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Mattie and Her Sweetman

In the neighborhood of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue a parlor social was taking place in the flat of a grass widow called Rosie.

Rosie had sent out invitations to a number of chambermaids, bellhops, waiters, longshoremen, and railroad men whom she knew personally. She asked them to bring their friends and to tell their friends to bring their friends.

The price of admission was twenty-five cents. Soda pop and hard drinks were sold at prices a little more than what was paid in the saloon. At ten o'clock Rosie's place began filling up with guests. It was that type of apartment called railroad flat. The guests put their wraps in Rosie's bedroom and danced in the dining-room and parlor.

Rosie kept the soda pop and beer cold in the ice-box in the kitchen. Whisky, wine, and gin were locked up in a cabinet whose key was secured by a red ribbon suspended from her waist.

The parlor social was good company. There was a fascinating mélange of color: chocolate, cocoa, chestnut, ginger, yellow, and cream. The people for whom these parlor maids and chambermaids worked would have gazed wonder-eyed at them now. Aprons and caps set aside, the maids were radiant in soft shimmering chiffon, crêpe de Chine and satin stuff. How do they do it? those people would have commented, wearing the things they do on their wages?

In that merry crowd was one strange person – a black woman in her fifties. She wore a white dress, long white gloves, black stockings and black shoes, and a deep-fringed purple shawl. She was of average height and very thin. Her neck was extraordinary; it was such a long, excessively skinny neck, a pathetic neck. Her face was much finer than her neck, thin also, but marked by a quiet, dark determination.

She danced with a codfish-complexioned strutter wearing a dress suit. He was tall with a trim ready-to-wear appearance and his hair was plastered down, glistening with brilliantine. His mouth wore a perpetual sneer. The woman danced badly. Her partner was a good dancer and tried to make her look as awkward as he could. The music stopped and they found seats near the piano.

'What youse gwina drink, Jay?' she asked.

'Gin,' he said, casually.

'Rosie!' the woman called.

Rosie bustled over, a marvel of duck-chested amiability. Rosie's complexion was a flat café-au-lait, giving the impression of a bad mixture, coffee over-parched, or burned with skimmed milk, and the generous amount of powder she used did not make the effect any pleasanter.

'Whaz you two agwine to hev, Mattie?' She knew, of course, that Jay was Mattie's sweetman and Mattie did the paying.

'One gin and one beer,' said Mattie.

'Gwine to treat the pianist to something?' Rosie knew how to tease her guests into making her parlor socials things worth giving.

'You throw me a good ball a whisky, sistah,' said the pianist, a slight-built, sharp-featured black, whose eyes were intense, the whites appearing inflamed . . .

Hands waved at Rosie from a group seated at a small table wedged against the mantelpiece, and an impatient young man called:

'Seven whiskies, Rosie, and four bottles a ginger ale jest that cold as you c'n makem.'

'Right away, right away, mah chilluns.' Rosie started a quick-time duck step to the cabinet.

Two girls pushed their way through a jam of men blocking the way between the dining-room and the parlor. The smaller was a satin-skinned chocolate; the other, attractive in a red frock, was cocoa. The cocoa girl saw Jay with Mattie and cried: 'Hello, Jay! Howse you?'

'Hello, you Marita!' said Jay.

'Having a good time?'

'Kinder,' he sneered.

Marita was the waitress at Aunt Hattie's pigs'-feet-and-chittlings joint. Jay went there to eat sometimes. Marita rather liked him, put more food

than ordinary in his dish, and chatted with him. She would have liked to keep company with Jay, but he made her realize that he had no desire to go with a girl in the regular way. He never felt that sort of feeling that would urge a fellow on to rent a room for two and live, a good elevator boy, in the Black Belt. For it was easier going with the Matties and grass widows of Harlem. Marita couldn't imagine herself down to the level of Jay's women. Not yet — when she was young and strong and pretty. But she rather admired his casual way of getting along and felt a romantic fascination for the sneer that sharp living had marked him by.

The pianist turned his inflamed eyes to the ceiling and banged the piano. Jay left Mattie alone to jazz with Marita.

'What a scary way she's dressed up!' said Marita as they wiggled past Mattie.

Jay grinned. Marita went liltily with his movement. He disliked toting a middle-aged black hen round the room. Not that he minded being Mattie's sweetman. He was very proud of his new job. For three months before he met her he had been dogged by hard luck. The bottom had been eaten out of his nigger-brown pants. A flashy silk shirt, the gift of his last lady, had given way around the neck and at the cuffs. For thirteen weeks it had not seen the wash-tub, and when it did it went all to pieces. The toes of his ultra-pointed shoes were turned pathetically heavenward and the pavement had gnawed through his rubber heels down to the base of the leather.

