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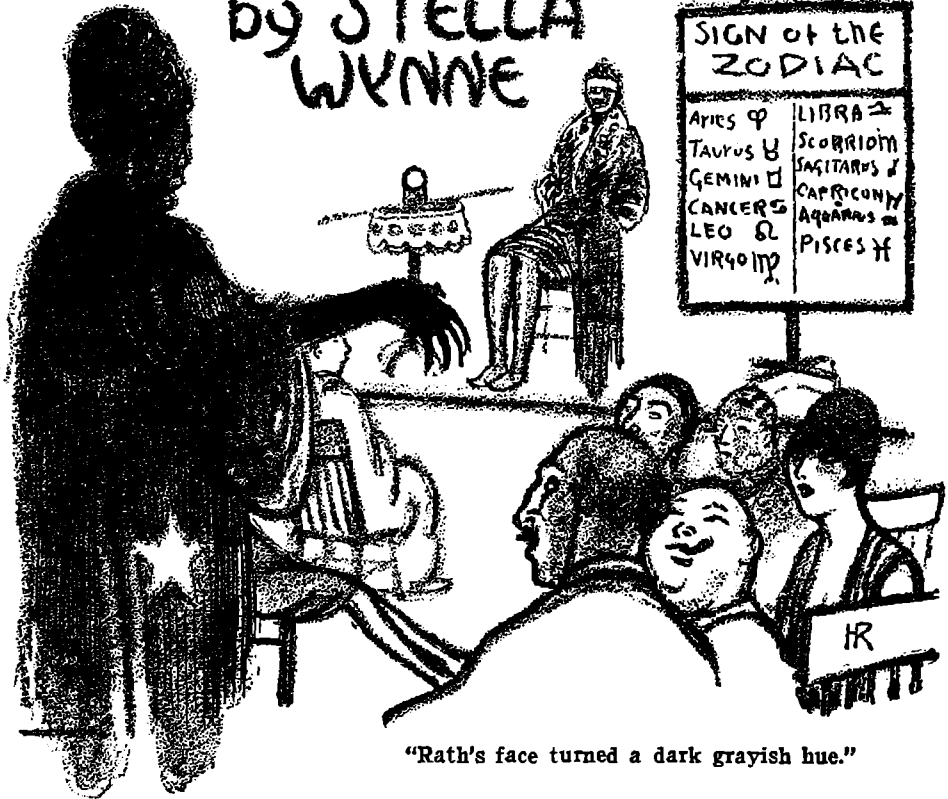
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# EBONY MAGIC

by STELLA  
WYNNE



"Rath's face turned a dark grayish hue."

**H**E WAS black. I was white. Night after night we were the only non-yellow men in the tucked-away Chinatown restaurant where one could still procure *chow mein* or *chow yuk* for very little indeed. Night after night now I had watched some incredible thing happening to this black man.

I had first seen him a month before, his bronze-dark, blunt profile outlined against a blaze of mustard yellow. Although it was only the coloring of the wrappers of bean cakes piled high on the shelf beside him, this mustard yellow was the exact shade to throw into relief,

flamboyantly as if it were depicted on a poster, his tight-curved head.

There was something exhilarating in his gusto that first night, in his fine animalness. He smacked his lips loudly over his rice, lips outlined thickly as if in purple chalk against the dusk of his face. His softly shining negroid eyes caught light flickers like dark jewels; the planes of his face gave back light like polished wood.

But tonight there was no heartiness in him. He but nibbled at the young green peas cooked in their pods. I had watched him through the month going from bad to worse.

The skin had fallen away from his high cheekbones like canvas from the ridgepoles of a tent; it had begun to take on the silvery tones of a black skin in illness. But it was his eyes that faltered out the truth. There was an evil spirit in the jungle of his mind. Some fear was living off his vitals. No one could doubt to-night as he started toward my table that he was a hunted, sick nigger.

"Evenin', boss."

I saw he wanted to talk. "Sit down, Rath," I said. He had told me his name was Rath Jackson.

He hesitated, a sort of hesitation to assume equality, then lowered himself into the chair. His black paws—I always thought of them as paws for they seemed both stronger and limberer than hands—he curled together on the oilclothed table edge.

