



RUDOLPH FISHER

THE CITY OF REFUGE

short story, *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1925

Confronted suddenly by daylight, King Solomon Gillis stood dazed and blinking. The railroad station, the long, white-walled corridor, the impassable slot-machine, the terrifying subway train — he felt as if he had been caught up in the jaws of a steam-shovel, jammed together with other helpless lumps of dirt, swept blindly along for a time, and at last abruptly dumped.

There had been strange and terrible sounds: “New York! Penn Terminal — all change!” “Pohter, hyer, pohter, suh?” Shuffle of a thousand soles, clatter of a thousand heels, innumerable echoes. Cracking rifle-shots — no, snapping turnstiles. “Put a nickel in!” “Harlem? Sure. This side — next train.” Distant thunder, nearing. The screeching onslaught of the fiery hosts of hell, headlong, breathtaking. Car doors rattling, sliding, banging open. “Say, wha’ d’ye think this is, a baggage car?” Heat, oppression, suffocation — eternity — “Hundred ’n turdy-fif’ next!” More turnstiles. Jonah emerging from the whale.

Clean air, blue sky, bright sunlight.

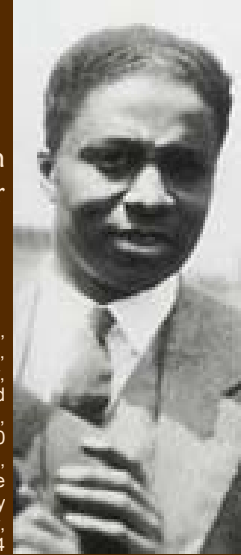
Gillis set down his tan cardboard extension case and wiped his black, shining brow. Then slowly, spreadingly, he grinned at what he saw: Negroes at every turn; up and down Lenox Avenue, up and down 135th Street; big, lanky Negroes, short, squat Negroes; black ones, brown ones, yellow ones; men standing idle on the curb, women, bundle-laden, trudging reluctantly homeward, children rattle-trapping about the sidewalks; here and there a white face drifting along, but Negroes predominantly, overwhelmingly everywhere. There was assuredly no doubt of his whereabouts. This was Negro Harlem.

Back in North Carolina Gillis had shot a white man and, with the aid of prayer and an automobile, probably escaped a lynching. Carefully avoiding the railroads, he had reached Washington in safety. For his car a Southwest bootlegger had given him a hundred dollars and directions to Harlem; and so he had come to Harlem.

Ever since a traveling preacher had first told him of the place, King Solomon Gillis had longed to come to Harlem. The Uggams were always talking about it; one of their boys had gone to France in the draft and, returning, had never got any nearer home than Harlem. And there were occasional “colored”

New York Public Library

Rudolph Fisher



Langston Hughes, Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, Rudolph Fisher, and Hubert T. Delaney, on the roof of 580 St. Nicholas Ave., Harlem, on the occasion of a party in Hughes's honor, 1924



newspapers from New York: newspapers that mentioned Negroes without comment, but always spoke of a white person as “So-and-so, white.” That was the point. In Harlem, black was white. You had rights that could not be denied you; you had privileges, protected by law. And you had money. Everybody in Harlem had money. It was a land of plenty. Why, had not Mouse Uggam sent back as much as fifty dollars at a time to his people in Waxhaw?

The shooting, therefore, simply catalyzed whatever sluggish mental reaction had been already directing King Solomon’s fortunes toward Harlem. The land of plenty was more than that now; it was also the city of refuge.

Casting about for direction, the tall newcomer’s glance caught inevitably on the most conspicuous thing in sight, a magnificent figure in blue that stood in the middle of the crossing and blew a whistle and waved great white-gloved hands. The Southern Negro’s eyes opened wide; his mouth opened wider. If the inside of New York had mystified him, the outside was amazing him. For there stood a handsome brass-buttoned giant directing the heaviest traffic Gillis had ever seen; halting unnumbered tons of automobiles and trucks and wagons and pushcarts and streetcars; holding them at bay with one hand while he swept similar tons peremptorily on with the other; ruling the wide crossing with supreme self-assurance. And he, too, was a Negro!

Yet most of the vehicles that leaped or crouched at his bidding carried white passengers. One of these overdrove bounds a few feet, and Gillis heard the officer’s shrill whistle and gruff reproof, saw the driver’s face turn red and his car draw back like a threatened pup. It was beyond belief — impossible. Black might be white, but it couldn’t be that white!

