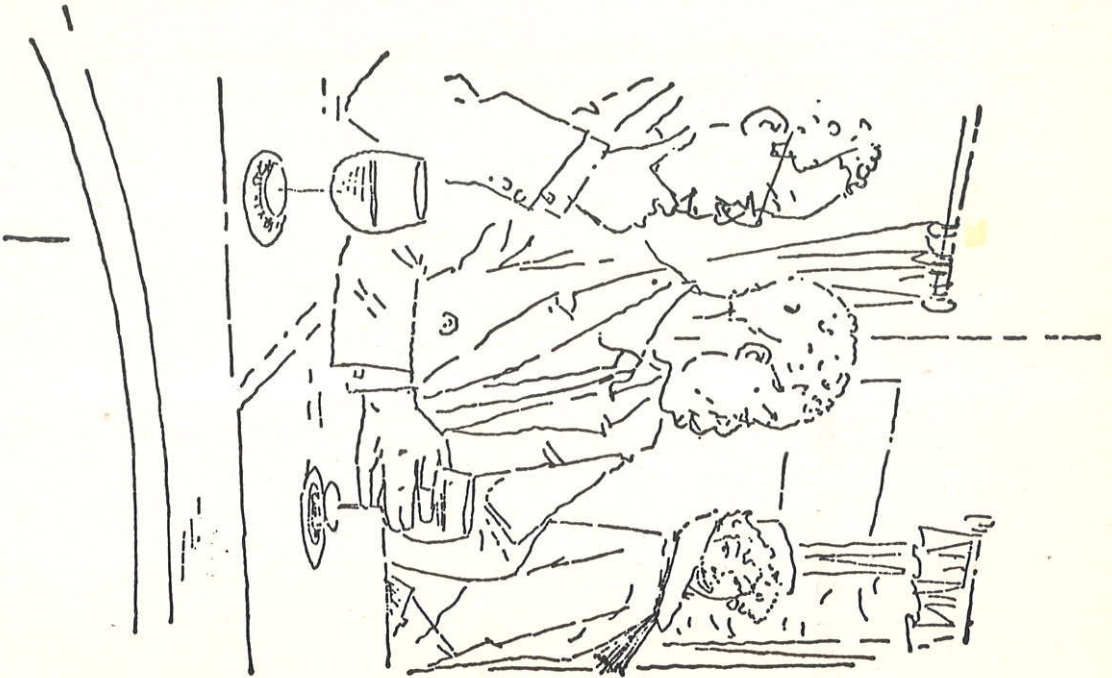


The Best of Simple

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 HILL AND WANG
New York



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TO MELVIN STEWART
Broadway's genial
Simple

the other brain was drunk. I could think about the Dodgers with one, and my future with the other. As it is now, there is too much in this world for one brain to take care of alone. I have thought so much with my one brain that it is about wore out. In fact, I need a rest right now. So let's drink up and talk about something pleasant. Two beers are on me tonight. Draw up to the bar."

"I was just at the bar," I said, "and Tony has nothing but bottles tonight, no draft."

"Then, daddy-o, they're on *you*," said Simple. "I only got two dimes—and one of them is a Roosevelt dime I do not wish to spend. Had I been thinking, I would have remembered that Roosevelt dime. When I get my other brain, it will keep track of all such details."

| Simple on Military Integration

"Now, the way I understand it," said Simple one Monday evening when the bar was nearly empty and the juke box silent, "it's been written down a long time ago that all men are borned equal and everybody is entitled to life and liberty while pursuing happiness. It's in the Constitution, also Declaration of Independence, so I do not see why it has to be resolved all over again."

"Who is resolving it all over?" I asked.

"Some white church convention—I read in the papers where they have resolved all that over and the Golden Rule, too, also that Negroes should be treated right. It looks like to me white folks better stop resolving and get to *doing*. They have resolved enough. *Resolving ain't solving*."

"What do you propose that they do?"

"The white race has got a double duty to us," said Simple. "They ought to start treating us right. They also ought to make up for how bad they have treated us in the past."

"You can't blame anybody for history," I said.

"No," said Simple, "but you can blame folks if they don't do something about history! History was yesterday, times gone. Yes. But now that colored folks are willing to let by-gones be by-gones, this ain't no time to be Jim Crowing nobody. This is a new day."

"Maybe that is why they are resolving to do better," I said.

"I keep telling you, it has come time to stop *resolving*!" said Simple. "They have been *resolving* for two hundred years. I do not see how come they need to *resolve* any more. I say, they need to *solve*."

"How?"

"By treating us like humans," said Simple, "that's how!"

"They don't treat each other like human beings," I said, "so how do you expect them to treat you that way?"

"White folks do not Jim Crow each other," said Simple, "neither in past have a segregated army—except for me."

"No, maybe not," I said, "but they blasted each other down with V-bombs during the war."

"To be shot down is bad for the body," said Simple, "but to be Jim Crowed is worse for the spirit. Besides, speaking of war, in the next war I want to see Negroes pinning medals on white men."

"Medals? What have medals to do with anything?"

"A lot," said Simple, "because every time I saw a picture in the colored papers of colored soldiers receiving medals in the last war, a white officer was always doing the pinning. I have not yet seen a picture in *no* papers of a *colored* officer pinning a medal on a white soldier. Do you reckon I will ever see such a picture?"

