

Other Stories

THANK YOU, M'AM

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but hammer and nails. It had a long strap and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy's weight, and the weight of the purse combined caused him to lose his balance so, instead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk, and his legs flew up. The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue jeansed sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

After that the woman said, "Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here."

She still held him. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

Firmly gripped by his shirt front, the boy said, "Yes'm."

The woman said, "What did you want to do it for?"

The boy said, "I didn't aim to."

She said, "You a lie!"

By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.

"If I turn you loose, will you run?" asked the woman.

"Yes'm," said the boy.

"Then I won't turn you loose," said the woman. She did not release him.

"I'm very sorry, lady, I'm sorry," whispered the boy.

"Um-hum! And your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?"

"No'm," said the boy.

"Then it will get washed this evening," said the large woman starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.

He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, frail and willow-wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans.

The woman said, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right now is to wash your face. Are you hungry?"

"No'm," said the being-dragged boy. "I just want you to turn me loose."

"Was I bothering you when I turned that corner?" asked the woman.

"No'm."

"But you put yourself in contact with me," said the woman. "If you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones."

Sweat popped out on the boy's face and he began to struggle. Mrs. Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half-nelson about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street. When she got to her door, she dragged the boy inside, down a hall, and into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of the house. She switched on the light and left the door open. The boy could hear other roomers laughing and talking in the large house. Some of their doors were open, too, so he knew he and the woman were not alone. The woman still had him by the neck in the middle of her room.

She said, "What is your name?"

"Roger," answered the boy.

"Then, Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face," said the woman, whereupon she turned him loose—at last. Roger looked at the door—looked at the woman—looked at the door—and went to the sink.

"Let the water run until it gets warm," she said. "Here's a clean towel."

"You gonna take me to jail?" asked the boy, bending over the sink. "Not with that face. I would not take you nowhere," said the woman. "Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe you ain't been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?"

"There's nobody home at my house," said the boy.

"Then we'll eat," said the woman. "I believe you're hungry—or been hungry—to try to snatch my pocketbook."

"I wanted a pair of blue suede shoes," said the boy.

"Well, you didn't have to snatch my pocketbook to get some suede shoes," said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. "You could of asked me."

"M'am?"

The water dripping from his face, the boy looked at her. There was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face and not knowing what else to do dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next. The door was open. He could make a dash for it down the hall. He could run, run, run, run, run, run!

The woman was sitting on the day-bed. After awhile she said, "I were young once and I wanted things I could not get."

There was another long pause. The boy's mouth opened. Then he frowned, but not knowing he frowned.

The woman said, "Um-hum! You thought I was going to say *but*, didn't you? You thought I was going to say, *but I didn't snatch people's pocketbooks*. Well, I wasn't going to say that." Pause. Silence. "I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son—neither tell God, if he didn't already know. So you set down while I fix us something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look presentable."

In another corner of the room behind a screen was a gas plate and an icebox. Mrs. Jones got up and went behind the screen. The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse which she left behind her on the day-bed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room where he thought she could easily see him out of the corner of her eye, if she wanted to. He did not trust the woman *not* to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

"Do you need somebody to go to the store," asked the boy, "maybe to get some milk or something?"

"Don't believe I do," said the woman, "unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here."

"That will be fine," said the boy.

She heated some lima beans and ham she had in the icebox, made the cocoa, and set the table. The woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that would embarrass him. Instead, as they ate, she told him about her job in a hotel beauty-shop that stayed open late, what the work was like, and how all kinds of women came in and out, blondes, redheads, and Spanish. Then she cut him a half of her ten-cent cake.

"Eat some more, son," she said.

When they were finished eating she got up and said, "Now, here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto *my* pocketbook *nor nobody else's*—because shoes come by devilish like that will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But I wish you would behave yourself, son, from here on in."

She led him down the hall to the front door and opened it. "Goodnight! Behave yourself, boy!" she said, looking out into the street.

The boy wanted to say something else other than, "Thank you, m'am," to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but he couldn't do so as he turned at the barren stoop and looked back at the large woman in the door. He barely managed to say, "Thank you," before she shut the door. And he never saw her again.

PATRON OF THE ARTS

Although it was just four o'clock of an autumn afternoon, the lights were on in the corners of Darby's little fifth floor studio apartment, those soft rose-colored lights that make even an ugly woman look charming—particularly if she is as smartly groomed as many New York women of color are. Through the windows with their *tete de negre* drapes, one saw a wind-blown, autumn-leaved view of aristocratic Sugar Hill, and southward the less well-kept regions of Harlem through which, in spite of poverty, fame had stalked to carry off a Josephine Baker or an Eartha Kitt.

Darby looked out, puffing impatiently on a cigarette and waiting for the lady to arrive. She was thirty-five and, according to the poets, there is no woman so charming as the woman of thirty-five. Darby had read this somewhere. He was twenty-one, fresh out of college. Today he had everything in readiness, the little anchovies, the ice in the bowl, the Barcardi and the limes. He knew what she liked, this green-eyed brownskin Mrs. Oldham who had been one of his first friends in New York. Back home in Oklahoma over his drawing board in art class in high school, Darby had dreamed of women like Cornelia Oldham. There were none in the West.

Now that he knew her—and had known her—there was a little girl at the Art Students League downtown he liked much better—a struggling young artist like himself in a strange city. He wished he could marry her.

Standing in reverie, Darby heard the elevator door close. He

straightened his tie—despite the fact that he might shortly take it off. You see, he was only twenty-one, and he wanted to look his best at first.

The bell rang. He went to his door and there was Cornelia. Taller than Darby, sleek in black and white, green-eyed and wise and old. He took her in his arms, but the very first words she said caused him to jump halfway across the room.

"Darling," she whispered, panting, looking at him with her great green eyes like a cat's, "I have told. . . my husband. . . all."

Something stopped beating in Darby's breast. It was his heart. "What?" he cried.

"Yes, dear, I have told him I love you!"

Darby stood behind the sofa. He stared at her with wide young eyes. He knew she had a husband, to be sure, a large dark man. But that personage had always seemed quite remote, far-away at home in St. Albans, or working at his Seventh Avenue office. This was Darby's first experience with a married woman. And he never dreamed that they told their husbands all.

"What—what," stuttered the young man as soon as he could talk,

"what—did—your husband say?"

"He rose," Cornelia panted, "and stalked out of the room."

Her green eyes in her cate-auf-lait face were full of tragedy. At once Darby had visions of an irate spouse still stalking—right on up to his apartment with a pistol in his hand.

"Lord!" Darby cried, "Cornelia, why did you do that?"

"I love you," she said, "that's why."

"But—but maybe he'll come here and shoot up the place!"

"Let him," she cried. "First we'll mix a cocktail." She took off her wraps and sat down. The youth stood behind the sofa shaking his head.

"I—I will not fix a cocktail," he said. She leaned her head back for a kiss. "Suppose he were tailing you! Why, he'd find us in a—a compromising position!" Darby retreated toward the wall.

"Darling!" Cornelia cried, rising to come slyly toward him, her green eyes gleaming, her dark hair done by Frankie, "Don't worry. . . ."

Just then there was a ring at the door. Darby stood as if petrified while Cornelia returned to the sofa. Finally he managed to move his legs, close his mouth, and turn the door knob.

The janitor stood in the hall.

"I'll take them socks, Mr. Middlefield, you said you wanted ma wife to mend."

"Could you come back later, please?" said Darby.