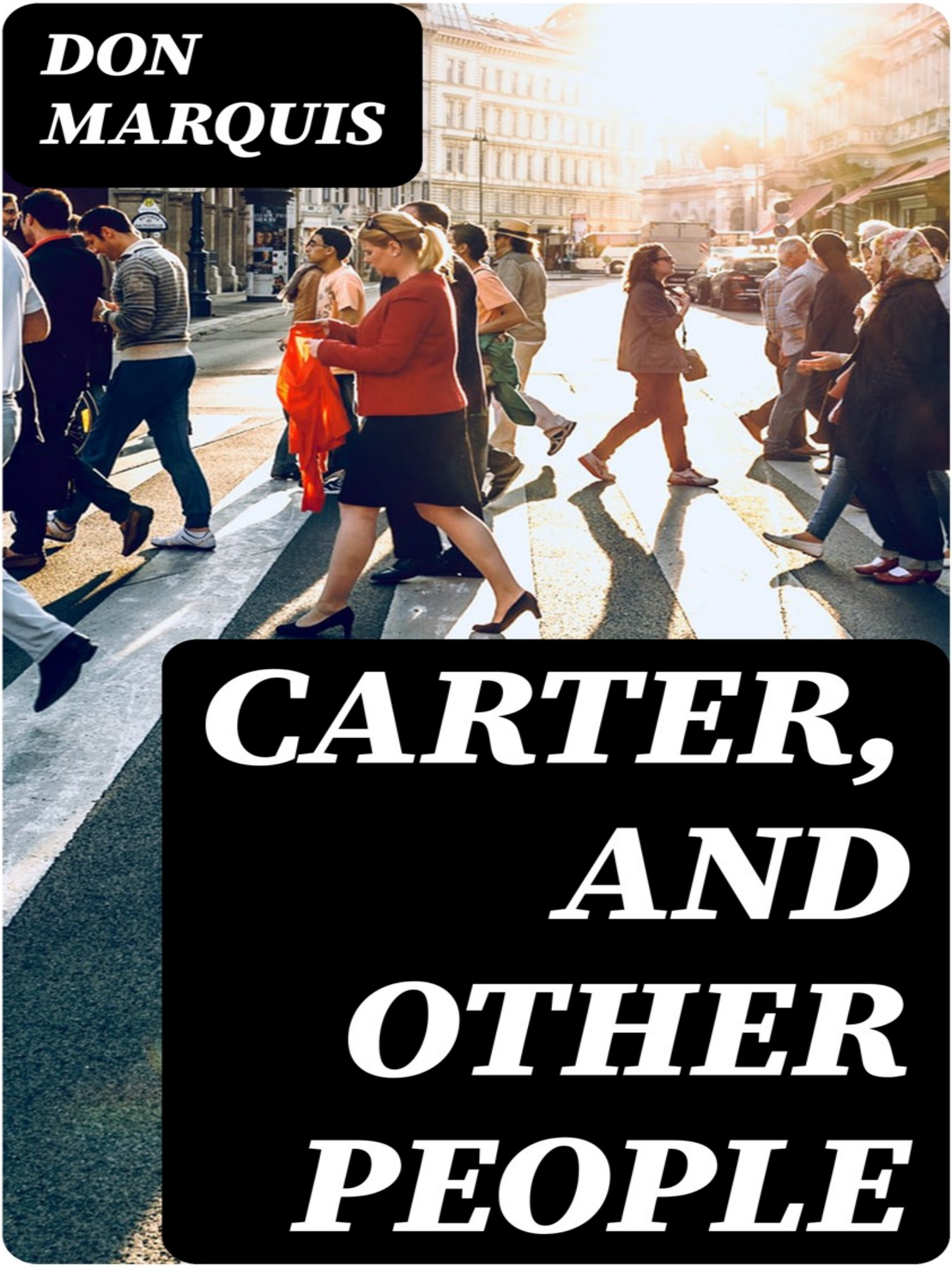
DON MARQUIS



CARTER, AND OTHER PEOPLE

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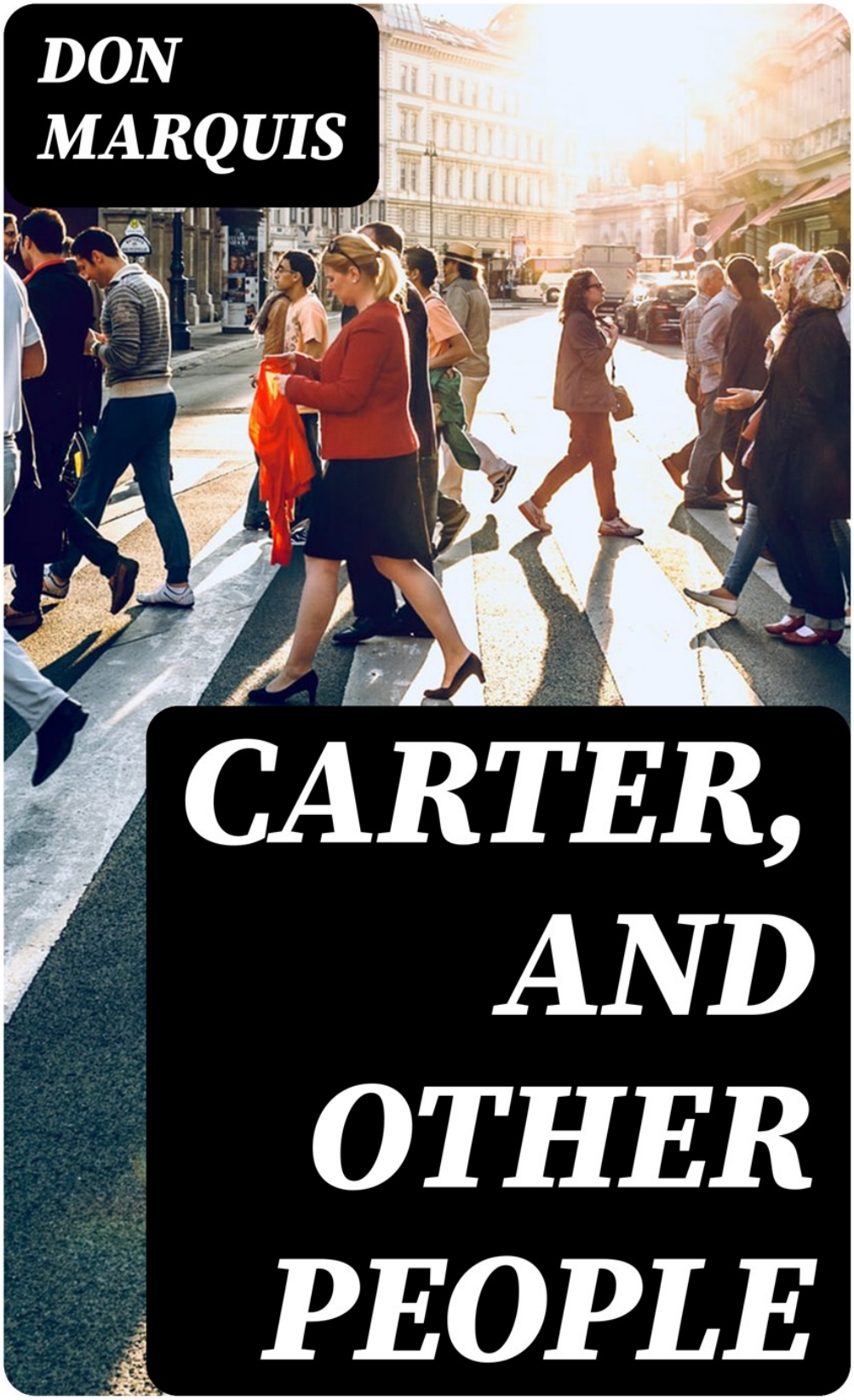

CARTER, AND OTHER PEOPLE

Don Marquis

Carter, and Other People

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FOREWORD

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I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to the editors of several magazines for permission to reprint the following stories in book form. “Carter” was originally published in *Harpers Monthly Magazine* under the title “The Mulatto.”

“Death and Old Man Murtrie” was printed in The New *Republic*; others were first brought out in *Everybody's Magazine, Short Stories, Putnam's Magazine and the Saturday Evening Post*. “The Penitent” was originally printed in *The Pictorial Review*, with the title “The Healer and the Penitent.” The plot of this story is taken from two poems, one by Browning and one by Owen Meredith. Happening to read these two poems, one after the other, I was struck by the fact that Owen Meredith had unwittingly written what was in effect a continuation of a situation invented by Browning; the plot of the one poem, telescoped into the plot of the other, made in effect a complete short story. I pasted the two situations together, so to speak, inventing an ending of my own, and had a short story which neither Browning nor Owen Meredith could claim as his-and which I scarcely have the nerve to claim as mine. And yet this story, taken piecemeal from the two poets, gave me more

trouble than anything else I ever tried to write; it was all there, apparently; but to transpose the story into a modern American setting was a difficult job. It is my only essay in conscious plagiarism-I hate to call it plagiarism, but what else could one call it?—and I give you my word that it is easier to invent than to plagiarize.

The one-act play, “Words and Thoughts,” was written ten years ago-in 1911-and has been offered to every theatrical manager in America, and refused by them all. I still believe in it as a thing that could be acted with effect, and I am determined to get it read, even if I cannot get it produced. The fact that it has been going the rounds of theatrical managers for ten years is no indication that it has ever been read.