"Out of work now, Rath?" I asked.

"Well . . . yes, sah, and no, sah . . . dat is, Ah got work if Ah wants it."

The strange look spread again like a gray film over his gaunt face.

"You mean you get a little work on and off, but not much money coming in—eh?"

"No, Ah don' mean dat. Money jus' naturally don' mean nothin' to me, boss, when Ah works at ma job."

"Why don't you work at it, then?"

"Jus' naturally don' like it."

I grew curious. "What is it?" I asked.

His hands squirmed; I could hear the slight shuffle of his feet. "Ah don' want to say . . . if you don' min'."

To cover his embarrassment he picked up a book I had placed on the table beside me and idly opened it about the middle. He could read well enough, I saw that, but the book—a modern one on travel in Abyssinia written by a distinguished Frenchman—was full of the terms of medicine, anthropology, psychology. Rath's high, narrow black forehead became trisected by two enormous wrinkles; the skin, loosened by his

emaciation, seemed to fold over. He put up his hand and scratched his ear.

"Wha' all dat about, boss?"

I looked into the open book. It was a chapter on the so-called "magic" of the black witch-doctors, some of whose performances, looked at unscientifically, the author stated, seemed actually to verge on the supernatural. His explanation was that it was merely mind-reading—telepathy—authentic instances of which are reported every now and then to scientific bodies. He went deeply into the psychology of it. I tried to think of small clear words in which to explain it to Rath.

"This man's a great traveler, Rath—goes into distant countries, you know, and tells about what he sees; the people, the way they do things and everything. He's telling about Abyssinia—"

"Where dat, boss?"

"Do you know where Egypt is?"

"His sunken eyes unexpectedly lighted. He spoke up quickly, proudly, like a schoolboy: "Sho' do. E-gypt—de oldest country in de known worl'! E-gypt—de cradle of de human race! E-gypt—where de Nile Ribber flow!"

"Well," I said, somewhat surprised at his burst of knowledge, "Abyssinia is south of Egypt, mountainous, in some parts quite inaccessible—hard for people to get into, you know. Paul du Bois, who wrote this book, says he has seen almost unbelievable things among the natives—they're dark there, too—what they call 'magic.' Sometimes they go into trances for days—then again, sometimes the witch doctors are able to tell what is in a person's mind. For instance—"

I heard a gasp. I looked up at an amazing sight. The negro's eyes popped like marbles; his lips drew back from his perfect teeth.

"Dat's stuperstition!" he shouted. "Ah don' believe in dat. Ah don'

believe no magic can make nobody know wha's in ma min'. Ah don' think white folks oughter write stuff like dat—dey oughter know better."

His black hands were clenched. He looked like an animal about to spring, to rend, to tear; what he panted to tear seemed to be this superstition of old Africa. His hands uncurled.

"Ah don' believe in no stuperstition whatsoever," he declared with vehemence but with less fury. The dying of his fury left him trembling, so violent had its short storming been. "Let's see dat book."

He almost snatched it from my hand. He began poring over it; his forehead again showed the two great pleated wrinkles with smaller ones etched in between. He spelled out the strange terms of a new psychology softly to himself; he held the book closer and closer to his savage, black, far-seeing eyes as if he would intimidate it, conquer it. But it was too much for him. He could not understand it—and suddenly the very fact of his non-understanding brought relief to him.

"Aw, dat book ain't some shucks! Dat's all fool nonsense." The relief grew in his voice. He couldn't make it out, therefore it was gibberish. "Frenchies is all like dat. Dat frog-eater's jus' pretendin'."

He tossed the book contemptuously on the table and I saw he was no longer troubled about it. He had sufficiently explained it to himself. He looked at me out of the corner of his eye, just becoming conscious himself of his behavior—to see how I had taken it. He glanced up at the clock.

"Ah mus' be gettin' back to Belle." Of a sudden he added out of nowhere, "Ah'm daid broke, boss. Ah—Ah guess Ah jus' about got to begin ma—ma job 'gain."

