

Four Who Came To Harlem

By CLAUDE H. HALL

TO MANY people Harlem is a mecca. Since the lush, crime-filled days of the roaring twenties when the "New Negro" was regarded as a refreshing biological and cultural oddity in his debut as a member of the literati, people have come uptown for various reasons.

The ermine-coated Park Avenue set used to frequent such well-known emporia of expensive pleasure as Small's, The Cotton Club, Connie's Inn and The Nest—not to mention the dozens of basement speakeasies that dispensed bootleg rot-gut at exorbitant prices.

Today Seek Fun

Today, with both the speakeasy and the night club absent from Harlem, people come to have an evening's fun in a plush Sugar Hill apartment; to observe Harlemites in their native habitat; to absorb the "different" atmosphere; to escape; and, among other things, to socialize.

Of all those who come to Harlem, none comes for reasons more singular than the white girl who visits her colored lover. She comes; she has her tryst; she disappears.

On a rainy afternoon I was sitting in a swanky Sugar Hill cocktail lounge doodling with my glass and trying to think of an idea for a magazine feature when a girl seated herself at the bar beside me.

In the mirror I could see that she had honey-blond hair and gray eyes—and that she was indeed strikingly pretty; but I attached no importance to that because New Yorkers of whatever complexion are free to drink at the bar of their choice, and certainly New York has its share of pretty girls.

The bartender came over, "Are you with this gentleman?" He wanted to know. (I knew why he asked: there was a house rule forbidding the seating of unescorted women at the bar.) The girl nodded her head affirmatively and ordered a cocktail.

"What is this," I thought, "a pick up?" There was nothing about her dress, her manner or her speech to indicate it, but you could not tell—some of those "joy girls" are pretty slick. I was about to leave when I decided that it would do me no harm to find out what she was "putting down."

"Thank you," she said, "for letting me say that we're together." I assured her that it was all right. And then she said: "I love sitting at a bar. I think it gives a girl more freedom."

"Freedom is a wonderful thing," I said.

"I wish I had more of it," she said longingly.

I looked at her, and, for the first time, I appreciated her beauty. "Aren't you free?"

"Well—no, not exactly," she said hesitantly.

I smelled a story, and was determined to follow through, however cautiously. "That's tough."

Her Story

She lit a cigarette and took another sip from her glass. "It's not quite as bad as it sounds. I have as much freedom as the average girl—probably more; but it's just that I am not free to do some of the things that I want to do."

"Such as—?"

"Like—" (she seemed to hold her breath for a moment)—"like taking Bob home and having him meet my family and going downtown with him and doing the things that a couple usually does for amusement."

"But why is Bob such an outcast?"

"He's not," she said quickly. "Actually, he has a lot to offer. He's handsome, well educated and has a good job—and in addition to that he is very kind and gentle, but—" Her face lost its glow.

"But what?"

There was a little embarrassment in her smile. "Well—he's colored."

Since I have been colored for some thirty-odd years and have known many interracial couples, I saw nothing odd in that. However, I pretended to see her point of view. "That must pose quite a problem for you," I ventured.

"Yes, it does. My family makes it terribly hard for us. They would never accept Bob. They want me to marry some nice young white fellow; but I believe a girl should marry the man she loves."

I ordered more drinks.

"How did you happen to meet Bob?"

How They Met

"Quite by chance. After college I took a job in an advertising office that handled an account for Bob's newspaper. He used to come to our office about once a week. We must have appealed to each other. Anyway, the first thing I knew we were dating—uptown, of course."

"But how does he feel about not seeing you outside of Harlem?"

"He doesn't really mind because he knows it isn't my fault."

I felt as though I could question her freely now. "Do you think you two will get married?"

Her answer was direct. "I'd marry him this afternoon if he'd agree to move away—anywhere except New York. I couldn't bear the scorn of my family here."

"And if he doesn't agree?"

Her eyes showed emotion. "Please don't say that. I realize I've been talking too much; but when you have a problem as big as mine you've got to tell somebody."

"Frankly, I'm scared—scared that he won't. And that would leave me no choice but to marry



"An attractive redhead in her late twenties who wanted to be free . . ."

him anyway. I've thought about it a lot—and I just can't imagine life without Bob."

A voice came through the loudspeaker. "Miss—. Miss—. Please answer the telephone in the second booth. Thank you."

She hurried away from the bar, and within a few minutes she was back. "It was Bob. He was supposed to meet me here, but he couldn't make it."

"Too bad," I said, "What are you going to do now?"

She was pensive for a long moment. "Oh, I don't know. I guess I'll go on back downtown."

I VISITED the apartment of a friend on upper St. Nicholas Avenue. I rang the bell and waited for him to answer. When the door opened, a woman, full-bodied and smiling, stood before me.

Her hair was dark brown and her face, though not pretty, was pleasant. She looked to be in her mid-thirties.

Being unsure of the address, I apologized for having rung the wrong bell.

"Whom do you wish to see?" she asked.

"Ken," I said.

"This is his apartment. Are you a friend of his?"

"Yes," I told her my name.

"He has told me about you. Do come in."

