

Harlem

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THE SHADOW OF THE PAST hangs heavily over Harlem, obscuring its outlines, obliterating its true face.

During the Prohibition era Harlem was described, usually with laughter, as a vast gin mill—a place where everybody manufactured synthetic gin in bathtubs, washtubs and kitchen sinks, where corn liquor bubbled in stills that steamed in dank basements, littered alleyways and back yards.

Those were the days when experienced pub crawlers, having made the rounds of the speakeasies in midtown Manhattan, headed for Harlem, where the joints stayed open right around the clock; when it was whispered that the cops and the Federal agents kept their heads turned the other way, and that you could buy anything in Harlem from human flesh to dope because the Dutchman (the late Dutch Schultz) paid off in crisp, new, hundred-dollar bills.

During the '30s, those lost, bitter years of the depression, Harlem became known as a city of evictions, relief bureaus and bread lines, where half of the people lived on “the Relief.” Social workers complained, in those days, that Harlemites were importing hundreds of their ragged Southern relatives—their sick old mothers, their rachitic and illegitimate children—who were supposed to have been supplied with faked baptismal certificates so that they could meet the residence requirements and share in New York’s comparatively bountiful relief funds. Thus Harlem was tagged, first, as the home of a dangerous underworld; then, later, as a poverty-stricken community, expert in the practice of shabby fraud.

In 1935, and again in 1943, there were “disturbances” in Harlem, disturbances that centered around 125th Street, the principal shopping section. Rioting mobs broke plate-glass windows, looted stores, causing property damage estimated in the millions. And in the process they seem to have permanently rubbed out that other hackneyed description of Harlem—the dwelling place of a dancing, laughing, happy-go-lucky, child-like people.

Harlem is now called a trouble spot, a “hot” place. Many

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conservative citizens believe it to be a lawless, violent community, inhabited by just two kinds of people—the poor and the criminal. More sophisticated minds simply dismiss it as that section of New York where the Saturday nights are one long, lost, hellish week end and where every night is a Saturday night.

And yet in this place of unhappy repute an astonishing number of boys and girls have lived long enough to grow up; and some of them have even achieved international fame. Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, Walter White, Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, Channing Tobias, Judge Jane Bolin and A. Philip Randolph live here. Duke Ellington writes music about the place, and many of his bandsmen call Harlem home. When Lena Horne, Rochester, and Joe Louis are in New York they stay in Harlem.

If a nose-by-nose count were made it would reveal that Harlem has a high proportion of distinguished residents. And if you subscribe to the theory that class distinctions in America are based on wealth, then Harlem can be said to have an aristocracy. There is a moneyed class which lives largely in and around the section known as the Hill—a high, hilly area, overlooking the Hudson River to the west and the Polo Grounds to the northeast. It is called Sugar Hill because it takes a lot of sugar to pay the rent for a swank apartment on Edgecombe, St. Nicholas or Convent Avenues.

There is no inherited wealth on the Hill. The leisure class is composed of the wives of successful doctors, lawyers, dentists, real-estate operators and businessmen. Their lives refute the picture of Harlem as a poverty-stricken community. The Hill's children are sent to experimental nursery schools, to expensive private schools, and on to the big Eastern colleges. They vacation in Canada, Mexico, New England, Bermuda, and they travel to England and France and Sweden.

Sometimes the Hill aristocrats display all of the glittering trappings of the 20th Century brand of conspicuous consumption. They drive high-priced cars. They obtain sensational divorces in Reno and Mexico and the Virgin Islands. Their women collect Persian rugs and mink coats and diamonds.

These are the people who can afford to eat the thick juicy steaks at Frank's Restaurant on 125th Street and drink Irish

whisky at the Theresa Bar, or drop in at Ma Frazier's on the maid's night off to eat some of the best food to be found in New York—sizzling hot lamb chops; chicken, fried, broiled, or roasted to a turn; thick slices of ham steak.

The Hill suggests that Harlem is simply a pleasant and rather luxurious part of Manhattan. Actually it is only one of Harlem's thousand varied faces.

Harlem is also the *Amsterdam News*: "One of America's Greatest Newspapers—We Only Print the News—We Do Not Make It." This is the most widely read Negro newspaper in New York. Twice a week, the *Amsterdam* reports the births and deaths, the defeats and victories, the sins and virtues of the Negro in New York City to some 375,000 readers. It headlines the ripest scandals and the goriest murders: Man Killed For Fee of \$25; Upshot of Three-Way Love Tilt Is Knifing; Nab Society Photog As Numbers Boss; Gangs Kill Schoolboy. By contrast, its editorials are as sedately written and as innocuous as those in the *New York Sun*.

