HUGHES, LANGSTON, 1902-1967 . ***CHAPTER: WASHINGTON SOCIETY*** . New York, NY :
University of Missouri Press , 1940 .

Chapter: Washington Society

Besides the quarter, I landed with a few poems. I took them that afternoon to show to Countee Cullen, whose work I admired. Cullen told me the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was having a benefit cabaret party that night at Happy Rhone's Club on Lenox Avenue. So I went -- and got in free, being a writer for the *Crisis*. It was a very gay and very crowded party, sprinkled with celebrities. Alberta Hunter was singing a song about, "Everybody loves my baby, but my baby don't love nobody but me."

At the door I met Walter White and he introduced me to Mary White Ovington, James Weldon Johnson, and Carl Van Vechten. I sat at a table with Walter's charming and very beautiful wife, and I was properly dazed. She looked like a Moorish princess.

I wanted to ask her for a dance, but I still had my sea-legs on. Besides, I was bashful.

All the *Crisis* people were at the party and I asked if they had liked my article and they said: "Yes." They told me their office had cabled me twenty dollars to Genoa. But the cable came back. The next day they showed me the cable receipt, and the date indicated that it reached the Albergo Populare the day after I sailed. I was glad it had missed me, because now I had twenty dollars to start life anew in my New World, like an immigrant from Europe. So I went to see Jeanne Eagels in *Rain*, and then *What Price Glory*, before I went home.

My mother and kid brother were in Washington. This time, she wrote, she and my step-father had separated for good, and she had decided to come to Washington to live with our cousins there, who belonged to the more intellectual and high-class branch of our family, being direct descendants of Congressman John M. Langston. She asked me to join her. It all sounded risky to me, but I decided to try it. My cousins extended a cordial invitation to come and share their life with them. They were proud of my poems, they said, and would be pleased to have a writer in the house.

By now, I wanted to go back to college, anyhow. And I thought that Howard, in Washington, would be a good place to start, if I could--163--manage to get together the tuition. So I bought a ticket to Washington. The twenty dollars from the *Crisis* would not cover both a ticket and an overcoat, which I needed, so I arrived in Washington with only a sailor's peajacket protecting me from the winter winds. All my shirts were ragged and my trousers frayed. I am sure I did not look like a distinguished poet, when I walked up to my cousin's porch in Washington's Negro society section, LeDroit Park, next door to the famous colored surgeon and heart specialist, Dr. Carson.

Listen, everybody! Never go to live with relatives if you're broke! That is an error. My cousins introduced me as just back from Europe, but they didn't say I came by chipping decks on a freight ship -- which seemed to me an essential explanation.

The nice, cultured colored people I met in Washington seemed to think that by just being a poet I could get a dignified job, such as a page boy in the Library of Congress. I thought such a job would be nice, too, so they sent me to see Mary Church Terrell and some other famous Negro leaders who had political influence. But to be a page boy in the Library of Congress seems to require a tremendous list of qualifications and influential connections, and a great capacity for calling on politicians and race leaders, as well as a vast patience for waiting and waiting. So, being broke, I finally got a job in a wet wash laundry instead.

I had to help unload the wagons, and open the big bags of dirty clothes people send to wet wash laundries. Then I had to sort out and pin the clothes together with numbered pins so that, once washed, they could be reassembled again. I never dreamed human beings sent *such* dirty clothes to a laundry. But I knew that, as a rule, only very poor people use wet wash laundries. And very poor people cannot afford to be changing clothes every day. Nor every week, either, I guess, from the look of those I handled.

Cultured Washington, I mean cultured colored Washington, who read my poems in the *Crisis*, did not find it fitting and proper that a poet should work in a wet wash laundry. Still, they did nothing much about it. And since none of them had any better jobs to offer me, I stayed there. The laundry at least paid twelve dollars a week.