"I don't know anything about the army's system of pinning on medals," I said.

"I'll bet there isn't a white soldier living who ever got a medal from a colored officer," said Simple.

"Maybe not, but I don't get your point. If a soldier is brave enough to get a medal, what does it matter who pins it on?"

"It may not matter to the soldiers," said Simple, "but it matters to *me*. I have never yet seen no *colored* general pinning a medal on a *white* private. That is what I want to see."

"Colored generals did not command white soldiers in the last war," I said, "which is no doubt why they didn't pin medals on them."

"I want to see colored generals commanding white soldiers, then," said Simple.

"You may want to see it, but how can you see it when it just does not take place?"

"In the next war it must and should take place," said Simple, "because if these white folks are gonna have another war, they better give us some generals. I know if I was in the army, I would like to command white troops. In fact, I would like to be in charge of a regiment from Mississippi."

"Are you sober?" I asked.

"I haven't had but one drink today."

"Then why on earth would you want to be in charge of a white regiment from Mississippi?"

"They had white officers from Mississippi in charge of Negroes—so why shouldn't I be in charge of whites? Huh? I would really make 'em toe the line! I know some of them Southerners had rather die than to *left face* for a colored man, buddy-o. But they would *left face* for me."

"What would you do if they wouldn't *left face*?"

"Court-martial them," said Simple. "After they had set in the stockade for six months, I would bring them Mississippi white boys out, and I would say once more, '*Left face!*' I bet they would *left face* then! Else I'd court-martial them again."

"You have a very good imagination," I said, "also a sadistic one."

"I can see myself now in World War III," said Simple, "leading my Mississippi troops into action. I would do like all the other generals do, and stand way back on a hill somewheres and look through my spyglasses and say, 'Charge on! Mens, charge on!' Then I would watch them Dixiecat boys go—like true sons of the old South, mowing down the enemy."

"When my young white lieutenants from Vicksburg jeeped back to Headquarters to deliver their reports in person to me, they would say, 'General Captain, sir, we have taken two more enemy positions,'

"I would say, 'Mens, return to your companies—and tell 'em to *charge on!*'"

"Next day, when I caught up to 'em, I would pin medals on their chests for bravery. Then I would have my picture taken in front of all my fine white troops—*me*—the first black American general to pin medals on white soldiers from Mississippi. It would be in every paper in the world—the great news event of World War III."

"I would certainly be news," I said.

"Doggone if it wouldn't," said Simple. "It would really be news! You see what I mean by *solving*—not just resolving. I will've done solved."

| Blue Evening

WHEN I walked into the bar and saw him on the corner stool alone, I could tell something was wrong.

"Another hangover?"

"Nothing that simple. This is something I thought never would happen to me."

"What?" I asked.

"That a woman could put *me* down. In the past, I have always left women. No woman never left me. Now Joyce has quit."

"I don't believe it," I said. "You've been going together for two or three years, and getting along fine. What happened? That little matter of the divorce from your wife, the fur coat, or what?"

"Zarita," said Simple.

"Zarita! She's nothing to you."

"I know it," said Simple. "She never was nothing to me but a now-and-then. But Zarita has ruined my life. You don't know how it feels, buddy, when somebody has gone that you never had before. I never had a woman like Joyce. I *loved* that girl. Nobody never cared for me like Joyce did."

"Have a drink," I said, "on me."

"This is one time I do not want a drink. I feel too bad."

"Then it is serious," I said.

"It's what the blues is made out of," said Simple. "Love, oh, love, oh, careless love! Buddy, I were careless."

"What happened, old man?"

"Zarita," said Simple. "I told that woman never to come around to my room without letting me know in advance. Joyce is too much of a lady to be always running up to my place, which is why I love her. Only time Joyce might ring my bell is when she can't get me on the phone due to my landlady is evil and sometimes will not even deliver a message. Then maybe Joyce might ring my bell, but she never comes upstairs, less it is to hang me some new spring curtains she made herself or change my dresser scarf. What's come up now is Zarita's fault, plus my landlady's. Them two womens is against me. That word *Town & Country* uses for female dogs just about fits them."

"I understand. They are not genteel characters. But what exactly took place?"

"It hurts me to think of it, let alone to talk about it. But I will tell you. Zarita not only came around to my room the other night, but she brought her whole birthday party *unannounced, uninvited, and unwanted*. I didn't even know it were her birthday. I had just come in from work, et a little supper at the Barbecue Shack, and was preparing to take a nap to maybe go out later and drop by to see were Joyce in the mood, when my doorbell rung like mad nine times—which is the ring for my Third Floor Rear. It were about nine p.m. I go running downstairs in my shirttail, and sixty-eleven Negroes, male and female, come pouring in the door led by Zarita herself, whooping and hollering and high, yelling they come to help me celebrate her birthday, waving three or four bottles of lickor and gin.

"Zarita say, 'Honey, I forgot to tell you I'm twenty-some-odd years old today. Whoopee-eee-e-e! We started celebrating this morning and we still going strong. Come on up, folks! Let's play his combination. This man has got some *fine* records!'

"I didn't have a chance to say nothing. They just poured up the steps with me trailing behind, and my landlady looking

cross-eyed out of her door, and Zarita talking so loud you could hear her in Buffalo. Next thing I knowed, Louis Jordan was turned up full-blast and somebody had even put a loud needle in the victrola. Them Negroes took possession. Well, you know I always tries to be a gentleman, even to Zarita, so I did not ask them out. I just poured myself a half glass of gin—which I do not ordinarily partake. Then I hollered, 'Happy birthday, too.'

