

A migrant from Virginia to Harlem, Simple is a memorable character in American literature. Lacking formal education, but richly endowed with intelligence, wit, and pride, he rejoices in the excitement of living while he simultaneously denounces white men who repress Negroes and middle-class Negroes who attempt to escape their racial identity.

As he continued to write for more than thirty years after the Renaissance ended, Hughes, better than any other writer, kept alive the confidence, the laughter, and the zest for living which had characterized the Harlem writers during that exuberant decade. The following selection is characteristic of the manner in which Hughes frequently satirized subjects which other writers have viewed with serious, often excessively serious, concern.

### Fooling Our White Folks

I never was one for pushing the phrase "social equality" to the nth degree. I concur with those persons, white or colored, who wish to reserve the right of inviting whom they choose into the house as friends, or as dinner guests. I do not believe civil rights should encroach on personal privacy or personal associations. But health, wealth, work, the ballot, the armed services, are another matter. Such things should be available to whites and Negroes alike in this American country.

But, because our American whites are stupid in so many ways, racially speaking, and because there are many things in this U.S.A. of ours which Negroes may achieve only by guile, I have great tolerance for persons of color who deliberately set out to fool our white folks. I remember the old slave story of the mistress who would not allow her house servants to have any biscuits. She was so particular on this point that she would cut the biscuits out herself and count them. But the cook went her one better. When the mistress left the kitchen, the cook would trim a narrow rim off every biscuit — with the result that the Negroes had in the end a pan of biscuits, too.

A great many Negroes in America are daily engaged in slyly trimming off the biscuits of race prejudice. Most Negroes feel that bigoted white persons deserve to be cheated and fooled since the way they behave toward us makes no moral sense at all. And many Negroes would be way behind the eight ball had they

not devised surreptitious means of escape. For those who are able to do it, passing for white is, of course, the most common means of escaping color handicaps. Every large Negro section has many residents who pass for white by day, but come home to their various Harlems at night. I know dozens of colored whites in downtown offices or shops. But at night they are colored again.

Then there are those Negroes who go white permanently. This is perhaps a more precarious game than occupational passing during work hours only. Some break down under the strain and go native again or go to pieces. But hundreds of others pass blithely into the third and fourth generations — entirely losing their dusky horizons by intermarriage. There is one quite well-known Negro family in the East with an equally well-known brother out West who has been "white" for forty years, and whose children's children are "white" — now, no doubt, beyond recall. A famous Negro educator told me recently of having lost track of one of his most brilliant students, only to be asked to address a large and wealthy congregation in the Midwest and to find as pastor of this church his long lost colored graduate, now the "white" shepherd of a white flock. The educator was delighted at his former student's ministerial success in fooling our white folks.

The consensus of opinion among Negroes seems to be approval of those who can get by with it. Almost all of us know Negroes of light complexion who, during the war, were hustled through their draft boards so fast that they were unwittingly put into white units and did their service entirely without the humiliations of the military color bar. One young Negro of my acquaintance took his basic training in Mississippi in a white unit, lived with the white boys, went to all the local dances and parties, and had a wonderful time without the army or Rankin being any the wiser. He is back now in the Negro college from which the draft took him. The army policy being stupid anyway, all his family and friends applaud his having so thoroughly fooled our white folks in the deep South.

Negroes are even more pleased when persons of obviously colored complexion succeed in calling white America's bluff. Those young ladies who, in spite of golden or brown complexions, take foreign names and become Hollywood starlets, delight us. And the men who go to Mexico as colored and come back as Spanish to marry wealthy white debutantes gain a great deal of admiration from the bulk of the Negro race. Negroes feel it is good

enough for Nordic debutantes to be thusly fooled. Besides, nothing is too good for those with nerve enough to take it. Anyhow, hasn't the army a strange way of classifying black Puerto Ricans as "white" while quite white American Negroes are put down as "colored"? Simple, our white folks: so why not fool them?

