

JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

WRITINGS

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

Along This Way

New York Age Editorials

Selected Essays

Black Manhattan

Selected Poems



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horse." I appreciated the honor and have preserved the commission, but the inducement of being one of a large number of non-equestrian civilians seated for several uncomfortable hours astride an unknown horse was not sufficient to cause me to cut short my stay in San Francisco.

During my stay I made many acquaintances. I was invited to speak in one of the colored churches on a Sunday afternoon, and from that became acquainted with a number of people of my race. The black population was relatively small, but the colored people that I met and visited lived in good homes and appeared to be prosperous. I talked with some of them about race conditions; the consensus of their comment was that San Francisco was the best city in the United States for a Negro. This may, of course, have been in some degree a reflex of prevalent Pacific Coast boosting.

I think the most interesting person I met was Jack Johnson, who was to be, three years later, the champion prize fighter of the world. I saw him first at the theater, where he had come to see Bob and Rosamond. He came frequently to our apartment, and his visits were generally as long as our time permitted, for he was not training. These visits put the idea in my head of improving myself in "the manly art of self-defense"—the manner in which gentlemen used to speak about taking boxing lessons. Jack often boxed with me playfully, like a good-natured big dog warding off the earnest attacks of a small one, but I could never get him to give me any serious instruction. Occasionally, he would bare his stomach to me as a mark and urge me to hit him with all my might. I found it an impossible thing to do; I always involuntarily pulled my punch. It was easy to like Jack Johnson; he is so likable a man, and I liked him particularly well. I was, of course, impressed by his huge but perfect form, his terrible strength, and the supreme ease and grace of his every muscular movement; however, watching his face, sad until he smiled, listening to his soft Southern speech and laughter, and hearing him talk so wistfully about his big chance, yet to come, I found it difficult to think of him as a prize fighter. I had not yet seen a prize fight, but I conceived of the game as a brutal, bloody one, demanding of its exponents courage, stamina, and brute force as well as skill and quick intelligence, and I could hardly figure gentle

Jack Johnson in the rôle. Frederick Douglass had a picture of Peter Jackson in his study, and he used to point to it and say, "Peter is doing a great deal with his fists to solve the Negro question." I think that Jack, even after the reckoning of his big and little failings has been made, may be said to have done his share.

Back in New York, Bob and Rosamond found that they were booked for six weeks at the Palace Theater in London. We were all excitement; and at once decided to make of the engagement a tour rather than just a trip. We planned to spend three months. I went to Columbia for the few last lectures that I could attend, and took an opportunity to consult Brander Matthews about our trip abroad. He suggested that we go first to Paris, and radiate out from there to the surrounding places we wished to visit; then to go up through Belgium and Holland, and come back to Ostend for the trip across the Channel. We followed his suggestions.

From the day I set foot in France, I became aware of the working of a miracle within me. I became aware of a quick readjustment to life and to environment. I recaptured for the first time since childhood the sense of being just a human being. I need not try to analyze this change for my colored readers; they will understand in a flash what took place. For my white readers . . . I am afraid that any analysis will be inadequate, perhaps futile . . . I was suddenly free; free from a sense of impending discomfort, insecurity, danger; free from the conflict within the Man-Negro dualism and the innumerable maneuvers in thought and behavior that it compels; free from the problem of the many obvious or subtle adjustments to a multitude of bans and taboos; free from special scorn, special tolerance, special condescension, special commiseration; free to be merely a man.

On the boat we had made some pleasant acquaintances from among our white compatriots. Of several of these I still have a distinct recollection. One was a West Point cadet; another was a young man going to Paris to study at the *Académie Julien*—the two were relatives, I think, and were traveling with two middle-aged ladies, who were aunts or something of that sort; a third was the fashion plate of the ship, a young man who

seemingly had an inexhaustible supply of clothes, and changed four or five times a day. It was this young man who strongly recommended that we put up in Paris at the Hotel Continental. We knew nothing of Paris hotels, and he appeared to know so much; we followed his advice. When we had registered and been assigned to our rooms, we found ourselves in possession of a suite of two bedrooms, sitting room, and bath, opening on the beautiful court. We were appalled in thinking of what the cost would be. What had they taken us for, South American millionaires or what? Bob and Rosamond were inclined to blame me, the one who knew the most about French, with letting the clerk or manager or whoever he was put it over on us. We decided that we should stay at the Continental a day or two for the sake of appearances, then look for a good *pension*.

When we had finished laying out this plan of action, it was near dinner time. We dressed and started out. As we stepped from our rooms a uniformed attendant standing at the door—waiting, it seemed for our exit—bowed low and said, "Messieurs." We walked toward the elevator, and there stood another uniformed attendant, who bowed low and said, "Messieurs." As we entered the elevator, the operator bowed low and said, "Messieurs." As we passed through the office, there came from various functionaries a chorus of "Messieurs." As we went out of the great gate, an attendant uniformed like a major general saluted and said, "Messieurs." We laughed heartily over all this when we got back to our rooms, and declared that whatever it cost to stay at the Continental, it was worth it.