“Done died an’ woke up in Heaven,” thought King Solomon, watching, fascinated; and after a while, as if the wonder of it were too great to believe simply by seeing, “Cullud policemen!” he said, half aloud; then repeated over and over, with greater and greater conviction, “Even got cullud policemen—even got cullud —”

“Where y’ want to go, big boy?”

Gillis turned. A little, sharp-faced yellow man was addressing him.

“Saw you was a stranger. Thought maybe I could help y’ out.”

King Solomon located and gratefully extended a slip of paper. “Wha’ dis hyeh at, please, suh?”

The other studied it a moment, pushing back his hat and scratching his head. The hat was tall-crowned, unindented brown felt; the head was brown patent-leather, its glistening brush-back flawless save for a suspicious crimpiness near the clean-grazed edges.

“See that second corner? Turn to the left when you get there. Number forty-five’s about halfway [down] the block.”

“Thank y’, suh.”

“You from — Massachusetts?”

“No, suh, Nawth Ca’lina.”

“Is ’at so? You look like a Northerner. Be with us long?”

“Till I die,” grinned the flattered King Solomon.

“Stoppin’ there?”

“Reckon I is. Man in Washin’ton ’lowed I’d find lodgin’ at dis ad-dress.”

“Good enough. If y’.don’t maybe I can fix y’ up. Harlem’s pretty crowded. This is me.”

He proffered a card.

“Thank y’, suh,” said Gillis, and put the card in his pocket.

The little yellow man watched him plod flat-footedly on down the street, long awkward legs never quite straightened, shouldered extension-case bending him sidewise, wonder upon wonder halting or turning him about. Presently, as he proceeded, a pair of bright green stockings caught and held his attention. Tony, the storekeeper, was crossing the sidewalk with a bushel basket of apples. There was a collision; the apples rolled; Tony exploded; King Solomon apologized. The little yellow man laughed shortly, took out a notebook, and put down the address he had seen on King Solomon’s slip of paper.

“Guess you’re the shine I been waitin’ for,” he surmised.

As Gillis, approaching his destination, stopped to rest, a haunting notion grew into an insistent idea. “Dat li’l yaller nigger was a sho’ ’nuff gen’man to show me de road. Seem lak I knowed him befo’ —” He pondered. That receding brow, that sharp-ridged, spreading nose, that tight upper lip over the two big front teeth, that chinless jaw — He fumbled hurriedly for the card he had not looked at and eagerly made out the name.

“Mouse Uggam, sho’ ’nuff! Well, dog-gone!”

II

Uggam sought out Tom Edwards, once a Pullman porter, now prosperous proprietor of a cabaret, and told him:

“Chief, I got him: a baby jess in from the land o’ cotton and so dumb he thinks ante bellum’s an old woman.”

“Where’d you find him?”

“Where you find all the jaybirds when they first hit Harlem — at the subway entrance. This one come up the stairs, batted his eyes once or twice, an’ froze to the spot — with his mouth wide open. Sure sign he’s from ’way down behind the sun and ripe f’ the pluckin’.”

Edwards grinned a gold-studded, fat-jowled grin. “Gave him the usual line, I suppose?”

“Didn’t miss. An’ he fell like a ton o’ bricks. ’Course I’ve got him spotted, but damn ’f I know jess how to switch ’em on to him.”

“Get him a job around a store somewhere. Make out you’re befriendin’ him. Get his confidence.”

“Sounds good. Ought to be easy. He’s from my state. Maybe I know him or some of his people.”

“Make out you do, anyhow. Then tell him some fairy tale that’ll switch your trade to him. The cops’ll follow the trade. We could even let Froggy flop into some dumb white cop’s hands and ‘confess’ where he got it. See?”

“Chief, you got a head, no lie.”

“Don’t lose no time. And remember, hereafter, it’s better to sacrifice a little than to get squealed on. Never refuse a customer. Give him a little credit. Humor him along till you can get rid of him safe. You don’t know what that guy that died may have said; you don’t know who’s on to you now. And if they get you — I don’t know you.”

“They won’t get *me*,” said Uggam.

King Solomon Gillis sat meditating in a room half the size of his hencoop back home, with a single window opening for an airshaft.