Don Marquis

New York

I.-Carter

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Carter was not exactly a negro, but he was a “nigger.” Seven drops of his blood out of every eight were Caucasian. The eighth, being African, classified him. The white part of him despised and pitied the black part. The black part hated the white part. Consequently, wherever Carter went he carried his own hell along inside of him.

Carter began to learn that he was a nigger very early in life. Nigger children are not left long in doubt anywhere, and especially

in the South. Carter first saw the light—and the shadows—of day in Atlanta. The color line itself, about which one hears so much talk, seemed to run along one end of the alley in which he was born. It was an alley with a gutter and a great deal of mud in it. At the corner, where it gave into a little narrow street not much better than an alley itself, the mud was the thickest, deepest, and best adapted to sculptural purposes. But in the little street lived a number of white families. They were most of them mill hands, and a numerous spawn of skinny children, little “crackers,” with faces white and sad even from babyhood, disputed the mud with the nigger children. Nigger babies of five, four, three, and even two, understood quite well that this most desirable mud, even though it was in the nigger alley, was claimed by the white babies as *their* mud. It was in every way a more attractive sort of mud than any in the little street proper; and juvenile race riots were of almost hourly occurrence—skirmishes in which the very dogs took part. For the dogs grasped the situation as clearly as did the children; a “nigger” dog, even though he may have started in life as a white man's dog, soon gets a certain look about him.

So there was no chance for Carter to escape the knowledge that he was a nigger. But it was with a thrill that he perceived in his youthful excursions from the home alley, that he was sometimes mistaken for a white child. He was so white in color that one could not tell he was a nigger at a casual glance.

As he grew up, he made another discovery that elated and embittered him still more. He found out who his father was—or rather, who his father had been, since he never saw that gentleman. The white blood in Carter's veins was no common ichor. Because white people seldom speak of these things it does not follow that they are not known pretty generally among the negroes. They are, in fact, discussed.

Carter went to school; he made the further discovery that he had brains—“white man's brains” is the way he put it to himself. Given the opportunity, he told himself, he could go as far as the

average white man—perhaps further than the average. The white man's standard, nigger though he was, was still the standard by which he must measure himself. But the opportunity! Even as the youth prepared himself for it he perceived, hopelessly, that it would be denied him.

As he matured he began to feel a strange, secret pride in that white family whose blood he shared. He familiarized himself with its genealogy. There is many a courtier who cannot trace his ancestry as far back as Carter could. One of his forebears had signed Magna Charta; several had fought in the Revolutionary War. There had been a United States Senator in the family, and a Confederate General. At times, feeling the vigorous impulse of hereditary instinct and ambitions, Carter looked upon himself as all white man, but never for long, nor to any purpose. The consciousness of his negro blood pulled him down again.

But, as he grew up, he ceased to herd with black negroes; he scorned them. He crept about the world cursing it and himself—an unfortunate and bitter creature that had no place; unfortunate and bitter, cursed with an intellect, denied that mitigation that might have come with a full share of the negro jovialty of disposition, forever unreconciled.

There was one member of that white family from which he drew so much of his blood whom Carter particularly admired. Willoughby Howard was about Carter's own age, and he was Carter's half-brother. Howard did not distinguish Carter from any other mulatto; probably did not know of his existence. But as Howard reached manhood, and, through virtue of his wealth and standing and parts, began to attain an excellent place in the world, his rise was watched by Carter with a strange intensity of emotion. Carter in some occult way identified himself with the career of Willoughby Howard—sometimes he almost worshiped Willoughby Howard, and then he hated him; he envied him and raged over him with the same breath.

But mostly, as the isolation of his own condition, ate into his soul, he raged over himself; he pitied himself; he hated himself. Out of the turmoil of his spirit arose the one despairing cry, Oh, to be white, white, *white!*

Many a night he lay awake until daybreak, measuring the slow minutes with the ceaseless iteration of that useless prayer: Only to be white! O God, for *one little year of being white!*

Fruitless hours of prayers and curses!

Carter went North. He went to New York. But the North, which affects to promise so much to the negro, in a large, loose, general way, does not perform in the same degree. There was only one thing which Carter would have thanked any one for performing; it was the one thing that could never be performed—he wanted to be made white. Sometimes, indeed, from the depths of his despair, he cried out that he wanted to be altogether black; but in his soul he did not really want that.

Nevertheless, at several different periods he yielded to temptation and “went over to the whites.” In the South he could not have done this without discovery, in spite of the color of his skin. But in the Northern cities, with their enormous numbers of aliens, all more or less strange to the American eye, Carter found no great difficulty in passing as white. He “looked a little foreign” to the casual glance; that was all.

But if there was no great difficulty in it, there was no great satisfaction in it, either. In fact, it only made him the more bitter. Others might think him a white man, but he knew that he was a nigger.