Dan Burley, the former managing editor, (now managing editor of the *New York Age*, another Harlem paper) used to give a tongue-in-cheek report on the doings of Harlem's big and little fish in a column called *Back Door Stuff*. It revealed still another side of Harlem.

Burley poked fun at a curious assortment of people: fighters, singers, dancers, actors, night-club entertainers, Hill aristocrats and a demimonde composed of kept women and gentlemen with no known source of income.

He portrayed the Hill's aristocrats as selfish, stupid and ungrammatical; spavined and permanently winded from getting off to a fast start in that rat race known as keeping up with the Joneses. He pretended to believe, for example, that the folk on the Hill are so stony-broke that they cannot afford the luxury of overnight guests:

"I heard one woman say: 'Lawd, here comes old Big Foot Hattie and them kids of hers. . . . I ain't got no place for 'em to stay here and I stayed six weeks with them when I was down in Raleigh last summer. . . . Roosevelt, you pull them windows down and turn out them lights and for Gawd's sake, keep quiet till they leave. . . .'"

The *Amsterdam* is worth a look for many other reasons. Not all Harlemites spend their time carving each other with knife and razor. Sometimes they carve out a financial empire instead.

This newspaper with the big circulation and the gaudy headlines is part of the empire built by Dr. Philip M. H. Savory and Dr. Clilan Bethany Powell.

They own not only the *Amsterdam News* but also an insurance concern, Victory Mutual Life Insurance Company; a loan business, Personal Finance Corporation; a photo-engraving company, Rapid Reproduction. Doctor Savory, a general practitioner, is president of the insurance company and secretary-treasurer of the *Amsterdam*. Doctor Powell, who was an X-ray specialist until his retirement about eight years ago, is president and editor of the *Amsterdam*, a Dewey-appointed member of the State Athletic Commission, and executive vice-president of the Midway Technical School, a newly opened trade school.

But Harlem is not all Hill and wealth and empire. It is also the ugly tenements and the scarred, evil-smelling rooms in the Hollow.

The Hollow, called that only by way of contrast to the Hill, is that central area in Harlem which welcomed the first influx of Negroes at the turn of the century. When Negroes entered this area, the whites who lived there fled before them, block by block, street by street. The houses were old when Negroes moved into them; they are some forty-nine years older now.

The Hollow is as unpredictable and contradictory as the rest of Harlem. Some of the last of the Victorians live in the brownstone houses on Fifth Avenue, 130th Street, 133rd Street—one family to a house, the high-ceilinged rooms with the intricately laid oak flooring, and the carved mantels still intact. The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company's crisp new Harlem project, the Riverton Houses, sits on the eastern edge of the Hollow; and the Hill aristocrats have very nearly filled it. Strivers Row, that quiet residential street of houses designed by Stanford White, is in the Hollow, too—138th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues.

Parts of the Hollow, and parts of the Hill, too, for that matter, reveal something else about Harlem. In some of the side

streets the law is an enemy, visible, hateful—a fat cat in a blue uniform, twirling a nightstick.

New York's "Finest" has, on occasion, been so hated, so distrusted here, that if a man was found lying in the street, stabbed, and a policeman leaned over him, a crowd would gather, instantly; and this angry crowd would believe that the *cop* knifed the man.

Fear of the police seems to go hand in hand with wretched housing. And the Hollow offers, in spots, some of the world's most miserable shelter. Many of the old brownstones were long ago turned into rooming houses. The landlord or the lessee found that he could double, triple, quadruple his income if he partitioned the big rooms into cubicles just big enough to hold a bed, a bureau and a broken chair or two. These were offered for rent as "Furnished Rooms For Respectable Tenants."

And so Harlem is also two hundred persons jammed into seventy dingy, vermin-ridden rooms, in old-fashioned brownstones without fire escapes, on Lenox Avenue, and 123rd Street, their halls lightless, their stairs, corridors and lavatories filthy. Harlem is these same two hundred persons paying anywhere from \$1.50 to \$3.75 a week in excess of legal rentals. It is also the fifty-seven tenements in which the New York City Commissioner of Housing and Buildings reported finding 1407 "shocking" violations.

This type of substandard housing predominates in East Harlem, known in real-estate circles as a "blighted area," the kind of section that usually harbors drug vendors and users and becomes a breeding place for gangs.