"Well, the rest of the roomers heard the function and started coming in my room. Boyd next door brought his girl friend over, and before you knowed it, the ball was on. The joint jumped! To tell the truth, I even enjoyed myself.

"By and by, Zarita said, 'Honey, send out and get some more to drink.'

"Send who? I said. 'We ain't got no messenger boy.'

"She said, 'Just gimme the money, then, and I will send that old down-home shmoos who has been trying to make love to me since four o'clock this afternoon. That man ain't nothing to me but a errand boy.'

"So we sent the old dope after a gallon of beer and pretzels. Soon as he left out the door Zarita grabbed me close as paper on the wall and started to dance. She danced so frantic, I could not keep up with her, so I turned her loose and let her go for herself. She had a great big old pocketbook on her arm and it were just a-swinging. Everybody else stopped dancing to watch Zarita, who always did want to be a show girl. She were really kicking up her heels then and throwing her hips from North to South. All of a sudden she flung up her arms and hollered, 'Yip-pee-eee-e-e!' whilst her pocketbook went flying through the air. When it hit the ceiling it busted wide open. Man, everything she had in it strewed out all over my floor as it come down. "Lord have mercy!' Zarita said. 'Stop the music! Don't nobody move a inch. You might step on some of my personal belongings.'

"Just about then the downstairs doorbell rung nine times—my ring. I said, 'Somebody go down and let that guy in with the beer, while we pick up Zarita's stuff.'

"Zarita said, 'You help me, baby. The rest of you-all just stay

where you are. I ain't acquainted with some of you folks and I don't want to lose nothing valuable.'

"Well, you know how many things a woman carries in her pocketbook. Zarita had lost them all, flung from one wall to the other of my room—compact busted open, powder spilt, mirror, key ring with seven keys, lipstick, handkerchief, deck of cards, black lace gloves, bottle opener, cigarette case, chewing gum, bromo-quinine box, small change, fountain pen, sun glasses, big old silver Bow-Dollar for luck, address books, fingernail file, three blue poker chips, matches, flask, also a shoehorn. Her perfume bottle broke against the radiator so my room smelt like womens, lickster, mens, and a Night in Paris.

"Zarita was down on her hands and knees scrambling around for things, so I got down on my hands and knees, too.

"Baby,' she says to me, 'I believes my lipstick has rolled under your bed.'

"We both crawled under the bed to see. While we was under there, Zarita kissed me. She crawled out with the shoehorn and I crawled out with her lipstick—some of it on the side of my mouth. Just as I got up, there stood Joyce in my door with a package in her hand.

"Have you ever seen a man as dark as me turn red? I turned red, daddy-o! I opened my mouth to say 'Howdy-do?' but not a sound come out. Joyce had on her gold earrings and I could see they were shaking. But she did not raise her voice. She were too hurt.

"Zarita said, 'Why, Joyce, tip on in and enjoin my birthday. We don't mind. Just excuse my stuff flyin' all over the room. Me and Mr. Semple is having a ball.'

"Joyce looked at the black lace gloves, playing cards strewed all over the place, cigarette case, compact, poker chips, address book, powder, Bow-Dollar, and nail file on the floor with all them strange Negroes setting on the bed, in the window sill, on the dresser, everywhere but on the ceiling, and lipstick on my cheek. She did not say a word. She just turned her head away and looked like tears was aching to come to her eyes.

"I says, 'Joyce, baby, listen,' I says, 'I want a word with you.' She said, 'I come around here to bring you your yellow

rayon-silk shirt I ironed special for you for Sunday. Since your landlady said you was at home, she told me to bring it on upstairs myself. Here it is. I did not know you had company.'

"Just then that old down-home Negro come up with the beer yelling, 'Gangway! The stuff is here. Make room!' and he almost run over Joyce.

"Joyce says, 'Excuse me for being in your guests' way.'

"She turned to go. In facts, she went. I followed her down the steps but she did not turn her head. That loud-mouthed Zarita put the needle on Louis Jordan's bodacious 'Let the Good Times Roll,' and the ball were on again. When I got to the bottom of the steps, my landlady was standing like a marble statue.

"Landlady says, 'No decent woman approves of this.' Which is when Joyce started crying.

"Boy! My heart was broke because I hates to be misunderstood. I said, 'Joyce, I did not invite them parties here.'

"Joyce says, 'You don't need to explain to me, Jess Semple, getting all formal and everything. She says, 'Now I have seen that woman with my own eyes in *your* bedroom with her stuff spread out every which-a-where just like she was home. And people I know from their looks could not be *your* friends because I never met any of them before—so they must be hers. Maybe Zarita lives with you. No wonder you giving a birthday party to which I am not invited. Good night, I am gone out of your life from now on. Enjoy yourself. Good night!'

"If she had fussed and raised her voice, I would not have felt so bad. But the sweet way she said, 'Enjoy yourself,' all ladylike and sad and quiet, as if she was left out of things, cut me to my soul. Joyce ought to know I would not leave her out of nothing.

"I would of followed her in the street, but she said, 'Don't you come behind me!'

