euphoria was amazed at his vehemence.

"That's all right," he interrupted. "You're a grand landlady. No one else in Harlem would stand for any of us, that is, not collectively." They had

reached her house. "Here you are, with your wad of bills safe. Drop in and see us tomorrow. Maybe somebody will be working for a change. Good night."

He turned and quickly retraced his steps, thinking of what Euphoria had said about the lack of work being done in Niggeratti Manor, and also remembering a conversation which he and Stephen had had earlier that evening. Stephen had asked:

"Just when are you going to begin work on your novel, Ray?"

"I don't know, Steve," Raymond had answered.

"I can't get started. Something holds me back."

"Laziness?"

"Partially."

"Lack of material?"

"You know it isn't that. Haven't I often outlined the thing for you? I know what I want to write . . . but . . . ." He had shrugged his shoulders.

"Something holds me back."

Stephen had shifted his gaze and lit a cigarette.

"Are you afraid," he had asked, "of exposing your own peculiar complex?"

"Complex? I have none."

"The hell you haven't," Stephen had said emphatically. "Remember our talk a month ago? You



pronounced yourself a Nietzschean. I pronounced you a liar. I still admit I'm at sea. I don't know whether you are or not."

"Neither do I," Raymond had admitted after a moment's pause.

"Which is just what I thought," Stephen had continued. "You'd like to be. You try hard to be. But after all, something holds you back and that same something hinders your writing."

"Why not elucidate?"

"I can't, Ray. You baffle me. Were you like Paul or Eustace or Pelham, I could analyze you immediately. Paul has never recovered from the shock of realizing that no matter how bizarre a personality he may develop, he will still be a Negro, subject to snubs from certain ignorant people. The fact distresses him, although he should ignore both it and the people who might be guilty of such snubs. He sits around helpless, possessed of great talent, doing nothing, wishing he were white, courting the bizarre, anxious to be exploited in the public prints as a notorious character. Being a Negro, he feels that his chances for excessive notoriety à la Wilde are slim. Thus the exaggerated poses and extreme mannerisms. Since he can't be white, he will be a most unusual Negro. To say 'nigger' in the presence of a

white person warms the cockles of his heart. It's just a symptom of some deep set disease. You're not like that; nor are you like some of the others I've met who are so conscientiously Negroid. Like Pelham for instance, who is a natural born menial with all a menial's respect for his superiors. Or like Eustace who is ashamed of his color, and won't sing spirituals because he does not care to remind the world that he is a Negro and that his ancestors were slaves of whom he is now ashamed."

"Jesus no, Steve, you know I'm not like that. I'm just indifferent to it all. Race to me . . ."

"Yes, race to you," Stephen had interrupted impatiently, "means nothing. You stand on a peak alone, superior, nonchalant, unconcerned. I know all that. You've said it enough. Propagandists you despise. Illusions about Negroes you have none. Your only plea is that they accept themselves and be accepted by others as human beings. But what the hell does it all mean, after all? You claim to have no especial love for your race. You also claim not to despise them. The spectacle of your friends striving to be what they are not, and taking no note of their limitations, sickens you, nay revolts and angers you. Yet you, like the rest, sit about and do nothing. Are you as emancipated as you claim? Aren't you, too, hindered by some racial complex?"

"Nonsense, Steve. I know I'm a Negro and so does everyone else. I certainly cannot pass nor can I effect a change. Why worry about it? I rather love myself as I am, and am quite certain that I have as much chance to make good as anyone else, regardless of my color. In fact, I might even say that being black gives me a certain advantage which a white person of equal talent would be denied."

"Oh, I see."

"You see what?"

"Oh, nothing, let's beat it downstairs." And with this Stephen had terminated the conversation and the two of them had joined the crowd, gathered in Eustace's studio.

Raymond wondered about it now, and also about what Euphoria had said concerning the lack of creative work among Negro artists. Pelham and Eustace of course were not to be considered. They had nothing to contribute anyhow. But Paul and, he thought, himself, did have something to contribute once they made up their minds to do some actual work.

There had been throughout the nation an announcement of a Negro renaissance. The American Negro, it seemed, was entering a new phase in his development. He was about to become an important factor in the artistic life of the United States. As

the middle westerner and the southerner had found indigenous expression, so was the Negro developing his own literary spokesmen.

Word had been flashed through the nation about this new phenomenon. Novels, plays, and poems by and about Negroes were being deliriously acclaimed and patronized. Blues shouters, tap dancers, high yaller chorus girls, and singers of Negro spirituals were reaping much publicity and no little money from the unexpected harvest. And yet the more discerning were becoming more and more aware that nothing, or at least very little, was being done to substantiate the current fad, to make it the foundation for something truly epochal. For the time being, the Negro was more in evidence in the high places than ever before in his American career, but unless, or so it seemed to Raymond, he, Paul and others of the group who had climbed aboard the bandwagon actually began to do something worth while, there would be little chance of their being permanently established. He wondered what accounted for the fact that most Negroes of talent were wont to make one splurge, then sink into oblivion. Was it all the result, as Stephen had intimated, of some deep-rooted complex? Or was it merely indicative of a lack of talent?

Arriving home, Raymond decided to go to his studio before returning to the party in the basement. He could hear laughter and the clink of glasses as he climbed the stairs. On reaching his landing, he was surprised to see rays of light gleaming through the cracks in his studio door. He was certain he had turned out the lights before he had gone out with Euphoria. Perhaps Stephen was there. He hoped so. This would be a propitious time to thrash out certain problems which were tantalizing his mind.

As he turned the knob, he heard a scream. Startled, he hurriedly opened the door, and entered the room. Aline lay on his daybed sobbing. Stephen and Bull, in the center of the room, were locked together, wrestling. Both were quite drunk. Both were swearing breathlessly. Tears were streaming down Bull's virile, scarred face.

"What the hell?" Raymond shouted.

"The bastard's trying to kill me." Stephen was red-faced and panting. Bull was weak with rage. Raymond had little trouble pushing them apart. Stephen collapsed into a nearby chair. Aline struggled to her feet and staggered toward Raymond.

"He slapped me," she screamed.

"An' by God, I'll slap you again." Bull started toward her. She backed away, collided with the day-



bed, and fell prostrate upon it. Raymond tried to push Bull from the room. Then he noticed that the doorway was filled with a staring mob, inane, drunken, and stupefied by the surprising scene which confronted them. The screams had penetrated to the floor beneath and mounted above the sounds of revelry there.

As Raymond relaxed, Bull regained his strength, thrust Raymond aside, and with fists clenched, face wet and distorted, turned upon the frightened Aline:

"Y' hussy. With a white man, eh? Yer own race ain't good enough? You want a white man? You goddam bitch, I'll kill you."

He made a rush for the figure lying on the day-bed. Aline, seeing him come toward her, struggled to her feet, attempted to run, became entangled in the rug and fell heavily to the floor. Stephen snored in his chair. Raymond again threw himself into Bull's way only to be sent crashing into the corner by the door. His head struck the wall and he was only dimly conscious of the sound of scuffling feet as the rest of the crowd surged into the room. A short struggle ensued. Raymond recovered his balance, and stumbled toward the prostrate Aline just as Bull was being forced down the stairs, hysterically rav-  
ing, blasphemous.