The incident which sent him back South, resolved to be a nigger, and to live and die among the niggers, might not have affected another in his condition just as it did Carter. But to him it showed conclusively that his destiny was not a matter of environment so much as a question of himself.

He fell in love. The girl was a waitress in a cheap restaurant near the barber shop where Carter worked. She was herself a

product of the East Side, struggling upward from the slums; partly Italian, with some Oriental strain in her that had given the least perceptible obliqueness to her eyes—one of those rare hybrid products which give the thinker pause and make him wonder what the word “American” will signify a century from now; a creature with very red lips and very black eyebrows; she seemed to know more than she really did; she had a kind of naïve charm, a sort of allurement, without actual beauty; and her name had been Anglicized into Mary.

And she loved Carter. This being, doomed from the cradle to despair, had his moment of romance. But even in his intoxication there was no hope; his elation was embittered and perplexed. He was tempted not to tell the girl that he was a nigger. But if he married her, and did not tell her, perhaps the first child would tell her. It might look more of a nigger than he did.

But if he told her, would she marry a nigger? He decided he would tell her. Perhaps his conscience had less to do with this decision than the fatalism of his temperament.

So he made his revelation one Sunday evening, as they walked along the boardwalk from Coney Island to Brighton. To him, it was a tremendous moment. For days he had been revolving in his mind the phrases he would use; he had been rehearsing his plea; in his imagination he saw something spectacular, something histrionic, in his confession.

“Mary,” he said, as they sat down on a bench on the beach, “there is something I think I ought to tell you before we get married.”

The girl turned toward him her big, sleepy, dark eyes, which always seemed to see and understand so much more than they really did, and looked away again.

“I ought to tell you,” he said—and as he said it, staring out to sea, he was so imposed upon by the importance of the moment to himself that he almost felt as if the sea listened and the waves paused—“I ought to tell you that I have negro blood in my veins.”

She was silent. There was a moment before he dared look at her; he could not bear to read his doom in her eyes. But finally he did muster up courage enough to turn his head.

The girl was placidly chewing gum and gazing at an excursion vessel that was making a landing at one of the piers.

He thought she had not heard. “Mary,” he repeated, “I have negro blood in my veins.”

“Uh-huh,” said she. “I gotcha the first time, Steve! Say, I wonder if we couldn't take the boat back to town? Huh? Whatcha say?”

He looked at her almost incredulous. She had understood, and yet she had not shrunk away from him! He examined her with a new interest; his personal drama, in which she, perforce, must share, seemed to have made no impression upon her whatsoever.

“Do you mean,” he said, hesitatingly, “that it will—that it won't make any difference to you? That you can marry me, that you *will* marry me, in spite of—of—in spite of what I am?”

“Gee! but ain't you the solemn one!” said the girl, taking hold of her gum and “stringing” it out from her lips. “Whatcha s'pose I care for a little thing like that?”

He had looked for a sort of dramatic “situation”; and, behold, there was none! There was none simply because the girl had no vantage point from which to look at his life and hers. He had negro blood in his veins—and she simply did not care one way or the other!

He felt no elation, no exultation; he believed that she *should* have cared; whether her love was great enough to pardon that in him or not, she should have felt it as a thing that *needed* pardon.

As he stared at the girl, and she continued to chew her gum, he swiftly and subtly revised his estimate of her; and in his new appraisement there was more than a tinge of disgust. And for a moment he became altogether a white man in his judgment of the thing that was happening; he looked at the situation as a patrician

of the South might have looked at it; the seven eighths of his blood which was white spoke:

“By God!” he said, suddenly leaping to his feet and flinging aside the startled hand which the girl put out toward him, “I can't have anything to do with a woman who'd marry a nigger!”

So Carter went back to Atlanta. And, curiously enough, he stepped from the train almost into the midst of a strange and terrible conflict of which the struggle in his individual breast was, in a sense, the type and the symbol.

It was a Saturday night in September, an evening on which there began a memorable and sanguinary massacre of negroes; an event which has been variously explained and analyzed, but of which, perhaps, the underlying causes will never be completely understood.

There was riot in the streets, a whirlwind of passion which lashed the town and lifted up the trivial souls of men and spun them round and round, and passed and left the stains of blood behind. White men were making innocent negroes suffer for the brutal crimes of guilty negroes. It had been a hot summer; scarcely a day had passed during July and August without bringing to the newspapers from somewhere in Georgia a report of a negro assault upon some white woman. A blind, undiscriminating anger against the whole negro race had been growing and growing. And when, on that Saturday afternoon, the newspapers reported four more crimes, in rapid succession, all in or near Atlanta, the cumulative rage burst into a storm.