I spoke with Dean Kelly Miller at Howard University about the possibility of trying for a scholarship at the college. And he spoke grandiloquently about my grand-uncle, who had been the first Dean of the Howard Law School, and what a fine man he was. But it seems that there were no scholarships forthcoming. I spoke with Dr. Alain Locke, who said my poems were about to appear in the New Negro Issue of--164--the *Survey Graphic*, and who declared I was the most racial of the New Negro poets. But he didn't have any scholarship up his sleeve, either.

So I began to try to save a dollar a week toward entering college. But if you ever started out with nothing, maybe you know how hard it is to work up even to an overcoat.

I wanted to return to college mostly in order to get a better background for writing and for understanding the world. I wanted to study sociology and history and psychology, and find out why countries and people were the kind of countries and people they are. Somebody lent me *This Believing World*, which I put on the sorting table at the laundry and read between bundles of wet wash. Comparative religions interested me, but I didn't believe the end of *This Believing World* was necessarily true.

One day my mother came to the laundry, crying. She said she couldn't stay at our cousin's house a minute longer, not one minute! It seems that in some way they had hurt both her pride and her feelings. So I took my lunch hour off to help her find a new place to stay. We located two small rooms on the second floor in an old brick house not far from where I worked. The rooms were furnished, but they had no heat in them, so we bought a second-hand oil stove, which we had to take turns using, carrying it back and forth between my room and my mother's room, since we couldn't afford two oil stoves that winter.

My little brother, Kit, was in school then and could kick out a pair of shoes as fast as any boy his age in America. My mother worked in service, but wages were very low in Washington. So, together, we made barely enough to get along. Hard as I tried, I could not save a dollar a week to go to college. I could not even save enough to buy a heavy coat.

Folks! Start out with nothing sometime and see how long it takes to work up to something.

I felt very bad in Washington that winter, so I wrote a great many poems. (I wrote only a few poems in Paris, because I had had such a good time there.) But in Washington I didn't have a good time. I didn't like my job, and I didn't know what was going to happen to me, and I was cold and half-hungry, so I wrote a great many poems. I began to write poems in the manner of the Negro blues and the spirituals.

Seventh Street in Washington was the nearest thing I had known to the South up to that time, never having been in Dixie proper. But Washington is like the South. It has all the prejudices and Jim Crow customs of any Southern town, except that there are no Jim Crow sections on the street cars.--165--Negro life in Washington is definitely a ghetto life and only in the Negro sections of the city may colored people attend theaters, eat a meal, or drink a Coca-Cola. Strangely undemocratic doings take place in the shadow of "the world's greatest democracy."

In Europe and in Mexico I have lived with white people, worked and eaten and slept with white people, and no one seemed any the worse for it. In New York I have sat beside white people in theaters and

movie houses and neither they nor I appeared to suffer. But in Washington I could not see a legitimate stage show, because the theaters would not sell Negroes a ticket. I could not get a cup of coffee on a cold day anywhere within sight of the Capitol, because no "white" restaurant would serve a Negro. I could not see the new motion pictures, because they did not play in the Negro houses.

I asked some of the leading Washington Negroes about this, and they loftily said that they had their own society and their own culture -- so I looked around to see what that was like.

To me it did not seem good, for the "better class" Washington colored people, as they called themselves, drew rigid class and color lines within the race against Negroes who worked with their hands, or who were dark in complexion and had no degrees from colleges. These upper class colored people consisted largely of government workers, professors and teachers, doctors, lawyers, and resident politicians. They were on the whole as unbearable and snobbish a group of people as I have ever come in contact with anywhere. They lived in comfortable homes, had fine cars, played bridge, drank Scotch, gave exclusive "formal" parties, and dressed well, but seemed to be altogether lacking in real culture, kindness, or good common sense.

Lots of them held degrees from colleges like Harvard and Dartmouth and Columbia and Radcliffe and Smith, but God knows what they had learned there. They all had the manners and airs of reactionary, ill-bred *nouveaux riches* -- except that they were not really rich. Just middle class. And many of them had less fortunate brothers or cousins working as red-caps and porters -- so near was their society standing to that of the poorest Negro. (Their snobbishness was so precarious, that I suppose for that very reason it had to be doubly reinforced.)