Over his gaunt black face there rolled stiffly a wave of fear.

ONE night two weeks later, chancing to wander down into lower Third Street, I saw a small crowd before a ramshackle vacant store. A round chart of the zodiac in red, yellow and green divisions blazed brightly behind the cracked window-glass. The chart was crowned with the caption, unassailably true, "KNOWLEDGE IS POWER." Other brilliantly lettered placards conveyed the information that the Princess Fatima, who was one of the most esoterically gifted ladies in the entire world, would convey mystic information to all comers, absolutely free. Reassured by the "absolutely free," I entered and placed myself well to the back of the rag-tag crowd.

On a sort of low stage at the far end of the store, in what went for royal Egyptian robes, there sat in an ornate chair badly in need of re-gilding, a slim mulatto girl. She sat there beautifully poised, beautifully at ease, and was a striking picture with the red curtains, bedizened with golden stars and crescents, behind her. Her skin was faintly yellow-brown like a leaf. Her black hair was curly but not woolly, her great dark eyes were pools of light—mysterious, indrawn eyes, I thought.

A tall, skinny man with a smudge of dirty gray stubble covering his sunken face poked me with his elbow and volunteered, "Guy's goin' to make the high pitch now, mister."

"The what?" I ventured.

"Aw, a geezer comes out and gits the crowd worked up to a high pitch of interest so's they'll buy what he's sellin'. Look!"

The curtains behind the mulatto girl suddenly pulled apart. A gorgeous being in a flame-colored robe, a glorified fez on his head, stepped forth.

It was Rath Jackson.

Through the crimson shimmer of his tawdry splendor I could see that he had grown even thinner; his bones were rawer and the silveriness

more pronounced in his black skin. His spirit vibrated within him, it seemed to me, like a skeleton in the wind.

He raised his arm, and his black hand—powerful, limber, pawlike—appeared at the end of his regally flowing but slightly dirty sleeve.

“Ladies and gentlemun,” he addressed in a grandly ceremonious manner this audience of masculine riffraff besprinkled with street-walkers, “you see before you in dat chair”—he pointed to the yellow girl—“one of de greates’ wonders of de worl’—if not *de* greates’—de Princess Fatima!”

The crowd followed with languid glance his dramatically pointing forefinger. They had too often been treated to some greatest wonder in the world.

“Dis dusky li’l lady, ladies an’ gentlemun, goes back in knowledge to E-gypt, de lan’ of de Pharaohs, where once her family reigned. E-gypt—de oldes’ country in de known worl’! E-gypt, de cradle of de human race! E-gypt, where flow de Ribber Nile! Wif de priests of E-gypt an’ in dose ol’ temples dere—more ’specially in de temple of de goddess I-sis—has been preserve’ de secrets which de Princess Fatima, born wif a veil, in all dese United States alone is heir to! Ain’t no country in de worl’ which so ’bounds wif de lore of de occult as de lan’ of Egypt.”

He stopped suddenly, then added, “’Cept maybe A-by-seen-ya, a country we-all don’ know so much about, which lies up ’longside of E-gypt. Ah reckon dis here A-by-seen-ya is de country mos’ chock-full of occult lore in de worl’.”

I recognized the genesis of this last remark—but why should he shoot a quick, fearful glance at the girl as if she, in some manner, were connected with A-by-seen-ya?

“An’ now ladies an’ gentlemun, dis li’l lady will give a de-monstration

of de power of her mi-raculous gif’ like as such none of yo’ ladies or gentlemun has ever seen befo’. She will do somethin’ which few people in de entire worl’ can do! I will tie dis bandage—you all see what it is, a heavy black silk gentlemun’s handkerchief—’round her eyes, an’ blin’-fol’, she will call de name of any article any person in dis audience shows me—nay, mo’, ladies an’ gentlemun, she will call de firs’ name of any lady or gentlemun, an’ tell deir berfdays. Don’ look anxious, ladies, she won’t tell de year.”

He turned in the direction of the girl and waved his hand: “Princess Fatima.”

She arose and bowed, and there was something in her which forced respect from that gargoylish crowd, ready enough to hoot, to hiss, or to laugh.