There was no danger for Carter in the streets; more than a hasty glance was necessary to spy out his negro taint. He stood in a doorway, in the heart of the business district of the town, and watched the wild work that went on in a large, irregular plaza, where five streets come together and all the car lines in the place converge. From this roughly triangular plaza leads Decatur Street, at one time notorious throughout the South for its negro dives and gambling-dens.

Now and then Carter could hear the crack of a pistol, close at hand or far away; and again some fleeing negro would start from a place of temporary concealment, at the approach of a mob that beat its way along a street, and make a wild dash for safety, as a rabbit startled from the sedge-grass scurries to the brush. There was not one mob, but several; the different bands united, split up, and reunited, as the shifting winds of madness blew. The plaza, with arc lights all about it, was the brilliantly illuminated stage on which more than one scene of that disgusting melodrama was played out; from some dim hell of gloom and clamor to the north or east would rush a shouting group that whirled and swayed beneath the lights, dancing like flecks of soot in their brightness, to disappear in the gloom again, shouting, cursing, and gesticulating, down one of the thoroughfares to the west or south. And to Carter, in whose heart there waxed a fearful turmoil of emotions, even as the two races clashed along the echoing streets, there was a strange element of unreality about it all; or, rather, the night was dreadful with that superior reality which makes so much more vivid than waking life the intense experience of dreams. Carter thrilled; he shook; he was torn with terror and pity and horror and hatred.

No white man felt all that Carter felt that night; nor yet any negro. For he was both, and he was neither; and he beheld that conflict which was forever active in his own nature dramatized by fate and staged with a thousand actors in the lighted proscenium at his feet.

This thought struck Carter himself, and he turned toward another man who had paused in the doorway, with no clear intention, but perhaps with the vague impulse of addressing him, as a point of solid contact and relief from the sense of hurrying nightmare that possessed both the streets and his own spirit.

Startled, he saw that the other man was Willoughby Howard. Carter hesitated, and then advanced a step. But whatever he had to say was interrupted by a crowd that swept past them from Decatur Street in pursuit of a panting negro. The fleeing colored

man was struck a dozen times; he fell at the street corner near them, and the mob surged on again into the darkness beyond, already in full chase of another quarry—all but one man, who left the mob and ran back as if to assure himself that the prostrate negro was really dead.

This was a short man, a very short man, a dwarf with a big head too heavy for him, and little bandy legs—legs so inadequate that he wabbled like an overfed poodle when he ran. Carter had seen him twice before that night, dodging in and out among the feet of the rioters like an excited cur, stumbling, falling, trodden upon; a being with bloodshot eyes and matted hair, hoarse voice and menacing fist, drunken and staggering with blood lust; the very Gnome of Riot himself come up from some foul cave and howling in the streets. “Kill them! Kill them!” he would cry, and then shake with cackling laughter. But he was only valiant when there was; no danger. As he approached the negro who lay upon the ground, and bent over him, Willoughby Howard stepped down from the doorway and aimed a blow at the creature with a cane. The blow missed, but the dwarf ran shrieking down Decatur Street.

Howard bent over the negro. The negro stirred; he was not dead. Howard turned toward Carter and said:

“He's alive! Help me get him out of the street.”

Together they lifted the wounded man, moving him toward the curbstone. He groaned and twisted, and they laid him down. Howard poured whisky into him from a pocket flask, and a little later he managed to struggle to a sitting posture on the curb, looking up at them with dazed eyes and a bloody face.

Howard took his slow gaze from the negro and covered his face with his hands.

Carter watched him.

Of all men in the world this was the one whom Carter most honored and most loved—honored and loved, while he envied; he was the only man, perhaps, that could have touched Carter through his crust of bitterness. Carter listened with strained

attention for what Howard would say, as if with some premonition that the words would be the cue for the most vital action of his life.

“My God! My God!” said Willoughby Howard, “will this thing never stop?” And then he straightened himself and turned toward the shadow into which Carter had retired, and there was the glow and glory of a large idea on his face; the thought of a line of men never lacking, when once aroused, in the courage to do and die for a principle or a human need. “There is one way,” he cried, stretching out his hands impulsively to Carter, and not knowing to whom or to what manner of man he spoke—“there is one way to make them pause and think! If two of us white men of the better class offer our lives for these poor devils—die in their defense!—the mob will halt; the crowd will think; we can end it! Will you do it, with me? Will you do it?”

Two of us white men of the better class! Willoughby Howard had taken him for a white man!

It was like an accolade. A light blazed through the haunted caverns of his soul; he swelled with a vast exultation.

Willoughby Howard had taken him for a white man! Then, by God, he would be one! Since he was nothing in this life, he could at least die—and in his death he would be a white man! Nay, more:—he would die shoulder to shoulder with one of that family whose blood he shared. He would show that he, too, could shed that blood for an idea or a principle! For humanity! At the thought he could feel it singing in his veins. Oh, to be white, white, white! The dreams and the despairs of all his miserable and hampered life passed before him in a whirl, and now the cry was answered!

