

XXVII

The New Negro in Paris



I FINISHED my native holiday in Marrakesh. In Casablanca I found a huge pile of mail awaiting me. The handsomest thing was a fat envelope from a New York bank containing a gold-lettered pocket book. The pocket book enclosed my first grand from the sale of *Home to Harlem*.

There were stacks of clippings with criticisms of my novel; praise from the white press, harsh censure from the colored press. And a lot of letters from new admirers and old friends and associates and loves. One letter in particular took my attention. It was from James Weldon Johnson, inviting me to return to America to participate in the Negro renaissance movement. He promised to do his part to facilitate my return if there were any difficulty. And he did.

The Johnson letter set me thinking hard about returning to Harlem. All the reports stressed the great changes that had occurred there since my exile, pictured a Harlem spreading west and south, with splendid new blocks of houses opened up for the colored people. The reports described the bohemian interest in and patronage of Harlem, the many successful colored shows on Broadway, the florescence of Negro literature and art, with many promising aspirants receiving scholarships from foundations and patronage from individuals. Newspapers and magazines brought me exciting impressions of a more glamorous Harlem. Even in Casablanca a Moor of half-German parentage exhibited an article featuring Harlem

in an important German newspaper, and he was eager for more information.

But the resentment of the Negro intelligentsia against *Home to Harlem* was so general, bitter and violent that I was hesitant about returning to the great Black Belt. I had learned very little about the ways of the Harlem élite during the years I lived there. When I left the railroad and the companionship of the common blacks, my intellectual contacts were limited mainly to white radicals and bohemians. I was well aware that if I returned to Harlem I wouldn't be going back to the *milieu* of railroad men, from whom I had drifted far out of touch. Nor could I go back among radical whites and try to rekindle the flames of an old enthusiasm. I knew that if I did return I would have to find a new orientation among the Negro intelligentsia.

One friend in Harlem had written that Negroes were traveling abroad *en masse* that spring and summer and that the élite would be camping in Paris. I thought that it might be less unpleasant to meet the advance guard of the Negro intelligentsia in Paris. And so, laying aside my experiment in wearing bags, bournous and tarboosh, I started out.

First to Tangier, where four big European powers were performing their experiment of international government in Africa upon a living corpse. Otherwise Tangier was a rare African-Mediterranean town of Moors and progressive Sephardic Jews and Europeans, mostly Spanish.

Through Spanish Morocco I passed and duly noted its points of interest. The first was Tetuán, which inspired this sonnet:

TETUÁN

*Morocco conquering homage paid to Spain
And the Alhambra lifted up its towers!
Africa's fingers tipped with miracles,
And quivering with Arabian designs,
Traced words and figures like exotic flowers,
Sultanas' chambers of rare tapestries,
Filigree marvels from Koranic lines,
Mosaics chanting notes like tropic rain.*

*And Spain repaid the tribute ages after:
To Tetuán, that fort of struggle and strife,
Where chagrined Andalusian Moors retired,
She brought a fountain bubbling with new life,
Whose jewelled charm won even the native pride,
And filled it sparkling with flamenco laughter.*

In all Morocco there is no place as delicious as Tetuán. By a kind of magic instinct the Spaniards have created a modern town which stands up like a happy extension of the antique Moroccan. The ancient walls merge into the new without pain. The Spanish Morisco buildings give more lightness to the native Moroccan, and the architectural effect of the whole is a miracle of perfect miscegenation.

I loved the colored native lanterns, illuminating the archways of Larache. I liked Ceuta lying like a symbolic hand-clasp across the Mediterranean. And I adored the quaint tile-roofed houses and cool watered gardens in the mountain fastness of Xauen. From Gibraltar I was barred by the British. But that was no trouble to my skin, for ever since I have been traveling for the sheer enjoyment of traveling I have avoided British territory. That was why I turned down

an attractive invitation to visit Egypt, when I was living in France.

