

Chapter One

Third Ward

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### THIRD WARD

Almost half of Newark's forty-four thousand colored citizens are packed and jammed into fifty-six hundredths of a square mile of sound and fury. This is the Third Ward; in area, the seventh smallest of the entire city, with a density of seventy-four persons to an acre. Situated in the center of what is locally called the "Hill" section, the Third Ward is a cross-section of every city's Negro population, replete with bad housing, delinquency, poor health, the various strata of society, big-time rackets and a tremendous church-going population.

This is one of the places where you would have to go (as we did) to see first hand, what is reproduced here on paper. "Fire Sweeps Tenement on West Kinney Street"... "Woman Near Childbirth Evicted"... "Man Found Frozen to Death in Charlton Street Hallway"... "Two Fatally Injured in Broome Street Fight"... "FHA to Survey Third Ward Housing"... "Study Reveals Housing Related to Delinquency Rate". These are actual headlines interpreting Third Ward life.

Or you could climb the nearby Orange mountains on a clear winter night, where the air is clean and the houses close by are set back in spacious grounds. Look out over the lights of the dazzling city beyond. If your eyes were good enough, you could see the Third Ward out there, partly haloed by red neon and sprawling with bright lines that are big important streets. There are even, steady-burning rows of lights from the Prudential Apartments—the first attempt at producing decent homes for the colored in Newark. Those faint, hardly-visible flickers come from kerosene-lit flats. That blue smear of light that seems to vibrate in the air is Skateland at the

foot of Montgomery Street. Three small movie houses that cater almost exclusively to the Negroes in the Third Ward, send up a vari-colored, regulated flash of light. Notice the splotches of darkness here and there.. those are the butcher shops ("Specials on chitlings, hogmaws, souse and cracklings"), grocery stores ("We Cash Relief Checks"), shoe-shine parlors, dry-goods, haberdashery and ten cent stores - all closed for the night.

Perhaps you will leave this rocky perch and go toward the Third Ward, on High Street, Avon or South Orange Avenue. Keep going until you hear the Third Ward. Walk slowly so that you don't miss anything. Walk until you hear the sound of Negro voices...happy, angry, drawled, intense, rich and colorful voices.

Visit a tenement on Morton Street. Climb up some rickety broken stairs. The bannister's a little shaky so be careful how you walk. It's dark in here, but the street light filters in and reveals cracked, sagging walls, the paper-filled cracks in the windows, the mouldy floors that creak as you walk.

You come to the first door. There is no bell; knock softly, there might be a child sleeping on a low cot in the corner of the room. Greet the tall, stooped brown man who says, "Come in. Rest your things on the kitchen table. This is the warmest room to sit in." Make yourself as comfortable as possible in that wobbly chair near the small wood stove. Don't ask questions too fast. Pay no attention to the wail of the sick baby that penetrates the thin walls from the next flat, or to the sporadic bursts of argument that come from the apartment on the floor above. Just listen (as we did) to the story of a steel-worker, waitress, beautician, housewife, chauffeur, on any side of the street.

"I was born in Marianna, Florida, January 23, 1883. I never knew my mother as she died the day after I was born. I was brought up by a step-mother. I went to school to the third year, school was only three months in the winter. The rest of the year I worked on a rented farm. When I was eighteen I went to live in Georgia, and got a job tapping leaves in turpentine fields. They paid ten cents a thousand boxes. After I got the hang of it, I averaged about 10,000 boxes a week.

"During the war I worked in a powder plant in Alabama, and made from thirty to seventy-five dollars a week. After the war there wasn't much to do around and my sister always wrote from Jersey City telling us how well they were getting along up there, so I left the South. When I got to Jersey City I couldn't find work, but after a few months I landed a job at Crucible Steel. After work slacked I was let go and found jobs in different foundries until the depression. Now I'm too old to get another job. They want young men and a man like me hasn't got a chance. For the last two years up to August, I worked on WPA. They laid me off there because of some 18 month rule. Now I'm doing nothing and can't even get on relief because my daughter is working and the investigator says my daughter has to support me."