I went in and, at her invitation, seated myself in the living room.

"Ken had to go downtown, but he should be back shortly. How is the writing game?"

I told her that, although I was working on several projects, there was considerable room for improvement.

"You'll make it," she assured me. "I've read some of your stuff and I think you have what it takes."

I thanked her for her kind words.

She "Explains"

She must have sensed that I was wondering why she, a white woman, seemed so comfortably entrenched in my friend's apartment.

"Maybe I should explain my presence here," she said; and before I could tell her that no explanation was necessary, she spoke again.

"You see, Ken and I have been friends—close friends—for a long time. We even discussed marriage, but there was a problem—and we decided not to marry until we were both sure that we could make a go of it."

"Is your problem that great?"

"Yes, it's pretty big," she said, warming to the subject. "I have a fifteen-year-old daughter who is somewhat maladjusted. She's crazy about her own father; and I don't think she could take a new



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stepfather.

"The strange thing is that Ken's color has nothing to do with it. She accepts him as a person, and they get along swell together; but I don't think the poor kid would understand my duties to Ken if I married him."

She went into the kitchen and came back with a pitcher of lemonade. We drank and talked about the weather for a while. Then I came back to the subject with: "How do you feel about coming to Harlem?"

She looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Well," I said, "how do you feel about you and Ken spending your time together here in Harlem?"

She laughed. "We don't. I have a music studio in my apartment in Greenwich Village and (incidentally, it was music that first brought us together) Ken spends as much time with me there as I spend with him here. We are free to go wherever we want. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't expect him to accept me at all if I were willing to spend time with him in Harlem only."

"I didn't know you were a musician," I said.

"Yes. Would you like to hear something?"

I said I would be delighted; and she went over to the piano and seated herself; her chubby fingers danced nimbly over the keyboard as she played something that sounded like "Piano Concerto . . ."

I HAD KNOWN a nurse in a midtown hospital for several months, although our acquaintance was definitely not of a social nature. Intelligent and friendly, she was an attractive redhead in her late twenties.

She was the sturdy American type who spoke with more than a trace of a Southern accent—the kind that one would least expect to cross the color line socially. So—I was very much surprised

when I ran into her at a tea in Harlem.

"I want you to meet my boyfriend," she said. And she proceeded to introduce me to a slender colored fellow whose smooth skin was the color of ebony.

"You didn't expect to see me here, did you?" And when I said that I had had no such expectation, she said: "It's different downtown."

I'm Scared

"I'm expecting a promotion soon, and I have to be careful or I'll miss the promotion and probably lose my job, too."

"They wouldn't dare do a thing like that, would they?" I asked.

Her face lost its smile. "I don't really know, but we can't afford to take the chance."



"She was a pleasant-faced woman who had a problem . . ."

"If you continue your present trend," I said, "you'll have to face the music sooner or later."

"If it's later, it will make no difference," she said. "Henry gets his M.D. in a couple of months. As soon as he's established in practice, we can settle down and live our kind of life."

She took a sip from her cup. "You know, we'll be free before much longer. That's wonderful, isn't it, Henry?"

His toothsome smile seemed to tell her that she was right.

JEAN WAS working on her master's degree at an Eastern university. Through a mutual friend, at whose table we sat, I met her in a restaurant on Harlem's gaudy "neon belt."

She is an unusually pretty girl of 25—with a figure that would do more than justice to a bathing suit. And she dresses like the model that she is.

"I like coming to Harlem," she said. "The atmosphere is so delightfully different from those hide-bound, proper joints downtown. Here everybody seems to enjoy life. And the food is very good."

"Do you come here often?" I asked.

"As often as circumstances will



"A pretty girl of 25 who came uptown to meet her Mel . . ."

permit."

"Aside from the atmosphere and the gaiety, is there any other reason why you like to come uptown?"

The Big Reason

She didn't seem to mind the question. "Well—yes, there is," she admitted. "His name is Mel. We're close friends."

"Really? How close?"

A sly smile crept over her full lips. "Close enough to distinguish friendship from love."

"But isn't it sometimes difficult to do that?"

"Not when you consider all the factors involved," she said.

"That must be a rather complicated business."

Her reply was quick. "Not at all. On the contrary, it's simplicity itself. He has his circle of friends and I have mine; and neither of us is sufficiently indiscreet to interfere."

"We meet on common ground, but both of us recognize the folly of becoming too deeply concerned."

Here was my chance to ask the "payoff" question. "But how about your family and your friends?"

Her laughter cut sharply through the din. "That's a joke," she said. "I'm a free, sane, self-supporting adult. Nobody can tell me how to live my life."

"Do you find such a relationship rewarding?"

"Mel and me?" she said after a slight hesitation. "I think so."

"In what way?"

She thought for a moment. "Oh—in fun, warmth, understanding—peace of mind. Is that enough?"

I said I thought it was, but that I couldn't see how such a setup could last.

"It will," she said, "until one of us gets married—and then the other will more or less fade out of the picture. It's a near-perfect setup because we know what we are doing."

Her voice indicated that she was confident . . .