Once again in Spain, I inspected the great Moorish landmarks. And more clearly I saw Spain outlined as the antique bridge between Africa and Europe.

After the strong dazzling colors of Morocco, Paris that spring appeared something like the melody of larks chanting over a gray field. It was over three years since I had seen the metropolis. At that time it had a political and financial trouble hanging heavy round its neck. Now it was better, with its head up and a lot of money in every hand. I saw many copies of my book, *Banjo*, decorating a shop window in the Avenue de l'Opéra and I was disappointed in myself that I could not work up to feeling a thrill such as I imagine an author should feel.

I took a fling at the cabarets in Montparnasse and Montmartre, and I was very happy to meet again a French West Indian girl whom I knew as a *bonne* in Nice when I was a valet. We ate some good dinners together and saw the excellent French productions of *Rose Marie* and *Show Boat* and danced a little at the Bal Negre and at Bricktop's Harlem hang-out in Montmartre.

I found Louise Bryant in Paris. It was our first meeting since she took my manuscript to New York in the summer of 1926. The meeting was a nerve-tearing ordeal. About two years previously she had written of a strange illness and of doctors who gave her only six months to live and of her determination to live a long time longer than that. She had undergone radical treatment. The last time I had seen her she was plump and buxom. Now she was shrunk and thin and fragile like a dried-up reed. Her pretty face had fallen

like a mummy's and nothing was left of her startling attractiveness but her eyebrows.

She embarrassed me by continually saying: "Claude, you won't even look at me." Her conversation was pitched in a nervous hysterical key and the burden was "male conceit." I told her that the female was largely responsible for "male conceit." Often when I had seen her before she had been encircled by a following of admirably created young admirers of the collegiate type. Now she was always with an ugly-mugged woman. This woman was like an apparition of a male impersonator, who was never off the stage. She had a trick way of holding her shoulders and her hands like a gangster and simulating a hard-boiled accent. A witty Frenchman pronounced her a *Sappho-manqué*. The phrase sounded like a desecration of the great glamorous name of Sappho. I wondered why (there being so many attractive women in the world) Louise Bryant should have chosen such a companion. And I thought that it was probably because of the overflow of pity pouring out of her impulsive Irish heart.

I remembered, "Aftermath," the beautiful poem which she sent us for publication in *The Liberator* after John Reed died. Now it seemed of greater significance:

AFTERMATH

*Dear, they are singing your praises,
Now you are gone.
But only I saw your going,
I . . . alone . . . in the dawn.*

*Dear, they are weeping about you,
Now you are dead,
And they've placed a granite stone
Over your darling head.*

*I cannot cry any more,
Too burning deep is my grief . . .
I dance through my spendthrift days
Like a fallen leaf.*

*Faster and faster I whirl
Toward the end of my days.
Dear, I am drunken with sadness
And lost down strange ways.*

*If only the dance could finish
Like a flash in the sky . . . Oh, soon,
If only a storm could come shouting—
Hurl me past stars and moon.*

And I thought if I could not look frankly with admiration at Louise Bryant's face, I could always turn to the permanently lovely poem which she had created.

I had spruced myself up a bit to meet the colored élite. Observing that the Madrileños were well-tailored, I had a couple of suits made in Madrid, and chose a hat there. In Paris I added shoes and shirts and ties and gloves to my wardrobe.

The cream of Harlem was in Paris. There was the full cast of *Blackbirds* (with Adelaide Hall starring in the place of Florence Mills), just as fascinating a group off the stage as they were extraordinary on the stage. The *Porgy* actors had come over from London. There was an army of school teachers and nurses. There were Negro Communists going to and returning from Russia. There were Negro students from London and Scotland and Berlin and the French universities. There were presidents and professors of the best Negro col-

leges. And there were painters and writers and poets, of whom the most outstanding was Countee Cullen.