An airshaft: cabbage and chitterlings cooking; liver and onions sizzling, sputtering; three player-pianos out-plunking each other; a man and a woman calling each other vile things; a sick, neglected baby

wailing; a phonograph broadcasting blues; dishes clacking; a girl crying heartbrokenly; waste noises, waste odors of a score of families, seeking issue through a common channel; pollution from bottom to top — a sewer of sounds and smells.

Contemplating this, King Solomon grinned and breathed, “Dog-gone!” A little later, still gazing into the sewer, he grinned again. “Green stockin’s,” he said; “loud green!” The sewer gradually grew darker. A window lighted up opposite, revealing a woman in camisole and petticoat, arranging her hair. King Solomon, staring vacantly, shook his head and grinned yet again. “Even got cullud policemen!” he mumbled softly.

III

Uggam leaned out of the room’s one window and spat maliciously into the dinginess of the airshaft. “Damn glad you got him,” he commented as Gillis finished his story. “They’s a thousand shines in Harlem would change places with you in a minute jess f’ the honor of killin’ a cracker.”

“But I didn’t go to do it. ’Twas a accident.”

“That’s the only part to keep secret.”

“Know whut dey done? Dey killed five o’ Mose Joplin’s hawses ’fo he lef’. Put groun’ glass in de feed-trough. Sam Cheevers come up on three of ’em one night pizenin’ his well. Blesom beat Crinshaw out o’ sixty acres o’ lan’ an’ a year’s crops. Dass jess how ’t is. Soon’s a nigger make a li’l sump’n he better git to leavin’. An’ ’fo long ev’ybody’s goin’ be lef’!”

“Hope to hell they don’t all come here.”

The doorbell of the apartment rang. A crescendo of footfalls in the hallway culminated in a sharp rap on Gillis’s door. Gillis jumped. Nobody but a policeman would rap like that. Maybe the landlady had been listening and had called the law. It came again, loud, quick, angry. King Solomon prayed that the policeman would be a Negro.

Uggam stepped over and opened the door. King Solomon’s apprehensive eyes saw framed therein, instead of a gigantic officer, calling for him, a little blot of a creature, quite black against even the darkness of the hallway, except for a dirty wide-striped silk shirt, collarless, with the sleeves rolled up.

“Ah hahve bill fo’ Mr. Gillis.” A high, strongly accented Jamaican voice, with its characteristic singsong intonation, interrupted King Solomon’s sigh of relief.

“Bill? Bill fo’ me? What kin’ o’ bill?”

“Wan bushel appels. T’ree seventy-five.”

“Apples? I ain’ bought no apples.” He took the paper and read aloud, laboriously, “Antonio Gabrielli to K. S. Gillis, Doctor —”

“Mr. Gabrielli say, you not pays him, he send policemon.”

“What I had to do wid ’is apples?”

“You bumps into him yesterday, no? Scatter appels everywhere — on the sidewalk, in de gutter. Kids pick up an’ run away. Others all spoil. So you pays.”

Gillis appealed to Uggam. “How ’bout it, Mouse?”

“He’s a damn liar. Tony picked up most of ‘em; I seen him. Lemme look at that bill — Tony never wrote this thing. This baby’s jess playin’ you for a sucker.”

“Ain’ had no apples, ain’ payin’ fo’ none,” announced King Solomon, thus prompted. “Didn’t have to come to Harlem to git cheated. Plenty o’ dat right wha’ I come fum.”

But the West Indian warmly insisted. “You cahn’t do daht, mon. Whaht you t’ink, ’ey? Dis mon loose ’is appels an’ ’is money too?”

“What diff’ence it make to you, nigger?”

“Who you call nigger, mon? Ah hahve you understahn’ —”

“Oh, well, white folks, den. What all you got t’ do wid dis hyeh, anyhow?”

“Mr. Gabrielli send me to collect bill!”

“How I know dat?”

“Do Ah not bring bill? You t’ink Ah steal t’ree dollar, ’ey?”

“Three dollars an’ sebenty-fi’ cent,” corrected Gillis. “Nuther thing: wha’ you ever see me befo’? How you know dis is me?”

“Ah see you, sure. Ah help Mr. Gabrielli in de store. When you knocks down de baskette appels, Ah see. Ah follow you. Ah know you comes in dis house.”

“Oh, you does? An’ how come you know my name an’ flat an’ room so good? How come dat?”

“Ah fin’ out. Sometime Ah brings up here vegetables from de store.”

“Humph! Mus’ be workin’ on shares.”

“You pays, ’ey? You pays me or de policemon?”