"The way she said it, I knowed she meant it. So I did not go. When I turned back, there was my landlady. All I said to that old battle-ax was, 'Go to hell!' I were so mad at that woman for sending Joyce upstairs.

"She started yelling as I went on up the steps, but I didn't hear a word she said. I knowed she was telling me to find another room. But I did not care. All I wanted was to lay eyes on

Zarita, stop them damn records from playing, and get them low-down dirty no-gooders out of my room. Which I did before you could say 'Jackie Robinson.' But after they left, I could not sleep. It were a blue evening.

"Some of Zarita's stuff was still on the floor next day when I went to work, so I gathered it up and brought it down here to the bartender and left it for her. I do not want to see Zarita no more again. The smell of that Night in Paris water is still in my room. I'll smell it till the day I die. But I don't care if I die right now. I don't know what to say to Joyce. A man should not fool around a bad woman *no kind of way* when he's got a good woman to love. They say, 'You never miss the water till the well runs dry.' Boy, you don't know how I miss Joyce these last few days."

"Haven't you tried to see her?" I asked.

"Tried?" said Simple. "I phoned her seventeen times. She will not answer the phone. I rung her bell. Nobody will let me in. I sent her six telegrams, but she do not reply. If I could write my thoughts, I would write her a letter, but I am no good at putting words on paper much. The way I feel now, nobody could put my feelings down nohow. I got the blues for true. I can't be satisfied. This morning I had the blues so bad, I wished that I had died. These is my bitter days. What shall I do?"

"I don't know."

"You never know anything important," said Simple. "All you know is to argue about race problems. Tonight I would not care if all the race problems in the world was to descend right on New York. I would not care if Rankin himself would be elected Mayor and the Ku Klux Klan took over the City Council. I would not care if Mississippi moved to Times Square. But nobody better not harm Joyce, I'm telling you, even if she has walked out of my life. That woman is my life, so nobody better not touch a hair of her head. Buddy-o, wait for me here whilst I walks by her house to see if there's a light in her window. I just want to know if she got home from work safe tonight."

"She's been getting home safely by herself all these years," I said. "Why are you so worried tonight?"

"Please don't start no whys and wherefores."

"I sympathize with you—still, there are always ameliorating circumstances."

"I don't know what that word means," said Simple, "but all that rates with me now is what to say to that girl—if I ever get a chance to say anything. If she does not come to the door when I ring this time, if I see a light I am going to holler."

"Since she lives on the third floor, you can hardly play Romeo and climb up," I said. "Still, I don't believe Joyce would relish having her name called aloud in the street."

"If she don't let me through the door, I will have to call her," said Simple. "I can explain by saying that I have lost my mind, that she has driv me crazy. And I will stand in front of her house all night if she don't answer."

"The law would probably remove you," I said.

"They would have to use force to do it," said Simple. "I wouldn't care if the polices broke my head, anyhow. Joyce done broke my heart."

"You've got it bad," I said.

"Worse than bad," moaned Simple. "Here, take this quarter and buy yourself a beer whilst you wait till I come back."

"I have some affairs of my own to attend to," I protested, "so I can't wait all night."

"I thought you was my ace-boy," he said as he turned away.

"But everybody lets you down when trouble comes. If you can't wait, then don't. To hell with you! Don't!"

I started to say I would wait. But Simple was gone.

| A Letter from Baltimore

As I walked into Paddy's, there stood Simple grinning from ear to ear. He greeted me like a long-lost brother, pulling me toward the bar as he announced, "This evening the beers are on me and I have the where-with-all to pay for two rounds and a half, so pick up and drink down."

"What, may I ask, is the occasion for this sudden conviviality? Tonight is not Saturday."

"No," said Simple, "but it is a new day right on, a new week, and a new year. They say a man's life changes every seven years. I am in the change. Here, read this letter that I found laying on the radiator in the hall this evening when I come in that I know my landlady tried to peer through the envelope. It's from my wife, Isabel."

"I have no desire to pry into your personal correspondence," I said.

"Read it, man, read it," urged Simple. "Desire or not, read it. I want to hear it in words *out loud* what Mrs. Semple says—because I cannot believe my eyes. Unfold it, go ahead."