I met Professor Alain Locke. He had published *The Anthology of the New Negro* in 1925 and he was the animator of the movement as well as the originator of the phrase "Negro renaissance." Commenting upon my appearance, Dr. Locke said, "Why, you are wearing the same kind of gloves as I am!" "Yes," I said, "but my hand is heavier than yours." Dr. Locke was extremely nice and invited me to dinner with President Hope of Atlanta University. The dinner was at one of the most expensive restaurants in the *grands boulevards*. President Hope, who was even more Nordic-looking than Walter White, was very affable and said I did not look like the boxer-type drawings of me which were reproduced with the reviews of *Home to Harlem*. President Hope hoped that I would visit his university when I returned to America.

There had been an interesting metamorphosis in Dr. Locke. When we met for the first time in Berlin in 1923, he took me for a promenade in the Tiergarten. And walking down the row, with the statues of the Prussian kings supported by the famous philosophers and poets and composers on either side, he remarked to me that he thought those statues the finest ideal and expression of the plastic arts in the world. The remark was amusing, for it was just a short while before that I had walked through the same row with George Grosz, who had described the statues as "the sugar-candy art of Germany." When I showed Dr. Locke George Grosz's book of drawings, *Ecce Homo*, he recoiled from their brutal realism. (Dr. Locke is a Philadelphia blue-black blood, a Rhodes scholar and graduate of Oxford University, and I have heard him described as the most refined Negro in America).

So it was interesting now to discover that Dr. Locke had

become the leading Negro authority on African Negro sculpture. I felt that there was so much more affinity between the art of George Grosz and African sculpture than between the Tiergarten insipid idealization of Nordic kings and artists and the transcending realism of the African artists.

Yet I must admit that although Dr. Locke seemed a perfect symbol of the Aframerican rococo in his personality as much as in his prose style, he was doing his utmost to appreciate the new Negro that he had uncovered. He had brought the best examples of their work together in a pioneer book. But from the indication of his appreciations it was evident that he could not lead a Negro renaissance. His introductory remarks were all so weakly winding round and round and getting nowhere. Probably this results from a kink in Dr. Locke's artistic outlook, perhaps due to its effete European academic quality.

When he published his *Anthology of the New Negro*, he put in a number of my poems, including one which was originally entitled "The White House." My title was symbolic, not meaning specifically the private homes of white people; but more the vast modern edifice of American Industry from which Negroes were effectively barred as a group. I cannot convey here my amazement and chagrin when Dr. Locke arbitrarily changed the title of my poem to "White Houses" and printed it in his anthology, without consulting me. I protested against the act, calling Dr. Locke's attention to the fact that my poem had been published under the original title of "The White House" in *The Liberator*. He replied that he had changed the title for political reasons, as it might be implied that the title meant the White House in Washington, and that that could be made an issue against my returning to America.

I wrote him saying that the idea that my poem had reference to the official residence of the President of the United States was ridiculous; and that, whether I was permitted to return to America or not, I did not want the title changed, and would prefer the omission of the poem. For his title "White Houses" was misleading. It changed the whole symbolic intent and meaning of the poem, making it appear as if the burning ambition of the black malcontent was to enter white houses in general. I said that there were many white folks' houses I would not choose to enter, and that, as a fanatical advocate of personal freedom, I hoped that all human beings would always have the right to decide whom they wanted to have enter their houses.

But Dr. Locke high-handedly used his substitute title of "White Houses" in all the editions of his anthology. I couldn't imagine such a man as the leader of a renaissance, when his artistic outlook was so reactionary.

The Negroid élite was not so formidable to meet after all. The financial success of my novel had helped soften hard feelings in some quarters. A lovely lady from Harlem expressed the views of many. Said she: "Why all this nigger-row if a colored writer can exploit his own people and make money and a name? White writers have been exploiting us long enough without any credit to our race. It is silly for the Negro critics to holler to God about *Home to Harlem* as if the social life of the characters is anything like that of the respectable class of Negroes. The people in *Home to Harlem* are our low-down Negroes and we respectable Negroes ought to be proud that we are not like them and be grateful to you for giving us a real picture of Negroes whose lives we know little about on the inside." I felt completely vindicated.