Meeting Mattie at a parlor social in the Belt's Fifth Avenue had materially changed Jay's condition. He had been taken to 125th Street and fitted to a good pair of shoes. Mattie chose also a decent shirt for him. But it was not silk. He hadn't achieved a new suit yet. The choice was between that and an overcoat. Mattie's resources could not cover both at once. One would have to wait until she could put by enough out of their daily living to get it. And so she decided that a heavy, warm overcoat was more necessary, for it was mid-January and in his ruined summer suit Jay had been freezing along the streets of Harlem.

It was not quite a month since Mattie and Jay had come together, and docile as she seemed, she was well worn in experience and carried a smoldering fire in her ugly black body. Years ago she had had a baby

for a white man in South Carolina. But being one black woman who did not feel proud having a yellow pickaninny at any price, she had got rid of the thing, strangling it at birth and, quitting relatives and prayer-meeting sisters, made her way up north.

Marita's girl pal discovered friends and went to drink with them. Marita followed, and Jay danced after her and got in with the gang. They were making rapid time with Old Crow whisky. They sent Rosie over to the pianist with a double drink of whisky to spur him on.

'Play that theah "Baby Blues",' she said. 'Them good spenders ovah theah done buys you this drink and ask foh it.'

The pianist tossed off his whisky, turned his eyes to the ceiling, and banged, 'Baby Blues, Baby Blues'.

Mattie stood up and went over to Jay. 'Le's dance,' she said. She loved dancing as a pastime, but it wasn't in her blood, and so she was a bad dancer.

'Not now,' Jay said, angrily. 'Ahm chinning with the gang.'

He was putting away a lot of the boys' good liquor and it was working on him in a bad way for Mattie. Disappointed, she looked round for Rosie. Rosie was bustling about in the kitchen getting new glasses. Mattie gulped down two stiff drinks of gin and returned to her seat by the piano . . .

Baby Blues! Baby Blues!

'Le's do this heah sweet strut, gal.' And before Jay, Marita was on her feet and poised for movement. Her pal was jiggling with one of the chocolate boys. The space was filled thick and warm with dancers just shuffling round and round. Hot cheeks, yellow, chestnut, chocolate, each perspiring against each.

'Is that theah thing you' lady now?' Marita asked.

'She ain't a bad ole mammy as she looks,' said Jay. 'She's good giving. Fixed *me* up all right.'

'Did she buy you this heah dress suit? Youse the only one here all dressed up so swell.'

Jay grinned for the compliment.

'No. I hired this off a ole Greenbaum. The other was so bad. But she got me these heah shoes and a swell overcoat. And she's gwina get me a nifty suit.'

'But youse kinder rough on her, though. You ain't treating her right, is you?'

Young and pretty, Marita disapproved of Mattie, old and ugly, having Jay; but she also resented with feminine feeling Jay's nastiness to the older woman.

'I ain't soft and sissified with no womens,' said Jay. 'Them's all cats, always mewing or clawing. The harder a man is with them the better.'

'Think so?' Marita said. Her resentment rose to anger and she wanted to stop wriggling, but Jay's casual manner (which said, I don't care whether you dance or quit) held her tethered to him.

Mattie, sitting alone, had swallowed her sixth glass of gin. Rosie, feeling sympathetic, went and gossiped with her for a while.

'Ain't dancing, honey?'

'No, but I guess I'll take the next one.'

'Don't you sit heah and get too lonely drinking all by you'se'f and that yaller strutter a youn having such a wicked time.'

'I don't mind him fooling with his own crowd when we goes to a paity, 'causen Ise pass their age.'

Finished 'Baby Blues'.

Jay went back to the waiters' table. One of his poolroom pals came in and joined the group, greeting Jay with enthusiasm and praising his rig-out.

In the poolroom where Jay loafed and played, he had become the hero of the place since his new affair. Colored boys who washed water-closets and cleaned spittoons for a living, with no hope of ever doing better, envied the way Jay could always get on to some woman to do everything for him. They wished they had Jay's magic. Jay might have his bad days getting by sometimes, but his luck never deserted him. He toted a charm.

The pianist turned his face to the ceiling and began a plaintive 'Blues'. He cast down his eyes for a moment and said to Mattie, 'Ain't you gwina dance, sistah?'

Mattie essayed a smile. 'Guess I will.'

She crossed over to Jay and asked, 'Wanta dance this with me?'

Jay glared at her, 'Wha's scratching you? I don't wanta dance. Ahm having a good time heah.'

The sneer deepened under the influence of the mixed drinks working on his temper. Mattie lingered near the table, but nobody asked her to sit down. Turning to go, she said to Jay hesitatingly, 'Well - any time you feels like dancing with me Ise ready.'