RATH bandaged her eyes, then stepped down into the audience, his royal robes swishing.

“Now, who gwine be firs’? Who gwine show me some objec’?”

A wisp of a man stepped forward. With great secretiveness he showed something to Rath.

“A penknife,” called out the blind-folded girl.

She continued to call out in rapid succession as the Prince of Egypt walked from person to person: “A watch—Ingersoll. A collar-button. A handkerchief—gentlemun’s. A union card—Teamster’s Local 146.”

I tried to make out what method of communication they were using. I was surprized at the mastery, the smoothness these two showed in their work; such ability was seldom seen outside good vaudeville stages.

“Now, ladies and gentlemun,” said Rath, “who-all wants deir name and berfday called? Who-all?” He snapped his fingers. “Who-all? Speak up.”

A woman in a bright cerise straw hat, her mouth rouged to the color of

raw meat, wishing to draw attention to herself said loudly, "Me!" and giggled.

"Lady wants her name and berf-day tol'. Very well, madam—jus' whisper de info'mation to me."

He bent toward the woman and her raw lips whispered into his black ear. A moment later the mulatto girl said in her peculiar singsong, "Lady's name is Mabel—bawn on de nine-teenth of July—under de influence of Cancer."

Mabel's butchery lower lip hung loose with astonishment.

The Prince of Egypt capitalized the moment. "Under de influence of Cancer," he repeated weightily; "yeh, ladies an' gentlemun, an' each an' ebery one of us is under de influence of some planet whose magnetic vibrations works us good or ebil. Each an' ebery one of us is under de influence of de stars of deir nativity whether dey like it or not. Any lady or gentlemun dat wants a written account dat dey can always keep to refer to an' which shows yo' faberable an' unfaberable days according to de aspect of yo' rulin' planet, here an' now has de opportunity to obtain same. Each chart directs you what days to act and what days not to act, when to ask fo' a job an' when to propose to yo' bes' girl, when to change yo' business or yo' residence, an' when yo' mudder-in-law is likely to visit yo' . . ."

The old joke got the old laugh, although few indeed of that audience had homes or mothers-in-law.

Rath followed up the laugh quickly with, "De price of dis invaluable astrological chart is only ten cents, one dime, an' yo' neber spent a dime better. Now, lady," he turned to Mabel, "shall I fetch you down a chart?"

"I'll take one," she said automatically, her mind still dazed with the mystery of her accessible birth-date.

Rath drew out from a pile of printed matter a sheet whose top was largely lettered *JULY — CANCER* and handed it to her.

Business became good. It was a little fuel to the ego-flames of these rags and tags of humanity to hear something so primarily their own as their names and birth-dates called out in an assemblage. It put them in such good humor that, unconscious of the cause, they nearly all dredged up grimy dimes. From end to end of the place there was a white paper blossoming, an unfolding of printed sheets, the bending of outcast heads over mystic destinies. Over it all the singsong of the mulatto girl rose and fell as Rath worked.

"Gentleman's name's Fred-rick—bawn December twenty-fourth. . ."

"Yeh—almos' a Christmas present fo' his mammy!" The Prince of Egypt injected humor into the solemnity of the occult.

He stopped almost opposite me without seeing me and placed his hand on the shoulder of a short, fat man who had signaled him. The man stood on tiptoe to whisper into his ear.

Fatima called out, "George—gentlemun's name is George—bawn August fourteenth."

I was astonished to see Rath's face suddenly turn a dark grayish hue—his eyes pop. He looked more startingly thin than ever, like an affrighted skeleton. The Thing, whatever it was, that had residence in his brain, had given him full sight of its horror. His glance shot up to the stage and rested on the mulatto girl who sat poised, blindfolded in her chair, awaiting his next question. It rested on her only a second, but it seemed in that second his agony deepened almost unbearably. . . .

I stretched out my hand and touched his arm. He jumped as if an electric current had struck him. Then immeasurable relief flooded

over his face. He seized my hand in his icy black paws.

"Oh"—it was almost a moan—"oh, boss. . . ."