My agent in Paris gave a big party for the cast of *Black-*

birds, to which the lovely lady and other members of the black élite were invited. Adelaide Hall was the animating spirit of the *Blackbirds*. They gave some exhibition numbers, and we all turned loose and had a grand gay time together, dancing and drinking champagne. The French guests (there were some chic ones) said it was the best party of the season. And in tipsy accents some of the Harlem élite admonished me against writing a *Home-to-Harlem* book about *them*.

Thus I won over most of the Negro intelligentsia in Paris, excepting the leading journalist and traveler who remained intransigent. Besides Negro news, the journalist specialized in digging up obscure and Amazing Facts for the edification of the colored people. In these "Facts" Beethoven is proved to be a Negro because he was dark and gloomy; also the Jewish people are proved to have been originally a Negro people!

The journalist was writing and working his way through Paris. Nancy Cunard's *Negro Anthology* describes him as a guide and quoted him as saying he had observed, in the flesh market of Paris, that white southerners preferred colored trade, while Negro leaders preferred white trade. Returning to New York, he gave lectures "for men only" on the peep-holes in the walls of Paris.

The journalist was a bitter critic of *Home to Harlem*, declaring it was obscene. I have often wondered if it is possible to establish a really intelligent standard to determine obscenity—a standard by which one could actually measure the obscene act and define the obscene thought. I have done lots of menial work and have no snobbery about common labor. I remember that in Marseilles and other places in Europe I was sometimes approached and offered a considerable remuneration to act as a guide or procurer or do other sordid things. While I was working as a model in Paris a handsome Italian model

brought me an offer to work as an occasional attendant in a special *bains de vapeur*. The Italian said that he made good extra money working there. Now, although I needed more money to live, it was impossible for me to make myself do such things. The French say "*On fait ce que on peut.*" I could not. The very idea of the thing turned me dead cold. My individual morale was all I possessed. I felt that if I sacrificed it to make a little extra money, I would become personally obscene. I would soon be utterly unable to make that easy money. I preferred a menial job.

Yet I don't think I would call another man obscene who could do what I was asked to do without having any personal feeling of revulsion against it. And if an artistic person had or was familiar with such sordid experiences of life and could transmute them into literary or any other art form, I could not imagine that his performance or his thought was obscene.

The Negro journalist argued violently against me. He insisted that I had exploited Negroes to please the white reading public. He said that the white public would not read good Negro books because of race prejudice; that he himself had written a "good" book which had not sold. I said that Negro writers, instead of indulging in whining and self-pity, should aim at reaching the reading public in general or creating a special Negro public; that Negroes had plenty of money to spend on books if books were sold to them.

I said I knew the chances for a black writer and a white writer were not equal, even if both were of the same caliber. The white writer had certain avenues, social and financial, which opened to carry him along to success, avenues which were closed to the black. Nevertheless I believed that the Negro writer also had a chance, even though a limited one,

with the great American reading public. I thought that if a Negro writer were sincere in creating a plausible Negro tale—if a Negro character were made credible and human in his special environment with a little of the virtues and the vices that are common to the human species—he would obtain some recognition and appreciation. For Negro writers are not alone in competing with heavy handicaps. They have allies among some of the white writers and artists, who are fighting formalism and classicism, crusading for new forms and ideas against the dead weight of the old.

But the journalist was loudly positive that it was easy for a Negro writer to make a sensational success as a writer by “betraying” his race to the white public. So many of the Negro élite love to mouth that phrase about “betraying the race”! As if the Negro group had special secrets which should not be divulged to the other groups. I said I did not think the Negro could be betrayed by any real work of art. If the Negro were betrayed in any place it was perhaps in that Negro press, by which the journalist was syndicated, with its voracious black appetite for yellow journalism.