'Oh, foh Gawd's sake,' he exclaimed, 'gimme a chance! Shake a leg, black woman.'

Everybody within hearing turned to look at Mattie, some with suppressed giggling, others with pity, Marita and her pal were ashamed and could not look at Mattie. For there is no greater insult among Aframericans than calling a black person black. That is never done. In Aframerican literature, perhaps, but never in social life. A black person may be called 'nigger' as a joke in Aframerica, but never 'black', which is considered a term of reproach in the mouths of colored people quite as contemptuous as 'nigger' in the mouths of whites. And so Aframericans have invented pretty names such as low-brown, seal-skin brown, chocolate, and even prune as substitutes for black.

Oh, Blues, Blues, Brown-skin Blues: the piano wailed.

'That was a mean one,' said Marita.

'Oh, mean hell. I guess the ole mug likes when you handle her rough. Don't she, Jay?' said his pal.

'Ain't nobody wanting their bad points thrown up to them as nasty as that,' declared Marita.

Her pal agreed. The girls imagined themselves growing old some day and ridden by a special passion like Mattie.

And Mattie by the piano, thinking that everybody was laughing at her, called for another gin. She wanted not to care. She knew she did not belong to a fast parlor-social set where everybody was young or acting young. Rosie with her hostess's tricks looked like a vampire beside her. But although she was ugly and unadjustable, she loved amusement and was always ready to pay for it.

Mattie worked hard doing half-time and piecework, washing and ironing and mending for white people. Her work was finely done and her patrons recommended her to their friends. She earned twenty to thirty and forty dollars a week.

Living for Mattie was harder than working. Having an irresistible penchant for the yellow daddy-boys of the Black Belt, she had realized,

when she was much younger, that because she was ugly she would have to pay for them.

She occupied a large rear room on the second floor of a private house, situated in the cheapest section of the Belt. The price was moderate and she was allowed the use of the kitchen and the spacious back yard for laundry work.

Mattie's coming and going quietly through the block was remarked by the good and churchy neighbors of the African Methodist, the Colored Methodist, and the Abyssinian and Cyrenian churches. And they marveled at her, a steady, reliable worker, refusing to be persuaded into membership in a church . . .

Mattie brooded. Nevah befoh I been slapped like that by an insult so public. Slam in the face: Black woman! Black woman! Didn't I know I was that and old and no beauty?

Oh, mamma, sweet papa. Blues, Blues, seal-skin, brown-skin Blues. The pianist was gone on a wailing Blues.

Mattie got up to go home. She looked round for Jay. He had hurt her, but her pride had fallen, humbled and broken, under desire. Jay was not in the room. Mattie found him in the kitchen with his poolroom pal and a boozy gang over a bottle of gin.

'I'm gwine along home, Jay,' she said. 'Youse coming?'

Jay was going drunk. 'Why you nosing and smelling after a fellah like that foh?' he demanded.

'Don't get mad, Jay. I ain't bothering you. If you wanta stay -'

'Oh, beat it outa here, you no-'count black bitch.'

Mattie slunk off to Rosie's bedroom and put on her coat. She saw Jay's overcoat and felt it and after a slight hesitation slipped it on over hers. Outside it was snowing. She dove her hands into the deep pockets and said: 'A man's clothes is that much more solid and protecting than a woman's is.' She went home, southward, along Lenox Avenue.

The gang finished the gin. Jay suggested to the waiters they should all go and hunt up a speakeasy. Marita and her pal said they were going home.

'No, you come on along with us,' said Jay.

'Not me. I gotta work tomorrow,' said Marita.

'Me too. That don't make no difference,' said the darkest waiter. The

others joined him asking the two girls to change their minds; but the girls went home.

The fellows stood up, arguing just what they should do next, when Rosie elbowed through them and waved a bottle of gin in their faces.

'Le's have another round,' said the mulatto waiter.

'You'd bettah,' said Rosie. 'Wha's this heah talk about you all going when is jest the time to start in on some real fun.'

The boys sat down again, each waiter paying a round of drinks. The waiters had been paying all along. Jay and his friend had not paid for anything. The darkest waiter was soft. He began sifting a pack of cards, crying: 'Coon-can! Coon-can! Le's play coon-can!'

'Ahm feeling high, ahm feeling cocky,' said Jay.

The bottle of gin was finished and they were now ready to leave, but Jay could not find his overcoat.

'Ain't nobody could take it 'cep'n' the one that done buys it.' Rosie grinned maliciously.

Jay was mad and blew Mattie to hell with curses. Just a hussy trick to get me home to bed. Ain't got no shame nor pride, that woman. But I'll punish her some more.

Outside the snow had turned to sleet and a high wind was driving through the shivering naked trees.

'It'll be some sweet skating on the sidewalk tomorrow,' said one of the waiters.