Then he began to come back to himself. He slowly grew from a terrified negro into the proportions of the Prince of Egypt. He waved a dignified if shaky arm over the audience.

"Dis finish tonight's entertainment, ladies and gentlemun."

He turned to me as the two of us stood—rocks in the stream of outgoing people. He pointed up toward the stage and said in a voice of great heartiness, in which I felt there was an attempt to wipe from my mind the memory of his fear, or at least make me think I had made a mistake in interpreting it as such: "Dat's ma wife. Dat's Belle, boss. Come on up and see her."

Up on the low stage Belle had already taken the black silk bandage from her eyes. She bowed with a good deal of dignity in her glittering robes.

"Like de show, suh?" she asked a little timidly.

"Marvelous stuff. Almost made me believe in the occult," I smiled.

Belle looked pleased and glanced up quickly at Rath. But the latter suddenly frowned and burst out, "Don' yo' neber let nobody fool you wif no occult stuff, boss. It's all jus' tricks. Belle an' me here works a code. Ah fastens dat bandage so's she can see jus' a little under it; she has little mirrors sewed on her sleeves to help. De way Ah hol's ma fingers, ma han's, ma arms, ma shoulders—whether Ah stan's on de lef' side, right side, or directly in front of de pusson—de way Ah pitches ma voice, de jokes Ah makes—ebery li'l single things means somethin'. Mos' things folks in an audience shows yo' is a lot alike—handkerchiefs, knives, rings, watches, gloves—stuff like dat, an' we has signs fo' dem all. We has signs fo' all de common firs'

names of people, fo' each month, fo' all de dates from one to thirty-one."

"We learn all dat down Memphis way," supplemented Belle, smiling.

"Yeh—Ah had a job helpin' a magician an' Belle was de girl he raise by le-vitation. Dat was eight years 'go. We been goin' round country eber since—makin' good money, until——"

Something constricted his throat.

He looked at Belle. She glanced quickly away with an oddly guilty look. I wondered if that look had anything to do with his fear of a few minutes before.

I felt, in spite of their evident affection for each other, that there was something queer and strained between these two. How strange a mixture was this mulatto girl—the deep black blood of Africa paled out by the white blood of the north! Rath was all primitive, I felt, but this girl had inherited subtleties of the spirit; there were things she would feel, motives she would follow, acts she would do of which her husband would forever be incapable. Yet I could see that she adored Rath.

As I walked home there kept recurring to my mind Rath's spasm of fear, the tortured look he had cast at the girl, her later look of guilt, yet not exactly guilt, either. Had Belle, his mulatto wife, anything to do with the fear which was eating like an acid into his life—which was undermining this splendid animal mentally and physically?

I WAS shocked the next time I saw Rath. Two weeks had passed, but it seemed that no two weeks could have caused so terrible a degeneration in a human being. He sat at a table in the little Chinese restaurant, but he touched not so much as a bite of the food he had ordered. His hands trembled. He waited until I had finished my very late dinner—waited in agony, it seemed to me—then came quickly over.



"Say, lissen, boss—will you do me a f-favor? Will you walk home wif me?"

I nodded, somewhat mystified.

It had begun to rain by the time we got outside; the wind, too, had started talking in a big, hollow voice. Rath's house luckily was not far; a tiny cottage in a small negro district on the edge of Chinatown. His key rattled crazily around the keyhole before he was able to steady his hand and open the door.

The front room of the negro couple was neat but shabby, with the shabbiness of cheap pine furniture. There were innumerable little reminders of Belle; some light tan straw half sewn on a hat shape, rose-colored silkaleen drapes at the windows, a calendar—a sentimental picture of a golden-haired child—tacked to a door with a bow of pink ribbon. This door was the only one in the front room other than the hall door through which we had entered. I noticed Rath cast quick, short glances at it.

"Don't go yet, boss," he pleaded. "Sit down."

I wouldn't have left him for anything. I wouldn't have left even a dog whose eyes were staring at nothing and whose neck ruff was bristling with fear.

"I'll stay. But you'd best get into bed, Rath—you're shivering. Got any quinine in the house?"