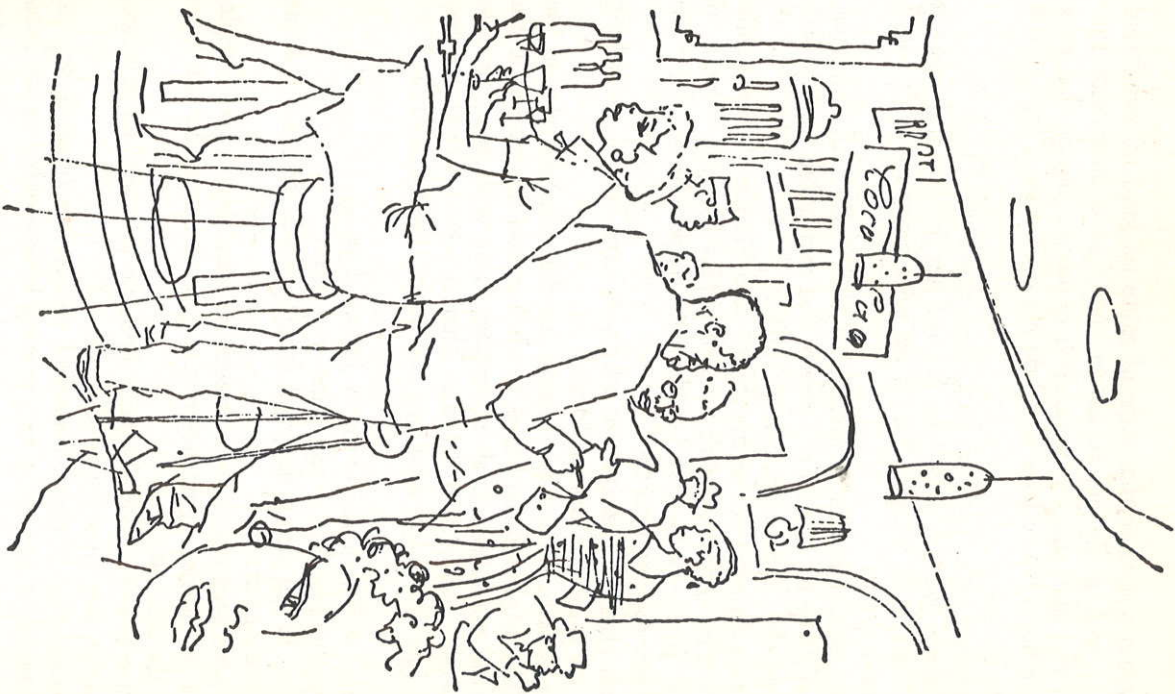
"She writes a nice clear hand," I said, "big round letters. You can tell this woman is a positive character. I see she's still in Baltimore, too. Well, here goes:

Dear Mr. Semple:

Jess, at last I have found a man who loves me enough to pay for my divorce, which is more than you was ever willing to do and you are my husband. Now, listen, this man is a mail clerk that owns two houses, one of which he has got rented and the other one he needs somebody to take care of it. His first wife being dead so he wants me for his second. He knows I have been married once before and am still married in name only to you as you have not been willing to pay for the legal paper which grants freedom from our entanglement. This man is willing to pay for it, but he says I will have to file the claim. He says he will get a lawyer to furnish me grounds I have to swear on and that you also have to swear on unless you want to contest. I do not want no contest, you hear me? All I want is my divorce, since I have found a nice man, willing to marry me and pay for it, too. I am writing to find out if you will please not make no contest out of this because he has never done nothing to you, only do you a favor by bearing the expenses of the grounds that rightly belong to a husband. Let me hear from you this evening as he has already passed the point where he could wait.

Once sincerely yours but not now,

ISABEL



"I suppose you would have no intention of cross-filing," I said.

"I would not cross that wife of mine no kind of way," said Simple, "with a file nor otherwise. My last contest with that woman was such that the police had to protect me. So that man can have her. He can have her! I do not even want a copy of the diploma."

"A divorce paper does not look like a diploma," I said.

"I knew a woman once who framed her divorce and hung it on the wall," said Simple. "But if my wife serves *me* with one, I will throw it out."

"That would render it invalid," I said, "also null and void. You will have to sign all the papers and mail them back to Baltimore so the proceedings can go through."

"Just so they get out of my sight," said Simple. "Joyce would not want no other woman's divorce papers hanging around. If she did, Joyce could have bought them papers herself by now. I gave her the opportunity."

"I am always puzzled as to why you have been so unwilling to pay for your own divorce," I said.

"I told Isabel when we busted up that she had shared my bed, she had shared my board, my licker, and my Murray's, but that I did not intend to share another thing with her from that day to this, not even a divorce. That is why I would not pay for it. Let that other man pay for it and they can share it together."

"But it will free you to marry Joyce," I said.

"Joyce will be free to marry me, you mean."

"Joyce is not being divorced from anyone. You are the one who is being divorced."

"Which means I will no longer be free, then," said Simple. "I will be married again before the gold seal is hardly out from under the stamper."

"That will be good for you. Perhaps you will settle down, stay home, stop running around nights."

"I will," said Simple, "because I will have a home to stay at. I will not have to live in bars to keep from looking at my landlady in the face."

"Maybe married you can save a little money and get somewhere in the world."

"Them would be my best intentions," said Simple. "Facts is, I always did have ambitions. When I were a little boy in Virginia, my grandma told me to hitch my wagon to a star."

"Did you try?"

"I did," said Simple, "but it must have been a dog-star."

"Well, now things will be different. Joyce is a good girl. You love her and she loves you, so this time you should make a go of it. And I will dance at your wedding."

"You will be my best man," said Simple.

"Well, of course, I'd be delighted—but maybe you'd like a relative or some other more intimate friend for your best man. After all, Joyce doesn't know me very well."

"I know you," said Simple, "which is enough. As many beers as you have bought me right here at this bar, and as often as you lent me a buck when I was trying to make the week, you deserve to be my best man. So no arguments! Now that my luck is turned, daddy-o, you'll be there at the finish."

"Thanks, old man," I said. "Certainly you seem to be coming out ahead at last—a *free* divorce from a wife you don't like, no contest, no expenses, and, all but for the formalities, a new wife you love."

"I am coming out ahead for once," said Simple, "which just goes to prove what's in that little old toast I learned from my Uncle Tige. Listen fluently:

*When you look at this life you'll find
It ain't nothing but a race.
If you can't be the winning horse,
Son, at least try to place.*

"I believe I have placed—so let's drink to it."