Yet one small portion of East Harlem, known as Spanish Harlem, now houses nearly half of New York City's newest immigrants—the Puerto Ricans. Thousands of them have come to New York in the last few years, and it is now estimated that 60,000 to 80,000 live in a boxlike area around 110th Street and Madison Avenue.

There is definite hostility between the Puerto Ricans and the Negroes who are in the great majority; and between the Puerto Ricans and the Italians living east of Third Avenue. And so Harlem is also a Puerto Rican child, afraid to use

the swimming pools in the East River playgrounds because, "Those belong to the Italians."

Sometimes these separate, hostile, national groups rub shoulders and, for a moment, create the illusion that Harlem is a melting pot. One of the places in which they meet is known throughout the area as "under the bridge." This is the City Market which runs under the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad bridge, on Park Avenue, from 111th to 116th Street. Here, beneath the railroad tracks, in block-long sheds, the concessionaires, many of them former pushcart vendors, quarrel, bargain, exchange insults with their customers, in Spanish, Italian, Yiddish, and in American ranging from tough East Side New Yorkese to the soft accents of the Old South. Leaning over their stalls, they cry, "Step up, Momma, step up and buy! I got fresh fruit!"

Overhead, the trains of the New York Central and the New Haven thunder across the bridge, taking commuters in and out of the city, carrying passengers to Boston, rushing them to Chicago on the Century.

Few of these travelers are aware that at this point on their journey they are crossing bits of Spain and Italy and the West Indies, as well as characteristic bits of the United States. Much of the merchandise offered for sale under the bridge suggests the homeland of the gesticulating crowds that come here to buy.

The stalls are piled with children's clothing, underwear in vivid colors, earrings, necklaces, and a bewildering variety of food: porgies, whiting, eels, crabs, long-grain Carolina rice, Spanish saffron, chili powder, fresh ginger root, plantains, water cress, olive oil, olives, spaghetti and macaroni, garlic, basil, zucchini, finocchio, white corn meal, collards, mustard greens, black-eyed peas, big hominy and little hominy, spareribs, hot peppers, pimentos, coconuts, pineapples, mangoes.

And so "under the bridge" is Harlem too. So is the Hotel Theresa, on Seventh Avenue, where the visiting firemen stay in three-room suites; and the Schomburg Collection of Negro Arts and Letters at the 135th Street Branch Library, housed in the newest, most modern library building in the city. It is Sydenham Hospital, the only interracial voluntary hospital in

the world; and the American Negro Theater, on 126th Street, which first produced *Anna Lucasta*; and the High School of Music and Art where young musical geniuses and its potential artists receive a high-school education.

The truth is Harlem is as varied and as full of ambivalences as Manhattan itself. For it is also the long-legged girls in the floor show at Small's Paradise, New York's oldest Negro-owned night club; the mass meetings and political rallies at the Golden Gate Ballroom whose barnlike interior serves as Harlem's Hyde Park and Union Square. And it is a pushcart peddler calling, "I got fish, fresh porgy, weakfish. I got fish."

It is a hodgepodge of churches, bars, beauty parlors, harsh orange-red neon signs, poolrooms, candy stores. It is a perspiring soapbox orator shouting from the top of a stepladder at the corner of Seventh Avenue and 125th Street, on a warm night in June; a hot roasted yam purchased from a pushcart and eaten on the street on a cold windy night; and the cricket matches at Van Cortlandt Park. It is the exclusive Comus Club giving a formal dance at the Savoy Ballroom; a woman crying, "Murder!" at three in the morning; a thick slice of ice-cold watermelon, honeysweet, bought on Lenox Avenue on a hot summer day; the barbecued ribs browning on a spit in the window of a Seventh Avenue restaurant. And it is a real gone gal on stage at the Apollo Theater, so gone that the audience stamps and whistles, beating out the rhythm until the Apollo's old walls tremble. It is a furtive man dropping numbers slips into the eager hands of a syndicate; and a calypso singer, at a Trinidadian carnival, in the spring of the year, half-talking, half-singing, "Always marry a woman uglier than you."

Harlem is all these things, yes. But it is primarily George Jackson, American Negro, neither rich nor rags-and-tatters poor. He is a typical New Yorker in that he was born somewhere else.