'And bitter cold, too,' said Jay. And the thought of his overcoat gave him a comfortable, warm, and luxurious feeling.

The boys had decided to visit a certain speakeasy. They walked along Fifth Avenue, and Jay stopped before an apartment house.

'It's here, fellahs,' he said.

'All right,' said the chocolate boy. 'Le's go on in and look the fair browns ovah.'

Jay, with his hands in his pockets and his dress suit slightly damp, gleaming in the far-flung flare of the arc-light, was the picture of perfect aplomb.

'But, buddies, I ain't got no money on me,' he announced.

'And I ain't got none, neither,' said Jay's pal.

The waiters exchanged eye-flecks with one another.

'Well,' said the mulatto waiter, 'after Rosie she done ate up so much I ain't none so flush to treat anybody else again, 'cep'n' mahself. What about you fellahs?'

His workmates took his cue and said they had just enough each for himself.

'Tell you what, then; we'll call this show off until some other night,' said the mulatto.

The waiters said good night to Jay and his pal. They were unanimous about not treating them in the speakeasy. If Jay hadn't any money to pay in the speakeasy, let him go home to Mattie. They had seen and felt so much as servitors, that they had not wasted any pity on Mattie. There were women whose special problems made them stand for that kind of hoggishness. But, neither had they any servile praise for Jay's attitude.

The waiters saw Jay and his pal out of sight, then entered the apartment house and rang the bell of the speakeasy. They worked. Creatures of service, waiters - that moment serving up a rarebit, this moment a cocktail, next a high-ball; bellhops in livery with ridiculous buttons before and behind, leaping up like rabbits at the touch of a knob. And they were fool spenders having that curious psychology of some servants who never feel life such good living as when they are making a big splurge imitation of their employers . . .

'Come on buddies,' said the mulatto. 'We may be suckers all right in Rosie's joint, but we won't be suckers in a cat dog bite mah laig hear the player piano crying fair chile baby oh boy house.'

Jay said goodbye to his pal and hurried homewards, head bent against the sleety wind, his hands in his trousers pockets, and thinking aloud: Well I was setting for an all-night laying-off, but I guess I'll have to warm up the old black hen tonight, after all.

But Mattie, too, had been thinking hard in the meanwhile. 'I don't know what love is, but I know what's a man!' The cabaret song was singing in her head. She remembered when she first left Dixie and 'went N'oth' to Philadelphia, how she had liked a yellow man and he had laughed in her ugly face and called her 'black giraffe'. She had forgotten the incident, it was so long ago, but Jay made her remember it now. She had hated

that man deeply and wanted to do him real hurt. And now she felt the same kind of hatred for Jay.

She lay in bed without sleeping, waiting for Jay, but not in the mood he anticipated. Dawn was creeping along the walls when the bell rang. Mattie raked up a window and craned out her giraffe neck. She had on a white nightcap and looked like a scarifying ghost.

'Who's it?'

'It's me - Jay.'

'Wait a minute.'

Mattie opened the closet where she kept her soiled linen and took out a little bandanna bundle that she had made of Jay's rags of a suit, his old greasy cap, his old shoes, and the remains of his silk shirt.

'Theah's you' stuff. Take a walk.'

The bundle fell against Jay, nearly knocking him over. Mattie raked down the window. The sleet blew in Jay's face and the wind sang round his rump. He turned up his collar and walked shivering toward Lenox Avenue.

The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals

I have a strange admission to make; but, since I regard myself as already dead, I have no reason to conceal anything: these words of mine are, as far as anything written by mortal hand can be, the truth.

I am fully persuaded that among our manifold emotional interests and activities there is some one or other which, very often unacknowledged, perhaps even unsuspected, is nevertheless the ruling and abiding passion; and this passion may range from those of the crudest and most blatant forms of expression, through an infinity of subtle changes, to others, so unusual, and, at times, so inexplicable, as to evoke from us halting excuses, if not a positive denial.

I make no such excuse or denial: my great passion on earth has been the attending of funerals.

Perhaps this may not be such a strange admission after all: there is something in each and every one of us, especially as we grow older, that tends to receive a sort of satisfaction, a happy consolation, in attending the funeral of some old acquaintance: we are not so much rejoicing that the man whom we knew in his boyhood days is gone from us for ever, but that we, perhaps as the result of our own excellence, or else perhaps safeguarded by some especial providence, have been successful in continuing this business of living, and to observe yet another of our contemporaries fall out of line. This, I think, will be reluctantly admitted by all, especially by those who have their best days behind them, and who, by dint of careful and temperate living, have so far escaped the inevitable end. Each funeral attended is, as it were, a triumphant feather in our cap registering our defiance of fate; and we hold up our heads the bolder,