“Wait a minute,” broke in Uggam, who had been thoughtfully contemplating the bill. “Now listen, big shorty. You haul hips on back to Tony. We got your menu all right” — he waved the bill — “but we don’t eat your kind o’ cookin’, see?”

The West Indian flared. “Whaht it is to you, ’ey? You can not mind your own business? Ah hahve not spik to you!”

“No, brother. But this is my friend, an’ I’ll be john-browned if there’s a monkey-chaser in Harlem can gyp him if I know it, see? Bes’ think f’ you to do is to catch air, toot sweet.”¹

Sensing frustration, the little islander demanded the bill back. Uggam figured he could use the bill himself, maybe. The West Indian hotly persisted; he even menaced. Uggam pocketed the paper and invited him to take it. Wisely enough, the caller preferred to catch air.

When he had gone, King Solomon sought words of thanks.

“Bottle it,” said Uggam. “The point is this: I figger you got a job.”

“Job? No I ain’t! Wha’ at?”

“When you show Tony this bill, he’ll hit the roof and fire that monk.”

“What ef he do?”

“Then you up ’n ask f’ the job. He’ll be too grateful to refuse. I know Tony some, an’ I’ll be there to put in a good word. See?”

King Solomon considered this. “Sho’ needs a job, but ain’ after stealin’ none.”

“Stealin’? ’T wouldn’t be stealin’. Stealin’ ’s what that damn monkey-chaser tried to do from you. This would be doin’ Tony a favor an’ gettin’ y’self out o’ the barrel. What’s the holdback?”

“What make you keep callin’ him monkey-chaser?”

¹ “toot sweet”: *tout de suite* — French, “right away.” [NHC note]

“West Indian. That’s another thing. Any time y’ can knife a monk, do it. They’s too damn many of ’em here. They’re an achin’ pain.”

“Jess de way white folks feels ’bout niggers.”

“Damn that. How ’bout it? Y’ want the job?”

“Hm — well — I’d ruther be a policeman.”

“Policeman?” Uggam gasped.

“M-hm. Dass all I wants to be, a policeman, so I kin police all the white folks right plumb in jail!”

Uggam said seriously, “Well, y’ might work up to that. But it takes time. An’ y’ve got to eat while y’re waitin’.” He paused to let this penetrate. “Now how ’bout this job at Tony’s in the meantime? I should think y’d jump at it.”

King Solomon was persuaded.

“Hm — well — reckon I does,” he said slowly.

“Now y’re tootin’!” Uggam’s two big front teeth popped out in a grin of genuine pleasure. “Come on. Let’s go.”

IV

Spitting blood and crying with rage, the West Indian scrambled to his feet. For a moment he stood in front of the store gesticulating furiously and jabbering shrill threats and unintelligible curses. Then abruptly he stopped and took himself off.

King Solomon Gillis, mildly puzzled, watched him from Tony’s doorway. “I jess give him a li’l shove,” he said to himself, “an’ he roll’ clean ’cross de sidewalk.” And a little later, disgustedly, “Monkey-chaser!” he grunted, and went back to his sweeping.

“Well, big boy, how y’ comin’ on?”

Gillis dropped his broom. “Hay-o, Mouse. Wha’ you been las’ two-three days?”

“Oh, around. Gettin’ on all right here? Had any trouble?”

“Deed I ain’t — ceptin’ jess now I had to throw ’at li’l jigger out.”

“Who? The monk?”

“M-hm. He sho’ Lawd doan like me in his job. Look like he think I stole it from him, stiddy him tryin’ to steal from me. Had to push him down sho’ nuff ’fo I could get rid of ’im. Den he run off talkin’ Wes’ Indi’man an’ shakin’ his fis’ at me.”

“Ferget it.” Uggam glanced about. “Where’s Tony?”

“Boss man? He be back direckly.”

“Listen — like to make two or three bucks a day extra?”

“Huh?”

“Two or three dollars a day more ’n what you’re gettin’ already?”

“Ain’ I near ’nuff in jail now?”

“Listen.” King Solomon listened. Uggam hadn’t been in France for nothing. Fact was, in France he’d learned about some valuable French medicine. He’d brought some back with him, — little white pills, — and while in Harlem had found a certain druggist who knew what they were and could supply all he could

use. Now there were any number of people who would buy and pay well for as much of this French medicine as Uggam could get. It was good for what ailed them, and they didn't know how to get it except through him. But he had no store in which to set up an agency and hence no single place where his customers could go to get what they wanted. If he had, he could sell three or four times as much as he did.