Thereupon the journalist declared that he would prove that it was easy for a Negro to write the “nigger stuff” the whites wanted of him and make a success of it. He revealed that he was planning a novel for white consumption; that, indeed, he had already written some of it. He was aiming at going over to the white market. He was going to stop writing for Negroes, who gave him so little support, although he had devoted his life to the betterment of the Negro.

I was eager to see him prove his thesis. For he was expressing the point of view of the majority of the colored élite, who maintain that Negroes in the arts can win success by clowning only, because that is all the whites expect and will

accept of them. So although I disliked his type of mind, I promised to help him, I was so keen about the result of his experiment. I introduced him to my agent in Paris, and my agent introduced him to a publisher in New York.

Our Negro journalist is very yellow and looks like a *métèque* in France, without attracting undue attention. Yet besides his "Amazing Facts" about Negroes he has written in important magazines, stressing the practical nonexistence of color prejudice in Europe and blaming Negroes for such as exists! Also he wrote in a white magazine about Africa and the color problem under a nom de plume which gave no indication of the writer's origin.

He might have thought that as he had "passed white" a little in complexion and in journalism, it would be just as easy "passing white" as a creative writer. Well, the Negro journalist deliberately wrote his novel as a "white" novelist—or as he imagined a white man would write. But the sensational white novel by a Negro has not yet found its publisher.

The last time I heard about him, he was again a Negro in Ethiopia, interviewing Haile Selassie and reporting the white rape of Ethiopia from an African point of view for the American Negro press.

Nigger Heaven, the Harlem novel of Carl Van Vechten, also was much discussed. I met some of Mr. Van Vechten's Negro friends, who were not seeing him any more because of his book. I felt flattered that they did not mind seeing me! Yet most of them agreed that *Nigger Heaven* was broadly based upon the fact of contemporary high life in Harlem. Some of them said that Harlemites should thank their stars that *Nigger Heaven* had soft-pedaled some of the actually wilder Harlem scenes. While the conventional Negro

moralists gave the book a hostile reception because of its hectic bohemianism, the leaders of the Negro intelligentsia showed a marked liking for it. In comparing it with *Home to Harlem*, James Weldon Johnson said that I had shown a contempt for the Negro bourgeoisie. But I could not be contemptuous of a Negro bourgeoisie which simply does not exist as a class or a group in America. Because I made the protagonist of my novel a lusty black worker, it does not follow that I am unsympathetic to a refined or wealthy Negro.

My attitude toward *Nigger Heaven* was quite different from that of its Negro friends and foes. I was more interested in the implications of the book. It puzzled me a little that the author, who is generally regarded as a discoverer and sponsor of promising young Negro writers, gave Lascar, the ruthless Negro prostitute, the victory over Byron, the young Negro writer, whom he left, when the novel ends, in the hands of the police, destined perhaps for the death house in Sing Sing.

Carl Van Vechten also was in Paris in the summer of 1929. I had been warned by a white non-admirer of Mr. Van Vechten that I would not like him because he patronized Negroes in a subtle way, to which the Harlem élite were blind because they were just learning sophistication! I thought it would be a new experience to meet a white who was subtly patronizing to a black; the majority of them were so naïvely crude about it. But I found Mr. Van Vechten not a bit patronizing, and quite all right. It was neither his fault nor mine if my reaction was negative.

One of Mr. Van Vechten's Harlem sheiks introduced us after midnight at the Café de la Paix. Mr. Van Vechten was a heavy drinker at that time, but I was not drinking liquor. I had recently suffered from a cerebral trouble and a specialist

had warned me against drinking, even wine. And when a French doctor forbids wine, one ought to heed. When we met at that late hour at the celebrated rendezvous of the world's cosmopolites, Mr. Van Vechten was full and funny. He said, "What will you take?" I took a soft drink and I could feel that Mr. Van Vechten was shocked.