"You have won," I said.

"Providing that Negro in Baltimore keeps his promise to my wife. If he don't, as sure as my name is Simple, I will go down there and beat his head."

"Do you mean to say you'd lay hands on your first wife's second husband?"

"Listen! I married Isabel for better or for worse. She couldn't do no better than to get a free divorce," said Simple. "That man made my wife a promise. *He better not betray her.* If he does, he'll have me to contend with because I dare him to stand in my way. I'll fix him! Just like that toast says:

*If they box you on the curve, boy,
Jockey your way to the rail,
And when you get on the inside track—
Sail! . . . Sail! . . . Sail!
In a race, daddy-o,
One thing you will find—
There ain't no way to be out in front
Without showing your tail
To the horse behind."*

"One regrets," I said, "that, after all, life is a conflict."
"I leave them regrets to you," said Simple.

| Seven Rings

EARLY blue evening. The street lights had just come on, large watery moonstones up and down the curbs. April. The days were stretching leisurely. This particular evening had become too old to eat dinner and too young to do much of anything else. It was unseasonably warm. Tasting spring, Harlem relaxed. Windows, stoops, and streets full of people not doing anything much. In spite of his landlady's request *not* to sit on the steps in front of her house, Simple was sitting there. Harlem has few porches. In his youth in Virginia, Simple had been accustomed to sitting on porches. His youth was some thirty-odd years gone, but the habit remained. The lights looked pretty in the smoke-blue evening of sudden spring. But did Simple see the lights?

Who knows? He didn't see me as I came down the street. His legs were stretched out over three steps and he leaned back staring at nothing.

"Good evening," I said, "if you're not too tired to open your mouth."

"Tired, nothing. Man, I'm natural-born disgusted," said Simple. "My divorce didn't come through."
"What?"

"That fool man that promised to marry my wife and pay for our divorce, too, did not pay her lawyer to clinch the proceedings," said Simple, "and until he does, the judge will not hand down no decree. Divorces and money is all mixed up in Baltimore. In fact, I believe divorces costs more there than they do here in New York. The last time I asked about a divorce in Harlem, the man told me Three Hundred Dollars. My wife write me that her present boy friend is paying Four Hundred for hers—and she ain't got it yet—which is hindering *me*, because I am due to marry Joyce. If it had not been that I showed Joyce Isabel's last letter, I do believe Joyce would have thought I am standing her up. But you know as nice as Joyce is to me, I would almost marry that girl *without* a divorce."

"Joyce would hardly want to marry a man who is already married," I said.

"No, but she wants me so bad that if I was to press her, she might even lend me the money to pay for the rest of my wife's divorce. Joyce swore she would never *outright* pay for no other woman's divorce, but a loan is a different thing."
"Why don't you accept the loan?"

"Because I do not want the shadow of nothing having to do with Isabel hanging over me and Joyce. I swore and be damned I wouldn't pay for no divorce for Isabel. Neither will I let Joyce pay for it. If that man in Baltimore who wants to marry Isabel can't even pay for a little old decree for her, he ain't much good. And he is bugging me!"

"I thought you told me the man is a widower who owns two houses and is a very solid citizen."

"That's the jive Isabel wrote. But Isabel might just be trying to shame me by comparison, because I never owned nothing."

All I do know is, I wish the man would hurry up and pay that lawyer so me and Joyce can complete our arrangements. Isabel had no business getting my expectations up like this.

"I have got all my trousseau clothes," Isabel wrote me, 'and everything but the decree—which is where I reckon the man's money went. Isabel done made him buy her a whole lot of clothes. Then she writ on, 'If you was any kind of a husband, Jess Semple, you would help me to get this decree. You ought to want a divorce as much as I do. The least you could do is to assist my husband-to-be pay for your wife-thar-was to get rid of you.'"

"What did you answer to that?"

"Nothing," said Simple. "The only answer would be money—and money I do not have. They say silence is golden—which is all the gold she can get out of me. Are you walking toward the corner?"

"Yes."

"I will keep you company as far as the bar. Maybe a little further. Maybe I will take a walk, too."

He rose, sighed, stretched, and, as we filed through the crowded block, for no good reason whatsoever started singing:

*Two things, Miss Martin,
I cannot stand,
A bow-legged woman
And a cock-eyed man.*

"Kindly lower your voice," I requested.

*Two things, Miss Martin,
I adore,
One is some loving—
And the other is
Some more!*

"Cease your rowdyism," I said. "People will conclude you're drunk."

*Two things, Miss Martin,
That bug a man . . .*

Cars sped by. The city hummed like a mechanical beehive. Beneath the street lights among the crowded scoops, the broken end of the song got lost in the early blue. With his mouth open Simple stopped indecisively at the corner to look slowly up and down the street.

"Which way are you going?" I asked.

"Come with me," said Simple, "and I will show you where I am going—to Joyce's."

"There is no point in my going with you to see Joyce. She's not *my* girl."

"You can keep the ball rolling," said Simple. "With me, Joyce is kind of silent these days. But if you are there, she will act like we got company—then I can talk, too. Otherwise, she will just *un-thum* when I say something and let it go at that. There is nothing worse than a woman that will not talk. You get so used to women rattling away that when they keep quiet you are scared they will explode. Are you coming with me or not?"