King Solomon was in a position to help him now, same as he had helped King Solomon. He would leave a dozen packages of the medicine — just small envelopes that could all be carried in a coat pocket — with King Solomon every day. Then he could simply send his customers to King Solomon at Tony's store. They'd make some trifling purchase, slip him a certain coupon which Uggam had given them, and King Solomon would wrap the little envelope of medicine with their purchase..Mustn't let Tony catch on, because he might object, and then the whole scheme would go gaflooeey. Of course it wouldn't really be hurting Tony any. Wouldn't it increase the number of his customers?

Finally, at the end of each day, Uggam would meet King Solomon some place and give him a quarter for each coupon he held. There'd be at least ten or twelve a day — two and a half or three dollars plumb extra! Eighteen or twenty dollars a week.

“Dog-gone!” breathed Gillis.

“Does Tony ever leave you heer alone?”

“M-hm. Jess started dis mawnin'. Doan nobody much come round 'tween ten an' twelve, so he done took to doin' his buyin' right 'long 'bout dat time. Nobody hyeh but me fo' 'n hour or so.”

“Good. I'll try to get my folks to come 'round here mostly while Tony's out, see?”

“I doan miss.”

“Sure y' get the idea, now?” Uggam carefully explained it all again. By thetime he had finished, King Solomon was wallowing in gratitude.

“Mouse, you sho' is been a friend to me. Why, 'f 't hadn' been fo' you —”

“Bottle it,” said Uggam. “I'll be round to your room tonight with enough stuff for tomorrer, see? Be sure 'n be there.”

“Won't be nowha' else.”

“An' remember, this is all jess between you 'n me.”

“Nobody else but,” vowed King Solomon.

Uggam grinned to himself as he went on his way. “Dumb Oscar! Wonder how much can we make before the cops nab him? French medicine — Humph!”

V

Tony Gabrielli, an oblate Neopolitan of enormous equator, wobbled heavily out of his store and settled himself over a soapbox.

Usually Tony enjoyed sitting out front thus in the evening, when his helper had gone home and his trade was slackest. He liked to watch the little Gabriellis playing over the sidewalk. with the little Levys and Johnsons; the trios and quartettes of brightly dressed dark-skinned girls merrily out for a stroll; the slovenly gaited, darker men, who eyed them up and down .and commented to each other with an unsuppressed “Hot damn!” or “Oh no, now!”

But tonight Tony was troubled. Something was wrong in the store; something was different since the arrival of King Solomon Gillis. The new man had seemed to prove himself honest and trustworthy, it was true. Tony had tested him, as he always tested a new man, by apparently leaving him alone in charge for

two or three mornings. As a matter of fact, the new man was never under more vigilant observation than during these two or three mornings. Tony's store was a modification of the front rooms of his flat and was in direct communication with it by way of a glass-windowed door in the rear. Tony always managed to get back into his flat via the side-street entrance and watch the new man through this unobtrusive glass-windowed door. If anything excited his suspicion, like unwarranted interest in the cash register, he walked unexpectedly out of this door to surprise the offender in the act. Thereafter he would have no more such trouble. But he had not succeeded in seeing King Solomon steal even an apple.

What he had observed, however, was that the number of customers that came into the store during the morning's slack hour had pronouncedly increased in the last few days. Before, there had been three or four. Now there were twelve or fifteen. The mysterious thing about it was that their purchases totaled little more than those of the original three or four.

Yesterday and today Tony had elected to be in the store at the time when, on the other days, he had been out. But Gillis had not been overcharging or short-changing; for when Tony waited on the customers himself — strange faces all — he found that they bought something like a yeast cake or a five-cent loaf of bread. Why should strangers leave their own neighborhoods and repeatedly come to him for a yeast cake or a loaf of bread? They were not new neighbors. New neighbors would have bought more variously and extensively and at different times of day. Living nearby, they would have come in, the men often in shirtsleeves and slippers, the women in kimonos, with boudoir caps covering their lumpy heads. They would have sent in strange children for things like yeast cakes and loaves of bread. And why did not some of them come in at night, when the new helper was off duty?

As for accosting Gillis on suspicion, Tony was too wise for that. Patronage had a queer way of shifting itself in Harlem. You lost your temper and let slip a single "*nègre!*" A week later you sold your business.