To seem people of culture, they performed in an amazing fashion. Perhaps, because I was very young and easily hurt, I remember so well some of the things that happened to me. When Dr˙ Locke's fine collection of articles, stories, pictures, and poems by and about Negroes was published, *The New Negro*, Washington's leading colored literary--166--club decided to honor the "New Negro" writers by inviting them to their annual dinner, a very "formal" event in the city. To represent the younger poets, they invited Countee Cullen and me. Mr˙ Cullen wrote from New York that he accepted the invitation. I dropped them a note saying that I could not come, because, among other reasons, I had no dinner clothes to wear to a formal dinner. They assured me that in such a case I could attend their dinner without dinner clothes -- just so I would read some of my poems. They also stated that their invitation included my mother, who, they knew, would be proud to see me so honored.

I did not want to go to the dinner, but finally I agreed. On the evening of the dinner, however, I came home from work to find my mother in tears. She had left her job early to get ready to go with me. But about five o'clock, one of the ladies of the committee had telephoned her to say that, after all, she didn't feel it wise for her to come -- since it was to be a formal dinner, and perhaps my mother did not possess an evening gown.

We didn't go.

Again, some months later, at the home of a prominent hostess, at a supper for Roland Hayes after his first big Washington concert, I was placed near the end of the table. The lady next to me kept her back turned all the time, talking up the table in the direction of Mr˙ Hayes. A few days later, however (amusingly enough), I got a note from this lady, saying she was extremely sorry she hadn't known she was sitting next to *Langston* Hughes, the poet, because we could have talked together!

One of the things that amused me in Washington, though, was that with all their conventional-mindedness, a number of the families in the best colored society made proud boast of being directly descended from the leading Southern white families, "on the colored side" -- which, of course, meant the *illegitimate* side. One prominent Negro family tree went straight back to George Washington and his various slave mistresses.

From all this pretentiousness Seventh Street was a sweet relief. Seventh Street is the long, old, dirty street, where the ordinary Negroes hang out, folks with practically no family tree at all, folks who draw

no color line between mulattoes and deep dark-browns, folks who work hard for a living with their hands. On Seventh Street in 1924 they played the blues, ate watermelon, barbecue, and fish sandwiches, shot pool, told tall tales, looked at the dome of the Capitol and laughed out loud. I listened to their blues:--167—

*Did you ever dream lucky --Wake up cold in hand?*And I went to their churches and heard the tambourines play and the little tinkling bells of the triangles adorn the gay shouting tunes that sent sisters dancing down the aisles for joy.

I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street -- gay songs, because you had to be gay or die; sad songs, because you couldn't help being sad sometimes. But, gay or sad, you kept on living and you kept on going. Their songs -- those of Seventh Street -- had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going.

Like the waves of the sea coming one after another, always one after another, like the earth moving around the sun, night, day -- night, day -- night, day -- forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power.

I'm goin' down to de railroad, baby,Lay ma head on de track.I'm goin' down to de railroad, babe,Lay ma head on de track --But if I see de train a-comin',I'm gonna jerk it back.

I liked the barrel houses of Seventh Street, the shouting churches, and the songs. They were warm and kind and didn't care whether you had an overcoat or not.

In one of the little churches one night I saw something that reminded me of my own unfortunate "conversion." A revival had been going full swing since early evening. It was now nearing one o'clock. A sinner, overcome by his guilt, had passed out in front of the mourners' bench and was lying prone on the floor. All the other sinners by now had been brought to Jesus, but this fellow looked distinctly as if he had fallen asleep.

It was a Sanctified Church, so the Saints came and gathered around the prostrate soul in prayer. They prayed and prayed and they sang and sang. But some of the less devout, as the hour grew late, had to get up and go home, leaving the unsaved soul for another day. Others prayed on. Still the man did not rise. He was resting easy. Neither prayer nor--168--song moved him until, finally, one old lady bent down, shook him, and said sternly: "Brother! You get up -- 'cause de Saints is gettin' tired!"