“Yes,” he said, lifting his head, and rising at that instant into a larger thing than he had ever been, “I will stand by you. I will die with you.” And under his breath he added—“my brother.”

They had not long to wait. In the confused horror of that night things happened quickly. Even as Carter spoke the wounded negro struggled to his feet with a scarce articulate cry of alarm, for around the corner swept a mob, and the dwarf with matted hair

was in the lead. He had come back with help to make sure of his job.

With the negro cowering behind them, the white man and the mulatto stepped forth to face the mob. Their attitude made their intention obvious.

“Don't be a damned fool, Willoughby Howard,” said a voice from the crowd, “or you may get hurt yourself.” And with the words there was a rush, and the three were in the midst of the clamoring madness, the mob dragging the negro from his two defenders.

“Be careful—don't hurt Willoughby Howard!” said the same voice again. Willoughby turned, and, recognizing the speaker as an acquaintance, with a sudden access of scorn and fury and disgust, struck him across the mouth. The next moment his arms were pinioned, and he was lifted and flung away from the negro he had been fighting to protect by half a dozen men.

“You fools! You fools!” he raged, struggling toward the center of the crowd again, “you're killing a white man there. An innocent white man——— Do you stop at nothing? You're killing a *white man*, I say!”

“White man?” said the person whom he had struck, and who appeared to bear him little resentment for the blow. “Who's a white man? Not Jerry Carter here! He wasn't any white man. I've known him since he was a kid—he was just one of those yaller niggers.”

And Carter heard it as he died.

II—Old Man Murtrie

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Old Man Murtrie never got any fresh air at all, except on Sundays on his way to and from church. He lived, slept, cooked and ate back of the prescription case in his little dismal drug store in one of the most depressing quarters of Brooklyn. The store was dimly lighted by gas and it was always damp and suggested a tomb. Drifting feebly about in the pale and cold and faintly greenish radiance reflected from bottles and show cases, Old Man Murtrie with his bloodless face and dead white hair and wisps of whisker was like a ghost that has not managed to get free from the neighborhood of a sepulcher where its body lies disintegrating.

People said that Old Man Murtrie was nearly a hundred years old, but this was not true; he was only getting along towards ninety. The neighborhood, however, seemed a little impatient with him for not dying. Some persons suggested that perhaps he really had been dead for a long time, and did not know it. If so, they thought, it might be kind to tell him about it.

But Old Man Murtrie was not dead, any more than he was alive. And Death himself, who has his moments of impatience, began to get worried about Old Man Murtrie. It was time, Death thought, that he was dead, since he looked so dead; and Death had said so, both to God and to the Devil.

“But I don't want to garner him, naturally,” Death would say, “till I know which one of you is to have him. He's got to go somewhere, you know.”

God and Death and the Devil used to sit on the prescription counter in a row, now and then, and watch Old Man Murtrie as he slept in his humble little cot back there, and discuss him.

God would look at Old Man Murtrie's pale little Adam's Apple sticking up in the faint gaslight, and moving as he snored—moving

feebly, for even his snores were feeble—and say, with a certain distaste:

“I don't want him. He can't get into Heaven.”

And the Devil would look at his large, weak, characterless nose;—a nose so big that it might have suggested force on any one but Old Man Murtrie—and think what a sham it was, and how effectually all its contemptible effort to be a real nose was exposed in Old Man Murtrie's sleep. And the Devil would say:

“I don't want him. He can't get into Hell.”

And then Death would say, querulously: “But he can't go on living forever. My reputation is suffering.”

“You should take him,” the Devil would say to God. “He goes to church on Sunday, and he is the most meek and pious and humble and prayerful person in all Brooklyn, and perhaps in all the world.”

“But he takes drugs,” God would say. “You should take him, because he is a drug fiend.”

“He takes drugs,” the Devil would admit, “but that doesn't make him a *fiend*. You have to do something besides take drugs to be a fiend. You will permit me to have my own notions, I am sure, on what constitutes a fiend.”

“You ought to forgive him the drugs for the sake of his piety,” the Devil would say. “And taking drugs is his only vice. He doesn't drink, or smoke tobacco, or use profane language, or gamble. And he doesn't run after women.”

“You ought to forgive him the piety for the sake of the drugs,” God would tell the Devil.

“I never saw such a pair as you two,” Death would say querulously. “Quibble, quibble, quibble!—while Old Man Murtrie goes on and on living! He's lived so long that he is affecting death rates and insurance tables, all by himself, and you know what that does to my reputation.”

And Death would stoop over and run his finger caressingly across Old Man Murtrie's throat, as the Old Man slept. Whereupon

Old Man Murtrie would roll over on his back and moan in his sleep and gurgle.