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"In 1922, my husband heard things were good up here and so, moved us to Newark. He got a job with a cement company here and we did fine until 1931. Business got bad, his salary was <sup>cut</sup> out in half and finally he lost his job. Since that time he's worked on WPA and right now we're on relief."

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"I was born on a farm in Sandville, Georgia, in 1915. I was the daughter of a man who farmed on shares. My parents never seemed able to make ends meet."

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"I was born in Norwood, North Carolina. I left there when I was a kid. I don't need to tell you everything I have done in my life. That ain't your business."

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"I guess I can tell you the little that happened in my life. I was born in Green County, Alabama, October 15, 1866. I was the last of 14 children. Most of the children in our family died soon as they were born or when they were little kids. I think one of the reasons they died so young was because there was no care taken of colored mothers expecting children."

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"I was born on a farm and worked there for many years. I went to school only a few weeks of my life. We worked very hard trying to make big crops. The school ran three months a year; I only went during the three months when the rain and snow were so bad we couldn't work."

"When I was seventeen I started courting. My girl friend was still going to school. We spent our evenings together with her teaching me to read and write. I never could learn arithmetic but reading and writing came easy to me."

"I married early so I started to farm for myself. I had a mule and some farm equipment and got to be the best farmer around there, real prosperous. We had seven children and we all worked hard so we saved some money. Then I got a job in Louisiana as a Right Boss and stayed there from 1902 to 1910. I stayed until the Boll Weevil ran me away. I was growing bales of cotton on my own tract of land but in 1910 the crop fell to 40 bales a year.

"In 1910 I moved to Arkansas. The Boll Weevil didn't get there yet, and I had some pretty good crops. I voted the first time in Arkansas. I was afraid to vote at first, because I never could vote before and I wasn't sure how the Whites would feel having a Negro vote. My first vote was for Harding. The first year Harding was president I lost \$1700, and I was never prosperous after that. I came to Newark about ten years ago from Arkansas. My daughter lived here and talked me into coming to live with her. Her husband still got a pretty good paying job. I sold all my horses and farm implements and come here with that money. I just ain't had any luck since."

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These are the people who live on Broome Street, on Charlton Street, way over on 18th Avenue. Maybe you would like to make some other stops.....look in on other lives.

It might be summer now in the Third Ward with sun-baked streets and sweltering sleepless nights. During the day the streets are crowded and ring with the high-pitched cries of Negro and white children playing games, dodging between the wheels of the heavy rumbling trucks that swerve by.

Street vendors call out their wares and anxiously brush away the flies that hover over the sticks of sugar-cane, slice pineapple and coconut meats stacked on their pushcarts. The smell of brewing beer wafts down from the large brewery on Belmont Avenue. The kosher butcher shops on Prince Street and the many Jewish foods advertised on store windows throughout the ward, give evidence of the vast Jewish population who share the poverty of Third Ward life with Negroes and <sup>with</sup> the foreign-born of many countries.

On the street corners, men in shirt-sleeves stand listlessly watching the passersby. A group of loudly-laughing youths stand in the shade of an awning, to escape the fury of the sun. The younger men look identical, wearing the same exaggerated "English drape" suits with jackets that are broad at the shoulders and taper down just below the hips. Their trousers all look the same, pegged or blousy at the top and narrowing down to small cuffs at the ankle. Their hats are wide-brimmed and show the influence of wild-western magazines. These men feel they are "pegged-back" or dressed at the height of fashion (even in the summer) and they call themselves "hip-kitties" (those who have been initiated into the art of perfect tailoring.) Their shirts are open at the neck, and a few have their neckties drawn so tightly that the knot scarcely shows above the "V" of the jacket.

A scrawny black cat slinks out of an alley to the street, indifferently surveys the scene, yawns, and curls up in a corner of shade. The doors of dusty, dark hallways gap open, their interiors reeking with the accumulated odors of ancient and inadequate plumbing. On Prince Street, the open chicken markets breathe a foul blast in your face as you walk by. An enthusiastic pushcart vendor nearby clutches the arm of a prospective customer. That vacant store on Kinney Street with the dirty red curtains hung unevenly on string, is occupied by a band of Gypsies. One has come out on the street

and engages an overalled Negro man in conversation. He pauses momentarily, regarding her swarthy face warily, then shuffles slowly away, shaking his head.