The chances are that the place he calls home is a small, dark apartment on Seventh Avenue, that broad through street which bisects the heart of Harlem and is neither Hill nor Hollow but a combination of both. If he lives in a large dark apartment then he takes in roomers to help out with the rent. He is always trying to close that ever-widening gap between what

he earns and what he spends for food and clothing and shelter for his family.

His worries and his dissatisfaction with the place in which he lives have turned him into one of Manhattan's most sophisticated voters, crossing and recrossing party lines, voting for issues and men, ignoring party labels.

Rep. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., played an important part in George Jackson's political education. In 1941 Powell announced his candidacy for the City Council from the pulpit of Harlem's 140-year-old Abyssinian Baptist Church. Sunday after Sunday, he stood in the pulpit of his church shouting: "If you want to change Harlem, then you've got to vote, vote, vote! And you've got to register in order to vote. And if your old grandmother can't vote because she can't read, then bring her to Abyssinian and we'll *teach* her to read."

Powell's 14,000 faithful church members trudged up and down the streets of Harlem, ringing doorbells, urging people to "vote for Adam." They rang George Jackson's doorbell too. And Powell was elected to the Council by the third largest majority in the city. Ever since, his congregation has been regarded as one of the most formidable vote-getting machines in New York. When Reverend Powell ran for Congress, George Jackson helped elect him, and re-elect him. This same George Jackson has twice helped to elect Benjamin J. Davis, Jr., a Communist, to the seat that Powell held in the City Council. This hardly meant, however, that our Mr. Jackson had become a member of the Communist Party. It was likely he was pursuing his usual political course and voting for a man, not a political party. The chances are that he voted for Ben Davis because he felt Davis would never sell Harlem down the river.

George Jackson is a man with deep religious convictions. On Sunday mornings, he dons his best suit and goes to church. He walks through quiet streets. The stores are closed; the bars and grills are shut down. He meets other churchgoers: scrubbed kids, women wearing white gloves, men dressed in their best dark suits. One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street, which the day before was overflowing with housewives seeking bargains, with children and sight-seers and beggars, is now as deserted as a village street. The long lines of people waiting to get inside

the Apollo Theater have disappeared. There are so few street noises that the chimes atop Bishop Lawson's Refuge Temple on Seventh Avenue can be heard for blocks.

As George Jackson walks slowly to and from his church, he tries to arrive at an honest conclusion about Harlem. He knows there is too much fear around—fear of the police, and an equally great fear of one's neighbors, as evidenced by special locks on the doors of the apartments and iron bars at the windows that open on fire escapes. He admits, uneasily, that there are too many children playing in the streets, night and day—his own and other people's children. His final conclusion might be contained in one short sentence: "Hawkins is here."

You can hear these same words all over Harlem when a bone-chilling wind sweeps across the town, hiking down from the North, intensifying the damp cold of the Island. On all sides people say, "Hawkins is here," or "Old Man Hawk is out there."

Whether George Jackson lives in the clutter of the Hollow or the comparative luxury of the Hill, he shivers as he looks around him; even on a hot day in August when the heat waves are rising from the sidewalk and the roads go soft and gummy underfoot, he shivers and says, "Hawk is here."

I do not know who Hawkins is or how he became a symbol for cold weather. But he could represent the chilling statistics on Harlem: the high death rate, the incredible population rate per city block. In that sense Old Man Hawkins stays in Harlem, huddled in the doorways, perched on the rooftops.

Can he be run out of this end of town? I think so. One of my favorite stories about the Rev. John Johnson suggests how the job might be done. Reverend Johnson was a police chaplain, the minister of Harlem's St. Martin's Protestant Episcopal Church, and a special advisor to the late Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia on the doings, the troubles, the needs and the demands of the people of Harlem.

The Little Flower, so the story goes, used to send for John Johnson about twice a week; and, leaning back in his chair, fiddling with his black-rimmed spectacles, the mayor would say, "Well, Johnnie, what do they want now?"

Johnnie Johnson always gave the same answer. "More houses, Mr. Mayor. More houses."

They still want more houses, need more houses.

And there is something else involved. Harlem has been studied and analyzed by sociologists, anthropologists, politicians. It has been turned and twisted, to the right and to the left; prettied up and called colorful and exotic; defamed and labeled criminal.

Sometimes its past has been glorified; more often it has been censured. But looked at head on, its thousand faces finally merge into one—the face of a ghetto. In point of time it belongs back in the Middle Ages. Harlem is an anachronism—shameful and unjustifiable, set down in the heart of the biggest, richest city in the world.

Holiday, April 1949