"If I am going to be in an explosion, I'll go. I'd like to see Joyce give you a good dressing down. Here you are, a man in your prime—and can't pay for one divorce. Why, some men at your age are already paying three alimonies."

"White men," said Simple. "The most alimonies I ever knowed a Negro to pay was *one*—and he didn't keep that up to date. What I like about Joyce is she would never alimony me. Joyce works and makes her own money and does not want anything out of me but love."

We stopped in front of the neat brownstone house around the corner from Seventh Avenue where Joyce roomed. He rang seven times.

"Joyce knows my ring," said Simple.

Nobody came to the door. He rang again, counting out loud from one to seven.

"Maybe Joyce is in the bathroom."

No answer.

"I wonder should I ring for her big old fat landlady?"

"You have walked way over here," I said, "so you might as well find out if she's home or not."

Simple rang one long ring and two short, the landlady's private signal. Presently the floor boards creaked. The inner door opened. An enormous figure filled the vestibule. Then the outer glass door cracked just a crack.

The landlady said, "I knowed it was you all the time. Joyce is not here. She went to a movie."

"You don't know which one?"

"Joyce does not tell me her business. There's a draft in this door, Mr. Semple. Excuse me."

The door closed.

"Um-huh! You see," said Simple. "Joyce has done made that woman mad at me, too. Done told her something. Her landlady is most in generally more pleasanter than mine, but you see how she acts tonight. When a woman is mad at a man, she always wants every other woman to be mad at him, too. Well, daddy-o, let's go have a beer. We done took our walk."

So we went and had a beer. Simple drank in silence, but not for long. As he ordered a second round, he said dolefully, "These are dark days for me, man. Joyce is as touchous as a mother hen done lost her chicks. She knows she has not lost me—she just has to wait a little longer. But she acts like I have put her down. That girl is bent, bound and determined to marry me. She has asked me seven times already."

"I'm tired of not seeing hair nor hide of neither ring, license, orange blossoms, or veil," Joyce told me last week. "I try to keep my head up and my back straight—but how straight can a girl's back be without breaking? You know I don't believe in no common-law stuff. But in the framework of marriage, that's different. Jess Semple, my patience is about done wore out with you."

"I said, 'Joyce, don't render me liable to commit bigamy.'"

"Whereupon, she struck her hands on her hips and yelled, 'Bigamy? Every time I mention marriage to you, *bigamy* is the first thing that jumps into your mind. I'm warning you, Jess Semple, for the last time, if you don't hurry up and think of something more respectable to commit besides bigamy. you're

going to see mighty little of me. I have never known any one Negro so long without having some kind of action out of him."

"I said, 'Baby, you talk like you have been married before.'

"Joyce said, 'No, I have not been married before. But I have been proposed to. You have not even yet, in going on several years, formally proposed to me, let alone writing my father for my hand.'

"I said, 'I did not know I had to write your father for your hand. This is the first time you mentioned that, honey. I thought this here living-together business, when it does come off, would be just between us.'

"She says, 'I do not like that *living-together* phrase, Jess Semple. We will be legally married as soon as you get legally divorced—and there will be no *living together* to it. Also, you will write my father.'

"Joyce, you know I cannot write good,' I said.

"Then I can dictate for you, and tell you what to say.'

"I said, 'I know what to say. But I still do not understand how a girl as big and old as you are has to have somebody ask her father if she can get married.'

"Marriage involves changing *my* name to *your* name, that is why,' says Joyce. 'Since I bear my father's name—although he is only my step-father—you have to ask him can you change it. Then I will cease to be Miss Lane and become Mrs. Semple—as soon as that woman in Baltimore lets loose of your name. Do you reckon she will ever do so?'

"The wheels of justice grind slow. But, Joyce, you know I mean well. I would have taken your hand long ago, had it not been for bigamy.'

"I thought your first wife's name was Isabel, not *Bigamy*.'

"Don't be funny,' I says. 'You know what I mean. I do not want to get in jail and leave you in disgrace. I love you, woman! I want all to be well with us, also between us. I will even write your old man tomorrow, if you say so.'

"My father,' says Joyce, 'not my *old man*. I never did like crude-talking people. I bet no child of mine better not call you *old man*, nor me *old lady*. Any child of mine will be brought up after me, not after you.'

"That's good," I said. "One thing, Joyce, for which I admire you is your culture. Was your old man cultured? I mean, your father?"

"He is a bricklayer," said Joyce, "but my mother was a Daughter of the Eastern Star, also a graduate of Fessenden Academy. She always worked around fine white folks. She never did work for no poor white trash. In fact, she wouldn't. Poor folks have nothing to give nobody—least of all culture. I come by mine honesty."

"Well, you will have to tell me what to ask your father because I am not used to writing no man for a woman's hand."

"When the time comes, I will put you straight," said Joyce. "But do not let it be too long. After all, I am only human and June don't come but once a year."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I might meet some other man before next year," said Joyce.

"That is what hurt me about our conversation, daddy-o. Pulling all them technicalities on me, then talking about *she might meet some other man*. Joyce better not meet no other man. She better not! Do, and I will marry her right now this June, in spite of my first wife, bigamy, or her old man—I mean, her father. Don't Joyce know I am not to be trifled with? I am Jesse B. Semple."

| What Can a Man Say?