That brown Negro with the luxuriant bearded growth looks like a figure out of the native quarter of some Oriental city. He is a member of the Moorish-American cult. There are many of these in the Third Ward. The tall, bespectacled youth who walks so straight and stares ahead of him, carries a bible under his arm.

Here is a Father Divine restaurant. Crude letters painted on the window advertise meals for ten, fifteen and twenty-five cents. Going inside and sitting at one of the long tables, you are greeted by a lean, dark woman. "Peace," she says. The menu is written on a black board at the rear of the room and includes Southern dishes, soups and desserts. The food is surprisingly good, the service is quick and no one smokes or talks loudly. A picture of "Father" occupies the head of the table and a tribute of cheap paper flowers are in a vase in front of "His" chair.

There is a two-storied yellow brick building across the street that has an interesting history. It began as a lodge home and years ago dances were held there nightly. With prohibition, its popularity diminished and it was finally closed. It was finally decorated and re-opened as a modern night club after Repeal. Operating several months at a loss, it was again closed. Now it is a Father Divine Kingdom, a place of refuge and prayer for his "angels," conveniently placed opposite the restaurant.

That woman standing near the corner across the street and hissing at Negro and white men in passing cars is a prostitute, called a "mudkicker" in the jargon of the Third Ward. <sup>She wears cheap gaudy clothes.</sup> Her lined face is marked with <sub>A</sub> dissipation. She hails a truck driver who slows down. They talk awhile. She



watches him drive off. Her business will start in earnest, later in the evening with customers of many colors, some in flashy cars from nearby counties, many from "better" sections of the city, some from just around the corner.

Here's a strong-looking attractive Negro woman passing us, carrying a doctor's bag in her hand. Let's follow her down Hillside Place, walking away from the busy center of the ward to sections where trees line the streets and there is quiet. This is still the Third Ward but unfortunately represents less than one eighth of its entire area.

We pass house after house set back from the street in the shade of lawn trees. The woman doctor enters this house on the left. It's a 2½ story frame structure with some recently-applied tan paint, much like the other houses on this street. A terrace with cement steps leads up to the double front doors and there is a rock garden on each side of the steps. A small, trimmed hedge encircles the lawn. You can look up into the windows of the house and suspect that there are parquet floors, glistening and spotless. A bay window juts out to the left, revealing the shiny fat sides of a grand piano that sits nearby. There's a doctor's shingle near the front door. Shall we visit with this woman doctor who has had to overcome the handicap of color in achieving a place for herself in a profession where even white women are scarce?

"I was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1900. I finished the local school and was graduated with honors. I went to Talladega College in Alabama and majored in the physical sciences. When I completed my work there I taught for a year.

"I saved most of the money that I made while teaching and then came North to Women's Medical College of the University of Pennsylvania, to study medicine. I worked hard each summer, trying to earn enough money for tuition the following September. My work was that of waitress, chambermaid, or any of the other jobs that one finds at a summer resort. After a terrific struggle which almost led to a nervous breakdown, I received my MD.

"After graduation, I went to Kansas where I served my internship. When my internship had been completed I came back East. I didn't have enough money to buy equipment and open an office so I worked as a maid with a wealthy family here. After a year, I had saved enough money to open an office, and did so in Philadelphia. I practised in Philadelphia for several years and enjoyed my work, but was not too successful financially. Just at that time, I married and moved to Newark with my husband who is a dentist.

"I've been practising in Newark since, and thoroughly enjoy my work. After I was here for a while, I was appointed to the venereal clinic of the Department of Health. I became interested in the study of syphilis and saw the need of much publicity and education to spread information about syphilis and its treatment to the people. I gave lectures, at churches, schools, and before various organizations.

"At present I am doing graduate work at Columbia University, beside my clinic work and private practise."

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Here's another professional's house down the street. No doubt we will get another story of struggle for education. . . .