When the Waldorf-Astoria first opened in New York, Negroes were not served in its main dining rooms. In a spirit of fun, a well-known Harlem journalist of definitely colored cast, put on a turban and went into the hotel. He was served with the utmost courtesy. During the war a fine Negro chemist, quite brownskin, applied for a position in a war plant and was given a blank to fill out. He truthfully put down his nationality as American, his race as Negro. He received a letter saying no openings were available, in spite of the fact that every day the firm advertised for chemists. He simply procured another blank. Instead of putting down Negro as his race, he wrote Puerto Rican — and was hired at once. Silly, our white folks!

Some Negroes make sport of them all the time. There is a very dark gentleman in a large Midwestern city where prejudice in public places is rampant, who delights in playing upon white\* gullibility. Being truly African in complexion, he does not pretend to pass for white. He can't. But since many of the restaurants and theatres are owned or managed by foreign-born Americans, or Jewish Americans, he simply passes for whatever the nationality of the management might be at the time. He will tell a Jewish theatre manager who wishes him to sit in the Negro section, "Do you not know that I am a black Hebrew?" Usually the man will be so taken aback that he will say no more. Such sport this patron enjoys more than the films.

He once went into a Greek restaurant at the edge of the Negro section, but which, nevertheless, had a custom of not serving Negroes. He was told he could not eat therein. He said, "but did you never hear of Socrates? He was a black Greek. Many noble Greeks of old were colored. I am descended from such ancient Greeks. What do you mean, I, a black Greek, cannot eat here?" He was served without further ado. Funny, our white folks — even those not yet Americanized! They, too, act right simple sometimes.

In the early days of the war, reading my poems at various U.S.O.'s in the South, one day between Nashville and Chattanooga I went into the buffet section of a parlor car coach for luncheon. The Filipino steward-waiter looked at me askance as I sat down.

He made several trips into the kitchen before he finally came up to me and said, "The cook wants to see you." I said, "Please send the cook out here, then." He did. The cook was a Negro. The cook said, "That Filipino wants me to tell you that you can't eat in here, but I am not going to tell you no such thing. I am going to send your lunch out." He did. I ate.

Another time during the war, before they had those curtained-off tables for colored folk in Southern diners, passing through Alabama, I went to dinner and sat down in the very center of the car. The white steward leaned over and whispered politely in my ear, "Are you Negro or foreign, sir?" I said, "I'm just hungry!" The colored waiters laughed. He went away. And I was served. Sometimes a little nerve will put discrimination to rout. A dignified lady of color one day walked into a white apartment house elevator whose policy was not to take Negroes upstairs except on the servant's lift. The elevator man directed her, "Take the service car, please." She drew herself up to her full height and said, "How dare you?" He did not dare further. He took her up without a word to the white friends on whom she was calling.

A little daring with languages, too, will often go a long way. "Dame un boletto Pullman to Chicago," will get you a berth in Texas when often plain English, "Give me a Pullman ticket to Chicago," will not. Negroes do not always have to change color to fool our white folks. Just change tongues. Upon returning from Europe one summer, a mulatto lady I know decided to live downtown for the winter. So, using her French, she registered at a Fifth Avenue hotel that has never before nor since been known to house a Negro guest. But she stayed there several months before moving back to Harlem. A little, "S'il vous plait" did it. I once knew a West Indian Negro darker than I am who spent two weeks at the Beverly-Wiltshire Hotel in the movie colony simply by registering as a Chinese from Hong Kong.

Our white folks are very easily fooled. Being so simple about race, why shouldn't they be? They have no business being prejudiced with so much democracy around. But since they are prejudiced, there's no harm in fooling the devil, is there? That old mistress in slavery time with plenty of dough, had no business denying her house servants a few biscuits. That they got them in the end served her right. Most colored folks think that as long as white folks remain foolish, prejudiced and racially selfish, they deserve to be fooled. No better for them!