I am afraid that as a soft drinker I bored him. The white author and the black author of books about Harlem could not find much of anything to make conversation. The market trucks were rolling by loaded with vegetables for Les Halles, and suddenly Mr. Van Vechten, pointing to a truck-load of huge carrots, exclaimed, "How I would like to have all of them!" Perhaps carrots were more interesting than conversation. But I did not feel in any way carrotty. I don't know whether my looks betrayed any disapproval. Really I hadn't the slightest objection to Mr. Van Vechten's enthusiasm for the truck driver's raw carrots, though I prefer carrots *en casserole avec poulet cocotte*. But he excused himself to go to the men's room and never came back. So, after waiting a considerable time, I paid the bill with some *Home to Harlem* money and walked in the company of the early dawn (which is delicious in Paris) back to the Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Mr. Van Vechten's sheik friend was very upset. He was a precious, hesitating sheik and very nervous about that introduction, wondering if it would take. I said that all was okay. But upon returning to New York he sent me a message from Mr. Van Vechten. The message said that Mr. Van Vechten was sorry for not returning, but he was so high that, after leaving us, he discovered himself running along the avenue after a truck load of carrots.

Among the Negro intelligentsia in Paris there was an in-

teresting group of story-tellers, poets and painters. Some had received grants from foundations to continue work abroad; some were being helped by private individuals; and all were more or less identified with the Negro renaissance. It was illuminating to exchange ideas with them. I was an older man and not regarded as a member of the renaissance, but more as a forerunner. Indeed, some of them had aired their resentment of my intrusion from abroad into the renaissance set-up. They had thought that I had committed literary suicide because I went to Russia.

For my part I was deeply stirred by the idea of a real Negro renaissance. The Arabian cultural renaissance and the great European renaissance had provided some of my most fascinating reading. The Russian literary renaissance and also the Irish had absorbed my interest. My idea of a renaissance was one of talented persons of an ethnic or national group working individually or collectively in a common purpose and creating things that would be typical of their group.

I was surprised when I discovered that many of the talented Negroes regarded their renaissance more as an uplift organization and a vehicle to accelerate the pace and progress of smart Negro society. It was interesting to note how sharply at variance their artistic outlook was from that of the modernistic white groups that took a significant interest in Negro literature and art. The Negroes were under the delusion that when a lady from Park Avenue or from Fifth Avenue, or a titled European, became interested in Negro art and invited Negro artists to her home, that was a token of Negroes breaking into upper-class white society. I don't think that it ever occurred to them that perhaps such white individuals were searching for a social and artistic significance in Negro art which they could not find in their own society, and that

the radical nature and subject of their interest operated against the possibility of their introducing Negroes further than their own particular homes in coveted white society.

Also, among the Negro artists there was much of that Uncle Tom attitude which works like Satan against the idea of a coherent and purposeful Negro group. Each one wanted to be the first Negro, the one Negro, and the only Negro *for the whites* instead of for their group. Because an unusual number of them were receiving grants to do creative work, they actually and naively believed that Negro artists as a group would always be treated differently from white artists and be protected by powerful white patrons.

Some of them even expressed the opinion that Negro art would solve the centuries-old social problem of the Negro. That idea was vaguely hinted by Dr. Locke in his introduction to *The New Negro*. Dr. Locke's essay is a remarkable chocolate *soufflé* of art and politics, with not an ingredient of information inside.

They were nearly all Harlem-conscious, in a curious synthetic way, it seemed to me—not because they were aware of Harlem's intrinsic values as a unique and popular Negro quarter, but apparently because white folks had discovered black magic there. I understood more clearly why there had been so much genteel-Negro hostility to my *Home to Harlem* and to Langston Hughes's primitive Negro poems.

I wondered after all whether it would be better for me to return to the new *milieu* of Harlem. Much as all my sympathy was with the Negro group and the idea of a Negro renaissance, I doubted if going back to Harlem would be an advantage. I had done my best Harlem stuff when I was abroad, seeing it from a long perspective. I thought it might

be better to leave Harlem to the artists who were on the spot, to give them their chance to produce something better than *Home to Harlem*. I thought that I might as well go back to Africa.