SWEET, rain, over the Harlem rooftops. Sweep into the windows of folks at work, not at home to close the windows. Wet the beds in side bedrooms almost as narrow as the bed against the window. Sweep, rain! Have fun with the brownstone fronts of rooming houses full of people boxed in *this* room, *that* room, seven rings, two rings, five, nine.

"Who are they ringing for? It ain't me, is it? Did you count how many rings?"

Turn into a spring equinox, rain, and blow curtains from Blumstein's until they flop limp-wet. Dampen drapes. Soak shades until they won't pull up or down. Make folks mad who come home from work and find everything all wet.

"It was so hot this morning any fool might have knowed it was going to rain. What did you leave the windows open for? It ain't summer yet. You just don't think," says my big old landlady to me.

"Yet and still, it ain't my fault," said Simple, "she's got arthritis-rheumatis so bad she can't get up the steps to shut the windows when it starts raining. Now she comes blaming me for letting *my* things get all wet! I come home from work tonight and find a puddle of water in the middle of the floor. Mattress soaked where I pushed the bed up against the window on account of the heat. The Bible my grandma gave me with my birth date writ in it looking like somebody run it through the laundry-mat. Ink all blurred. Nobody'll ever know when I was borned."

"Old landlady says, 'Ain't you got a birth certificate?'"

"I says, 'No'm."

"She says, 'Why, even my dog has got one on his pedigree.'"

"I says, 'I am not a dog, so I has no pedigree. And everything I own has got wet upstairs today, madam.'"

"I tells you roomers to pull down your windows when you leave the house. I cannot be running up and down steps looking after you-all. That is not my responsibility. You due to protect my house. Who's gonna pay for my rug when it molds and mildews that this rain done wet up in your room? Who's gonna buy me a new mattress for your Third Floor Rear when that one wets out? Mr. Semple, I *could charge you* with destroying my property. Don't come down here telling me about your things got all wet today. If you had a wife to stay home and shut the windows, instead of running around with them gals from the corner bar—that Zarita, for instance, passing here yesterday with her head looking like a hurrah's nest, switching worse than a dog. Trixie has got more respect for herself than that bar butterfly with that red streak in the front of her hair."

"Madam, you are talking about my friends. I will thank you

to hush. As much as I have walked your dog for you, is that the thanks I get?

"My dog is at least a lady. Ain't you, Trixie?"

"That dog makes me sick. I cannot stand such talk. I am going upstairs and hang my bed clothes up to dry."

"Bring your dirty sheets down here and I'll give you some fresh ones—*this once*. Your week's almost up anyhow."

"Three flights up—three flights down—three flights back up again! Thank you. Don't do me no favors. Do, and you'll want me to be walking that lady hound of yours around again. Madam, I am not a dog walker. And I reckon my sheets will dry out by the time I get ready to go to bed."

"Which is three, four a.m. Every night the Lord sends I hear you coming in straggle-legged."

"Don't you never sleep?"

"With roomers in the house, how can I? No telling what you-all might do. I'm responsible."

"Well, I wish you'd be responsible for folks' things getting all wet when a thunderstorm comes up and a man is at work. That is more important than hearing who comes in when."

"I know what my responsibilities is. You don't need to tell me. And if you just must keep on chewing the rag, complaining and arguing, you move."

"I have been here seven years, madam, but you liable to find me gone *soon*. Then who will walk your dog for you? Don't none of your other roomers do it. Neither your husband. Madam, you will miss me when I move. Won't she, Trixie?"

"Don't try to get on the good side of me through Trixie."

"Madam, have you got a good side?"

"Mr. Semple, I am hurried by that last remark. I tries to treat everybody nice. I dol And I am hurried. As often as I let you slip a week, sometimes two, on your rent. Nice as I been to you compared to most landladies, I tell you, I am hurried. You can just move, if you want to. Move."

"Madam, I do not wish to move. And I did not mean what I said. You got three or four good sides. I expect more. If it wasn't so damp right now I would walk Trixie for you."

"Trixie! Trixie! Trixie! Do you think that nobody else lives

downstairs here in this Dutch basement but Trixie? Ain't you got no regard for me?"

"Madam, does you want me to walk *you*?"

"I likes to go out once in a while myself. And you ain't never so much as invited me to Paddy's for a beer in all these years you been living in my house."

"But you got a husband, madam."

"I were my understanding that you also had a wife when you moved in here. But that does not, and has not, stopped you from running with every woman that wears a skirt—and some in pedal-pushers."

"But madam, you always said you did not drink."

"What I say and what I do are two different things."

"Do you want me to bring you back a can of beer when I go out?"

"Oh, no! Don't worry about *me*, Mr. Semple. Just bring Trixie some dog food—since you are so concerned about her. And excuse me, I am going to fix my husband's dinner. I don't need a thing. Excuse me."

"You are excused," I said, to which she did not answer. Wrong again! What can a man say to a woman that is not wrong, be they landladies, wives, or Joyce?"

| Empty Room

ONE night Paddy's bar for once was strangely quiet. I soon learned why. Watermelon Joe was going around taking up a collection to bury a fellow who had just died that day, a boy everybody around that corner knew. The bartender said the fellow had been in Paddy's drinking just a few nights before, now he was gone. The juke box was not playing as continuously that evening because most of the men had given their last spare change to help put their late bar-buddy away. Everybody was a little sad.

"Zarita has just been in here, cried, and gone," Simple said.