In coming through the office we had been joined by a young man we had met on the ship. He knew his Paris, and we were glad to be taken in tow. After dinner, we went to see the performance at the Marigny; and after the theater our friend piloted us to Olympia. I was amazed at the size of the place, the size of the orchestra seated in the center, and the great gayety of the whole scene. We found a table and were seated. The next number played by the orchestra was *Under the Bamboo Tree*. We attached no particular importance to that; but when it was followed by *The Congo Love Song*, we took notice and sent our compliments to the leader with the request that he and his men order whatever they wished. Soon four girls

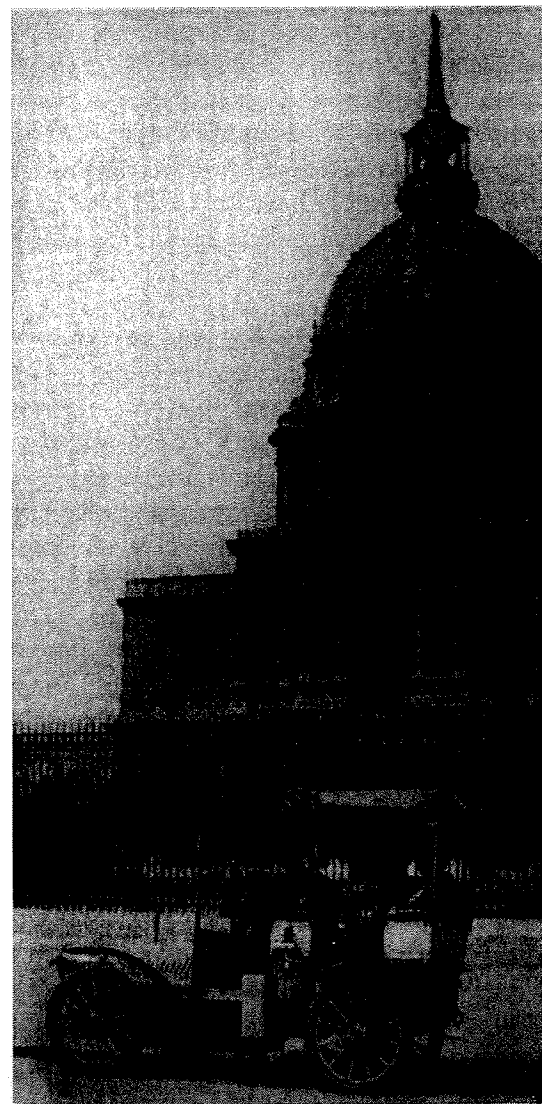
joined our party; only one of them, a German girl with lovely dark eyes, being able to speak any English, and she knew only a few words. Nevertheless, they all chatted with and at us gayly while they sipped their beer or black coffee drunk from tall, thin glasses. All the while we were in Paris we generally ended up each evening at Olympia; and, generally, this same group of girls joined us at our table. I stopped trying to make an interpreter out of the German girl, and took my first plunge into the practical use of French. My ability to talk the language increased in geometrical progression. I had studied French at school, and had taken the Cortina course in New York, but Olympia proved to be the best school for learning French I ever attended.

A few days after our arrival we were invited to a studio party. Our hostess was an American singer at the Paris Opera House; her husband being the secretary, if I remember correctly, of the American Chamber of Commerce in Paris. Among the guests were the West Point cadet and the art student with their aunts. It was through them that we had received the invitation to the party. There were a number of artists of one kind or another present, and each who could did a turn. This party was our sole opportunity for a peep at Paris on the inside, but, in the short time we had, we saw about all that could be seen on the outside. However, we didn't make a business of seeing Paris; we made a pleasure of it. We looked with something like pity on tourists groups working on a schedule, being hustled from point to point, pausing only while their guide repeated his trite and hasty lecture on this building or that painting or the other monument. I was glad that on my first visit I was able to see what I did see leisurely; not forced to gulp it down but able to take the time to note the taste of it. I kept congratulating myself that I had declined the chance to visit Europe the summer after I graduated from Atlanta as a member of a tourist party of colored Baptist preachers. I quickly discovered that "historical points" interested me less than almost anything else; that a good picture and the facts well told were, generally, as satisfying as the actual sight. What I wanted most, and what cannot be gotten vicariously, was impressions from the life eddying round me and streaming by. I wanted to see people, people at every

level, from an élite audience at the Opera House to a group of swearing fish-mongers in the market.

I left Paris with few anticipations. It was true that Bob and Rosamond's engagement was still before us in London, but I feared that so far as seeing things was concerned our trip would follow the steps of an anticlimax. I was relieved to find Brussels *un vrai petit Paris*. The city was in gala attire. We learned that the seventy-fifth anniversary of the independence of Belgium was being celebrated. As soon as we were located, we went out to see the sights. We tried to get a street car; we hailed a dozen or more, only to hear the conductor shout back to us, "*Complet, complet.*" Bob looked at me in his quizzical way and asked, "What are they doing, drawing the color line?" The "*complet*" of the conductors did not, so far as our knowledge went, give a clear explanation; for the cars, according to the American practice, were not full, there was lots of standing room. At last, we secured a cab and drove along through the crowded streets. The Belgian peasants, of whom there were great numbers in the city for the festival, made the most picturesque of all the sights. Our cab driver insisted that we go to see Manneken-Pis. I suppose that every Brussels cabby takes his fares who are strangers to see this famous little statue; we went without any idea of what we were going to see. When we arrived, there were two or three dozen country people looking at the figure. As soon as we stepped out of our cab, we, instead of the Manneken, became the center of their attention. We were at once almost surrounded by them, and they gazed at us respectfully but with undisguised curiosity. Judging that they had never before seen dark people, we stood long enough to enable them to satisfy their eyes; we felt it would be ungracious to rob them of something to tell the folks back home.

We spent our first night in Brussels at the *Palais d'Été*. Nothing on the program particularly interested us until a man in evening clothes stepped before the curtain and made an announcement in French regarding the closing act on the bill. We were confident that the man was colored, but we could not make up our minds whether he was East Indian, West Indian, African, or American. We decided to go to the stage door after the performance and see if we could find out something about him. We met him and found out that he was not only colored,



Paris