“He has wanted to be a cheat all his life,” God would say to the Devil. “He has always had the impulse to give short weight and substitute inferior drugs in his prescriptions and overcharge children who were sent on errands to his store. If that isn't sin I don't know what sin is. You should take him.”

“I admit he has had those impulses,” the Devil would say to God. “But he has never yielded to them. In my opinion having those impulses and conquering them makes him a great deal more virtuous than if he'd never had 'em. No one who is as virtuous as all that can get into Hell.”

“I never saw such a pair,” Death would grumble. “Can't you agree with each other about anything?”

“He didn't abstain from his vices because of any courage,” God would say. “He abstained simply because he was afraid. It wasn't virtue in him; it was cowardice.”

“The fear of the Lord,” murmured the Devil, dreamily, “is the beginning of all wisdom.”

“But not necessarily the end of it,” God would remark.

“Argue, argue, argue,” Death would say, “and here's Old Man Murtrie still alive! I'm criticized about the way I do my work, but no one has any idea of the vacillation and inefficiency I have to contend with! I never saw such a pair as you two to vacillate!”

Sometimes Old Man Murtrie would wake up and turn over on his couch and see God and Death and the Devil sitting in a row on the prescription counter, looking at him. But he always persuaded himself that it was a sort of dream, induced by the “medicine” he took; and he would take another dose of his “medicine” and go back to sleep again. He never spoke to them when he waked, but just lay on his cot and stared at them; and if they spoke to him he would pretend to himself that they had not spoken. For it was absurd to think that God and Death and the Devil could really be sitting there, in the dim greenish gaslight, among all the faintly

radiant bottles, talking to each other and looking at him; and so Old Man Murtrie would not believe it.

When he first began taking his “medicine” Old Man Murtrie took it in the form of a certain patent preparation which was full of opium. He wanted the opium more and more after he started, but he pretended to himself that he did not know there was much opium in that medicine. Then, when a federal law banished that kind of medicine from the markets, he took to making it for his own use. He would not take opium outright, for that would be to acknowledge to himself that he was an opium eater; he thought eating opium was a sin, and he thought of himself as sinless. But to make the medicine with the exact formula that its manufacturers had used, before they had been compelled to shut up shop, and use it, did not seem to him to be the same thing at all as being an opium eater. And yet, after the law was passed, abolishing the medicine, he would not sell to any one else what he made for himself; his conscience would not allow him to do so. Therefore, he must have known that he was eating opium at the same time he tried to fool himself about it.

God and the Devil used to discuss the ethics of this attitude towards the “medicine,” and Old Man Murtrie would sometimes pretend to be asleep and would listen to them.

“He knows it is opium all right,” God would say. “He is just lying to himself about it. He ought to go to Hell. No one that lies to himself that way can get into Heaven.”

“He's pretending for the sake of society in general and for the sake of religion,” the Devil would say. “If he admitted to himself that it was opium and if he let the world know that he took opium, it might bring discredit on the church that he loves so well. He might become a stumbling block to others who are seeking salvation, and who seek it through the church. He is willing to sacrifice himself so as not to hamper others in their religious life. For my part, I think it is highly honorable of him, and highly

virtuous. No person as moral as that in his instincts can get into Hell."

"Talk, talk, talk!" Death would say. "The trouble with you two is that neither one of you wants Old Man Murtrie around where you will have to look at him through all eternity, and each of you is trying to put it on moral grounds."

And Old Man Murtrie kept on living and praying and being pious and wanting to be bad and not daring to and taking his medicine and being generally as ineffectual in the world either for good or evil as a butterfly in a hurricane.

But things took a turn. There was a faded-looking blonde woman with stringy hair by the name of Mable who assisted Old Man Murtrie in the store, keeping his books and waiting on customers, and so forth. She was unmarried, and one day she announced to him that she was going to have a child.

Old Man Murtrie had often looked at her with a recollection, a dim and faint remembrance, of the lusts of his youth and of his middle age. In his youth and middle age he had lusted after many women, but he had never let any of them know it, because he was afraid, and he had called his fears virtue, and had really believed that he was virtuous.

"Whom do you suspect?" asked Old Man Murtrie, leering at Mable like a wraith blown down the ages from the dead adulteries of ruined Babylon.

"Who?" cried Mable, an unlessoned person, but with a cruel, instinctive humor. "Who but you!"

She had expected Old Man Murtrie to be outraged at her ridiculous joke, and, because she was unhappy herself, had anticipated enjoying his astounded protests. But it was she who was astounded. Old Man Murtrie's face was blank and his eyes were big for a moment, and then he chuckled; a queer little cackling chuckle. And when she went out he opened the door for her and cocked his head and cackled again.

It gave Mable an idea. She reflected that he took so much opium that he might possibly be led to believe the incredible, and she might get some money out of him. So the next evening she brought her mother and her brother to the store and accused him.