"Ah don't need no quinine. Ah ain't got no breakbone feber. Ah don't want to go to bed."

The pecking of the rain at the windows through the silence, and the actions of the negro, began to depress me. Something of the terror which possessed him reached fingers into my consciousness.

"Rath," I said, to make talk, "how's the horoscope business? How's Scorpio, Cancer, and Taurus? Raking in the dimes?"

"Ah ain't in dat business no mo'. Cain't," he whispered, "*cain't*—on 'count of *her*." He glanced toward

the door to which the calendar was tacked. Belle, then, was in there—probably asleep, for it was almost 10 o'clock. I must lower my voice.

Rath stared out the windows, which looked like pieces of ice in brown water against the windy opaqueness beyond them. He suddenly turned and looked up at me.

"O, Lawdy"—his black hands twisted together—"Ah got to talk. Pretty soon you gwine to leave, boss, an' Ah's gwine to be—"

He stopped short on the threshold of the word. His hands came down in jerky blows to his knees.

"Well, talk, Rath."

He hitched his chair nearer me and put the tips of his fingers on my arm.

"Do yo' believe, boss, dat dey is eber debbils aroun'—ebil spirits roamin' roun' changin' things?"

I was amazed at the look on his face, at his quick glance toward the bedroom door. "Superstition, Rath!" I said.

"Yeh—Ah know—stuperstition."

The wind blowing in around the window edges bellied out the rose-colored drapes that gave such a feminine touch to the poor room.

"Ah ain't neber uster be stuperstitious; no matter how slick an occult thing Ah seen Ah always reckon dere was some trick at de bottom of it."

He was silent for a minute, then added in a whisper, "Boss, dat night at de show when you reached out an' put yo' han' on ma arm—well, Ah hadn't given Belle no signal whatsoever when she up an' calls out 'Gentlemun's name is George'."

He turned his great eyes in his gaunt face up to me.

"Well," I said, "well, perhaps you were a little slow, and she took a chance calling out. George isn't an uncommon name."

"Dat's what Ah thought, too, firs' time she done it—in San Francisco here 'bout six months ago. Then—seem like somethin' come over Belle. Couple of nights later she called out

three times—names or berfdays—wifout me once givin' her de signal. It made me creep all over, her a-doin' thataways. How come she know dose things wifout ma signals?

"Ah fire dat question right quick at her after de show. First off she try to say she got de signals—but Ah *knowed*. Den she say, 'Oh, well . . . Ah don' jus' know exactly how comes Ah do dat. Seems like dose names jus' naturally pop into ma min' an' den pop outer ma mouf.'

"She took it awful light, like as if it might happen to anybody. But Ah jus' thought about it an' thought about it way into de night an' nex' day. How come any woman know what dose folks' names was wifout anythin' to know by? Why, she was *doin'* what we was pretendin' to do!

"Well, a few nights later she sho' nuf did it again. After dat Ah got so jumpy and fidgety waitin' fo' it to come dat Ah could hardly get ma signals right. Ah tried to be quicker dan Ah eber was, an' believe me, boss, Ah ain't neber been slow. Finally she did it an' Ah had a feeling in de pit of ma stomick like Ah was gwine to vomit.

"After dat night, when she seen how Ah feel, she promise she wouldn't do it no mo'—but seems like she couldn't help it, an' she done it every onct in a while anyway.

"Ah got so nervous 'bout de whole thing and so full of worriment seems like Ah had to talk to someone. One day in a barber shop Ah met up wif Bob Guinas, young colored feller Ah know, an' I spill out all 'bout it. He say he know jus' what it is—dat she had an ebil spirit in her an' dat *he* was givin' her de knowledge. He say dere was lots of cases jus' like dat—more'n folks eber know about. He'd jined up wif a church a while back an' he wants me to bring Belle dere. He say dey would pray over her an' sprinkle her wif blessed water an' pretty soon dat ebil spirit would be exorcised. He say lots of times folks

dat were possessed got dat done fo' dem, an' time after time somethin' like smoke come outer deir mouf, an' a moment later dey could see somethin' black and shadderlike but in human form running away wif its head covered where de drops of blessed water had burned.