Spread over his soapbox, with his pudgy hands clasped on his preposterous paunch, Tony sat and wondered. Two men came up, conspicuous for no other reason than that they were white. They displayed extreme nervousness, looking about as if afraid of being seen; and when one of them spoke to Tony, it was in a husky, toneless, blowing voice, like the sound of a dirty phonograph record.

"Are you Antonio Gabrielli?"

"Yes, sure." Strange behavior for such lusty-looking fellows. He who had spoken unsmilingly winked first one eye then the other, and indicated by a gesture of his head that they should enter the store. His companion looked cautiously up and down the Avenue, while Tony, wondering what ailed them, rolled to his feet and puffingly led the way.

Inside, the spokesman snuffled, gave his shoulder a queer little hunch, and asked, "Can you fix us up, buddy?" The other glanced restlessly about the place as if he were constantly hearing unaccountable noises.

Tony thought he understood clearly now. "Booze, 'ey?" he smiled. "Sorry — I no got."

"Booze? Hell, no!" The voice dwindled to a throaty whisper. "Dope. Coke, milk, dice — anything. Name your price. Got to have it."

"Dope?" Tony was entirely at a loss. "What's a dis, dope?"

"Aw, lay off, brother. We're in on this. Here." He handed Tony a piece of paper. "Froggy gave us a coupon. Come on. You can't go wrong."

"I no got," insisted the perplexed Tony; nor could he be budged on that point.

Quite suddenly the manner of both men changed. "All right," said the first angrily, in a voice as robust as his body. "All right, you're clever. You no got. Well, you will get. You'll get twenty years!"

"Twenty year? Whadda you talk?"

“Wait a minute, Mac,” said the second caller. “Maybe the wop’s on the level: Look here, Tony, we’re officers, see? Policemen.” He produced a badge. “A couple of weeks ago a guy was brought in dying for the want of a shot, see? Dope — he needed some dope — like this — in his arm. See? Well, we tried to make him tell us where he’d been getting it, but he was too weak. He croaked next day. Evidently he hadn’t had money enough to buy any more.

“Well, this morning a little nigger that goes by the name of Froggy was brought into the precinct pretty well doped up. When he finally came to, he swore he got the stuff here at your store. Of course, we’ve just been trying to trick you into giving yourself away, but you don’t bite. Now what’s your game? Know anything about this?”

Tony understood. “I dunno,” he said slowly; and then his own problem, whose contemplation his callers had interrupted, occurred to him. “Sure!” he exclaimed. “Wait. Maybeso I know somet’ing.”

“All right. Spill it.”

“I got a new man, work-a for me.” And he told them what he had noted since King Solomon Gillis came.

“Sounds interesting. Where is this guy?”

“Here in da store — all day.”

“Be here to-morrow?”

“Sure. All day.”

“All right. We’ll drop in tomorrow and give him the eye. Maybe he’s our man.”

“Sure. Come ten o’clock. I show you,” promised Tony.

VI

Even the oldest and rattiest cabarets in Harlem have sense of shame enough to hide themselves under the ground — for instance, Edwards’s. To get into Edwards’s you casually enter a dimly lighted corner saloon, apparently — only apparently — a subdued memory of brighter days. What was once the family entrance is now a side entrance for ladies. Supporting yourself against close walls, you crouchingly descend a narrow, twisted staircase until, with a final turn, you find yourself in a glaring, long, low basement. In a moment your eyes become accustomed to the haze of tobacco smoke. You see men and women seated at wire-legged, white-topped tables, which are covered with half-empty bottles and glasses; you trace the slow jazz accompaniment you heard as you came down the stairs to a pianist, a cornetist, and a drummer on a little platform at the far end of the room. There is a cleared space from the foot of the stairs, where you are standing, to the platform where this orchestra is mounted, and in it a tall brown girl is swaying from side to side and rhythmically proclaiming that she has the world in a jug and the stopper in her hand. Behind a counter at your left sits a fat, bald, tea-colored Negro, and you wonder if this is Edwards — Edwards, who stands in with the police, with the political bosses, with the importers of wines and worse. A white-vested waiter hustles you to a seat and takes your order. The song’s tempo becomes quicker; the drum and the cornet rip out a fanfare, almost drowning the piano; the girl catches up her dress and begins to dance. . . .*

Gillis’s wondering eyes had been roaming about. They stopped.

“Look, Mouse!” he whispered. “Look a yonder!”

“Look at what?”