Old Man Murtrie chuckled and... *and admitted it!* Whether he believed that it could be true or not, Mable and her people were unable to determine. But they made the tactical error of giving him his choice between marriage and money, and he chose matrimony.

And then Old Man Murtrie was suddenly seized with a mania for confession. God and Death and the Devil used to listen to him nights, and they wondered over him, and began to change their minds about him, a little. He confessed to the officials of his church. He confessed to all the people whom he knew. He insisted on making a confession, a public confession, in the church itself and asking for the prayers of the preacher and congregation for his sin, and telling them that he was going to atone by matrimony, and asking for a blessing on the wedding.

And one night, full of opium, while he-was babbling about it in his sleep, God and Death and the Devil sat on the prescription counter again and looked at him and listened to his ravings and speculated.

“I'm going to have him,” said the Devil. “Any one who displays such conspicuous bad taste that he goes around confessing that he has ruined a woman ought to go to Hell.”

“You don't want him for that reason,” said God. “And you know you don't. You want him because you admire the idea of adultery, and think that now he is worthy of a place in Hell. You are rather entertained by Old Man Murtrie, and want him around now.”

“Well,” said the Devil, “suppose I admit that is true! Have you any counter claim?”

“Yes,” said God. “I am going to take Old Man Murtrie into Heaven. He knows he is not the father of the child that is going to be born, but he has deliberately assumed the responsibility lest it be born fatherless, and I think that is a noble act.”

“Rubbish!” said the Devil. “That isn't the reason you want him. You want him because of the paternal instinct he displays. It flatters you!”

“Well,” said God, “why not? The paternal instinct is another name for the great creative force of the universe. I have been known by many names in many countries... they called me Osiris, the All-Father, in Egypt, and they called me Jehovah in Palestine, and they called me Zeus and Brahm... but always they recognized me as the Father. And this instinct for fatherliness appeals to me. Old Man Murtrie shall come to Heaven.”

“Such a pair as you two,” said Death, gloomily, “I never did see! Discuss and discuss, but never get anywhere! And all the time Old Man Murtrie goes on living.”

And then Death added:

“Why not settle this matter once and for all, right now? Why not wake Old Man Murtrie up and let him decide?”

“Decide?” asked the Devil.

“Yes,—whether he wants to go to Hell or to Heaven.”

“I imagine,” said God, “that if we do that there can be no question as to which place he would rather go to.”

“Oh, I don't know,” said the Devil. “Some people come to Hell quite willingly. I've been to Heaven myself, you know, and I can quite understand why. Are you afraid to have Old Man Murtrie make the choice?”

“Wake him up, Death, wake him up,” said God. “It's unusual to allow people to know that they are making their own decision—though all of them, in a sense, do make it—but wake him up, Death, and we'll see.”

So Death prodded Old Man Murtrie in the ribs, and they asked him. For a long time he thought it was only opium, but when he finally understood that it was really God and Death and the Devil who were there, and that it was really they who had often been there before, he was very much frightened. He was so frightened he couldn't choose.

“I'll leave it to you, I'll leave it to you,” said Old Man Murtrie. “Who am I that I should set myself up to decide?”

“Well,” said God, getting a little angry, perhaps, “if you don't want to go to Heaven, Murtrie, you don't have to. But you've been, praying to go to Heaven, and all that sort of thing, for seventy or eighty years, and I naturally thought you were in earnest. But I'm through with you… you can go to Hell.”

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” moaned Old Man Murtrie.

“No,” said the Devil, “I've changed my mind, too. My distaste for Murtrie has returned to me. I don't want him around. I won't have him in Hell.”

“See here, now!” cried Death. “You two are starting it all over again. I won't have it, so I won't! You aren't fair to Murtrie, and you aren't fair to me! This matter has got to be settled, and settled to-night!”

“Well, then,” said God, “settle it. I've ceased to care one way or another.”

“I will not,” said Death, “I know my job, and I stick to my job. One of you two has got to settle it.”

“Toss a coin,” suggested the Devil, indifferently.

Death looked around for one.

“There's a qu-qu-quarter in m-m-my t-t-trousers' p-p-pocket,” stammered Old Man Murtrie, and then stuck his head under the bedclothes and shivered as if he had the ague.

Death picked up Murtrie's poor little weazened trousers from the floor at the foot of the cot, where they lay sprawled untidily, and shook them till the quarter dropped out.

He picked it up.

“Heads, he goes to Heaven. Tails, he goes to Hell,” said Death, and tossed the coin to the ceiling. Murtrie heard it hit the ceiling, and started. He heard it hit the floor, and bounce, and jingle and spin and roll and come to rest. And he thrust his head deeper under the covers and lay there quaking. He did not dare look.

“Look at it, Murtrie,” said Death.