"Well, Ah didn't want to believe dat Belle had no ebil spirit in her, an' Ah tol' him it sounded like stuperstition to me, but he say, 'Well, all right, Rath, yo' wait an' see. If a pusson ain't cleansed of dat ebil spirit dat takes possession of deir body, well, it gets more'n more of a holt until dey jus' become it, an' it dem, an' ain't dey own selves no mo'.'

"Ah got thinkin' more'n no' 'bout what Bob Guinas tol' me, an' although it seem like stuperstition, de mo' it seem like it may be so, too. Ol' parson down souf when Ah was a chile uster say de Bible say dey is ebil as well as good spirits, an' de ebil spirits is debbils roaming round de worl' lookin' fo' a hab'tation.

"Ah sho' hated to think dat of Belle—but ebery night now in de show seems to me I could catch de shadder of dat ebil spirit whisperin' in her ear. Seem like somethin' uster go through de audience wif me, an' Ah could hear somethin' laugh low when she got de name or berfday wifout ma signal.

"One day Ah couldn't stan' it no mo'. Ah close down de show in de middle of things—an' Ah didn't open it no mo'. Belle seemed sort of relieved, Ah thought, though we didn't talk about why Ah done it.

"Things was fixin' fo' to turn out well fo' while. Ah done odd jobs aroun' an' Belle stayed wif a couple of chilluns nights three times a week—dose times Ah went to de Chinese restaurant. De idea of dat ebil spirit livin' in Belle begun to grow dim. . . ."

His hands clenched suddenly. He gave a quick look at the bedroom

door, then stared out the dark, rain-tapped window-pane.

"One evenin' Ah was sittin' here readin' in de paper about somethin' in dat city Rome, Italy, an' she was over by the gas plate cookin'. Ah thought, 'Ah'll ask Belle does she know if dat Eytalian city is bigger'n San Francisco,' but somethin' else caught ma eye an' Ah didn't ask. But she turned her head suddenly an' say, 'Ah sho' think it bigger'n San Francisco, Rath,'—an' seem to me Ah heard dat little, funny laugh 'gain!

"During de nex' week Ah watch close, an' maybe four or five times she would answer me things Ah hadn't spoke an' dat was only in ma min'. When she did, all ma strength would go an' ma knees would get bendy as if dey was made of water. Funny thing was seems like she didn't hardly know she done it. Dat made me more'n mo' think maybe dere was somethin' else answerin' through her voice an' Belle didn't really know nothin' much 'bout it.

"Boss, it was 'bout dis time de terrible thing come to me—quick, like lightnin' outer de sky. . . ."

His big black hands squirmed one over the other.

"I got to lie 'wake nights. I uster look over at Belle and wonder was dere an ebil spirit in her body, an' was Ah lyin' dere sleepin' beside an ebil spirit dat mocked at me?

"Maybe Ah should have runned away from de house an' Belle at dat time—but we'd always been together workin' since she was a little girl, and she was ma wife, an' Ah lubbed her—Ah lubbed Belle.

"**O**NE night Ah waked up suddent as if someone had laid a han' on me. De dawn was all pinky outside. Belle was fas' asleep beside me, an' dat was de firs' time fo' a long time dat Ah seen her face when her eyes wasn't open an' Ah dared look at it good. Ah saw de curve of

her neck against de white piller. Den de light grow mo', an' Ah saw ma own two han's lyin' dere on de white bed kiver. . . ."

He held up his black, pawlike hands to the light. The wind ballooned out the rose-colored drapes.

"Den all of a suddent Ah seemed to hear jus' as if a voice spoke it—but Ah knew dere weren't nobody sayin' it: 'Han's, yo' gwine to kill.'"

"After dat, all de time, Ah was 'fraid. Ah was 'fraid in de daytime but mos' Ah was 'fraid at night. Ah'd wake plumb 'wake at dawn an' Ah'd lie dere watchin' her—an' dat voice, always mo' an mo' urg'in', would say, 'Do it, Rath. Den *It* will die, too—an' nobody won't know what yo' thinkin' no mo'."