“Dog-gone if it ain’ de self-same girl?”

*ellipsis in original.

“Wha’ d’ ye mean, self-same girl!”

“Over yonder, wi’ de green stockin’s. Dass de gal made me knock over dem apples fust day I come to town. ’Member? Been wishin’ I could see her ev’ y sence.”

“What for?” Uggam wondered.

King Solomon grew confidential. “Ain’ but two things in dis world, Mouse, I really wants. One is to be a policeman. Been wantin’ dat ev’ y sence I seen dat cullud traffic cop dat day. Other is to get myse’f a gal lak dat one over yonder!”

“You’ll do it,” laughed Uggam, “if you live long enough.”

“Who dat wid her?”

“How ’n hell do I know?”

“He cullud?”

“Don’t look like it. Why? What of it?”

“Hm —nuthin’ —”

“How many coupons y’ got to-night?”

“Ten.” King Solomon handed them over.

“Y’ ought to ’ve slipt ’em to me under the table, but it’s all right now, long as we got this table to ourselves. Here’s y’ medicine for to-morrer.”

“Wha’?”

“Reach under the table.”

Gillis secured and pocketed the medicine.

“An’ here’s two-fifty for a good day’s work.” Uggam passed the money over. Perhaps he grew careless; certainly the passing this time was above the table, in plain sight.

“Thanks, Mouse.”

Two white men had been watching Gillis and Uggam from a table nearby. In the tumult of merriment that rewarded the entertainer’s most recent and daring effort, one of these men, with a word to the other, came over and took the vacant chair beside Gillis.

“Is your name Gillis?”

“’T ain’ nuthin’ else.”

Uggam’s eyes narrowed.

The white man showed King Solomon a police officer’s badge.

“You’re wanted for dope-peddling. Will you come along without trouble?”

“Fo’ what?”

“Violation of the narcotic law — dope-selling.”

“Who — me?”

“Come on, now, lay off that stuff. I saw what happened just now myself.” He addressed Uggam. “Do you know this fellow?”

“Nope. Never saw him before tonight.”

“Didn’t I just see him sell you something?”

“Guess you did. We happened to be sittin’ here at the same table and got to talkin’. After a while I says I can’t seem to sleep nights, so he offers me sump’n he says ‘ll make me sleep, all right. I don’t know what it is., but he says he uses it himself an’ I offers to pay him what it cost him. That’s how I come to take it. Guess he’s got more in his pocket there now.”

The detective reached deftly into the coat pocket of the dumfounded King Solomon and withdrew a packet of envelopes. He tore off a corner of one, emptied a half-dozen tiny white tablets into his palm, and sneered triumphantly. “You’ll make a good witness,” he told Uggam.

The entertainer was issuing an ultimatum to all sweet mammas who dared to monkey around her loving man. Her audience was absorbed and delighted, with the exception of one couple — the girl with the green stockings and her escort. They sat directly in the line of vision of King Solomon’s wide eyes, which, in the calamity that had descended upon him, for the moment saw nothing.

“Are you coming without trouble?”

Mouse Uggam, his friend. Harlem. Land of plenty. City of refuge — city of refuge. If you live long enough —

Consciousness of what was happening between the pair across the room suddenly broke through Gillis’s daze like flame through smoke. The man was trying to kiss the girl and she was resisting. Gillis jumped up. The detective, taking the act for an attempt to escape, jumped with him and was quick enough to intercept him. The second officer came at once to his partner’s aid, blowing his whistle several times as he came.

People overturned chairs getting out of the way, but nobody ran for the door. It was an old crowd. A fight was a treat; and the tall Negro could fight.

“Judas Priest!”

“Did you see that?”

“Damn!”

White — both white. Five of Mose Joplin’s horses. Poisoning a well; A year’s crops. Green stockings — white — white —

“That’s the time, papa!”

“Do it, big boy!”

“Good night!”

Uggam watched tensely, with one eye on the door. The second cop had blown for help —

Downing one of the detectives a third time and turning to grapple again with the other, Gillis found himself face to face with a uniformed black policeman.

He stopped as if stunned. For a moment he simply stared. Into his mind swept his own words, like a forgotten song suddenly recalled:

“Cullud policemen!”

The officer stood ready, awaiting his rush.

“Even — got — cullud — policemen —”

Very slowly King Solomon’s arms relaxed; very slowly he stood erect; and the grin that came over his features had something exultant about it.