"Oh, boss, dose days Ah jus' felt as if dey was a piece of glass set inter ma fo'head an' eberythin' Ah thought can be seen plain as plain can be! Boss, yo' don' know what a awful feelin' it can git to be to live wif someone all de time an' know, no matter how dey tries to hide it, dey knows eberythin' yo' think. But, Boss, Ah fought dat wicked thought fo' all Ah was worth. Ah sometimes see you lookin' at me in de Chinese restaurant as if yo' guessed some worriment was gnawin' on me."

His voice lowered to a whisper.

"But day after day seems like dat thought of killin' Belle jus' grew. Once Ah had a dream. Ah felt ma fingers hardin' up together like a vise 'roun' her throat. Ah woke up in a col' sweat an ma han's *was* in jus' dat position but only de bed clos' was between dem. Den Belle woke up suddently an' flash her big brown eyes at me in de dawn. Ah turned an' preten' Ah was 'sleep. But Ah didn't sleep none. Ah wondered if she *knew!* If *It* knew!

"Well, Ah jus' naturally didn't seem good fo' nothin', all dis goin' on inside me. Ah couldn't eat an' Ah couldn't sleep. . . ."

"Our money pretty soon give out. Ah got daid broke. Had to go back to de high pitch 'gain. Dat night you came to de show, boss, she done it 'gain fo' de firs' time since we opened. Seem likè Ah heard dat funny li'l laugh—an' Ah turned dizzy an' sick. Den yo' put out yo' han' an' touch me.

"After dat, seems like Ah hardly knew what Ah was doin' no mo'—or if it was Belle or dat *thing* lookin' out at me from her eyes dat knowed eberything. All las' week, boss, Ah was kinder wild inside like a animal in a trap. Once Ah foun' mahself whisperin' at ma han's: 'Han's, yo' gwine to kill.'

"Den, boss, dis mornin' Ah *knowed!* . . ."

His voice sank lower.

"Ah knowed Ah had to do it! Ah knowed dere weren't no escape fo' me!"

My eyes followed his; his were staring down at his two great, heavy black paws.

A gust of wind rattled the windows. The poorly latched bedroom door blew a little open.

Rath leaped from his chair with a scream. I, too, leaped up. I ran into the bedroom.

On the white counterpane of the bed, dimly lit by the rain-washed light of the east windows, the figure of Belle, the yellow girl, lay. She was fully dressed, nicely dressed, her hair prettily fixed. I raised her right arm which was hanging over the bed and placed it across her breast.

I heard a noise. Rath was standing in the door.

I opened the neck of her blouse—but her throat was clear, smooth, brown. No finger marks marred it.

"How did you—kill her?" I whispered.

But his tortured eyes understood nothing.

"Belle," he said, "Belle . . . baby." He seemed to be calling to her. "Belle . . . baby."

"Rath—I'm going out to telephone the police. I must, you understand."

He turned his wild, black eyes on me.

"O Lawdy . . . O God, she's daid. . . . O honey, you is daid! You is daid!"

He raised his huge hands above his head and brought them together with open palms like cymbals.

"O honey, you is daid."

His movements became more and more jerky. I saw with horror that the jerkiness was attaining a sort of jazz rhythm. He clapped his hands together unconsciously at intervals. His feet rose and fell in a sort of unconscious jazz-agony. He was going back, back into the thick forest, back before some huge, ring-lipped god—back into Africa. He was dancing with the sound of the wind and the rain to Belle, the mulatto girl. He was dancing the dance of agony, the primitive, naked dance of agony—the horrible, stiff syncopation of pain. . . .

"O honey, you is daid—you is daid!"

I could not bear to look at that naked dark spirit.

I bent over the girl to draw her left hand from under a fold of her dress so that both hands might be clasped together on her breast. I felt the thin yellow fingers of this hand gripped tightly around something. I bent lower. It was a small bottle, a triangular bottle. Then I gradually made out, on the torn label, part of a skull and cross-bones.

I looked slowly up at Rath.

Something in my glance penetrated to his consciousness.

"Yeh," he whispered. "She done it firs'. She *knowed*. She saved me."