"I was born in Winsboro, South Carolina in 1889, one of twelve children. My father, a minister, died when I was fourteen years old and I had to go to work to help support my mother and the other children. My education was neglected through lack of time, and I was thirteen before I reached the third grade. My mother died when I was seventeen and I was filled with a consuming ambition to go to school and make something of myself.

"After leaving the Winsboro school I matriculated at Friendship College in Rockhill, South Carolina, and was graduated in the class of 1909. I later attended Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina and was a four-letter man in athletics. After graduating from Shaw in 1915 I continued my studies at Howard University in Washington, D. C., where I went to the school of dentistry. I was married while still in dental school and derived great inspiration from my wife who was as interested in education as I.

"I was graduated from dental school in 1918 and spent the following year in the United States Army Medical Corps. I've been practicing dentistry in the Third Ward since 1920 and have participated in many phases of community life through my church and through political organizations."

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Let's walk back to the streets of noisy kids, hot dog stands, pool parlors, and cheap-looking brick fronts. Back to the squalor and poverty that is the Third Ward, made vivid and brilliant by the intensity of people's lives, by the desires and strivings for better things. Back to the lowest vibration in the American spectrum.

It's getting darker now, the heat is less oppressive. The tenements empty themselves with people hanging from second and third and fourth story windows, trying to get some air. Tenants can be seen on the roofs and fire-escapes, some have half-naked children in their arms or by their sides. Thick clouds of moths play about the street lights and store windows. Through the open door of a store-front church, you can hear the rhythm of a tambourine and the voices of those in attendance. One wonders at their energetic worship in such heat as this.

Near the gigantic Prudential Apartments, little knots of people talk together on the street or sit on the benches in the court. Glowing ends of cigarettes identify persons here and there. Shiny, well-kept cars stop and start as people leave or come to the Apartments. Sounds of laughter and music come from a party in a first-floor apartment. ¶ Let's stop this man coming toward us now. He's wearing a white apron over his thin summer slacks and his shirt sticks to his back. He's probably a restaurant worker on his way home from a humid greasy kitchen. Perhaps he'll spend a few minutes with us, sipping a cold drink at the soda-fountain across the street.

"I was born in Jamaica, British West Indies, in 1880. A German merchant brought my father to the island when he was a boy of ten. My father was born on the West coast of Africa, known as the Guinea Coast, and had been orphaned by a slave raid. His father and mother had been taken to be sold as slaves to America.

"My father always said that he lived by his wits because he had never had a home or a way of earning a living. This German merchant liked my father so much that he treated him not as a servant but as a son.

"When the merchant died, he left my father his small general store in Jamaica. Although we were British subjects on British soil, my father always had a deep-rooted love for Germany that he probably got from his friend the merchant. I guess I absorbed a lot of love for Germany which I still have now, but to a much lesser degree.

"As a boy I made good marks in school and finished the 9th standard. I intended to go to England for further education when my father became ill. I nursed him and took care of his business on the island instead, until he died four years later.

"After my father's death I married, closed the store, and took my wife to New York for a honeymoon. I was thrilled by this country and decided then and there that this was the place for me and my wife. Here we would live and raise our family, if there would be one. After we got here, I hated to leave this country but I had to go back and settle my business before we left for good.

"I returned and opened a small grocery store in New York. Business was very bad and I almost lost the store several times. I ran into a friend I once knew on the Island who was living in Newark, New Jersey. He had a large restaurant in Newark and persuaded me to move to Jersey and work for him. I've been here ever since."

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We could make one more stop before it gets dark. Let's turn into this sour-smelling tenement with the children scattered over the front stairs, listlessly playing together. Take the first flat on the ground floor....don't keep the occupants talking too long, supper has to be fixed for the children.

"I was born in Hartford, North Carolina, in 1905," says the dark brown woman who looks only 25 years old. "I was the youngest of four children, two boys and two girls. My father died when I was 12 years old. He was very strict with us and it seemed that we went to seed when he died. But, anyway, I managed to finish my first year in high school.

"I fell in love with a fellow who became the father of my first child. He didn't marry me but left town instead. One year later I met another fellow that I went with steady, and after a few months I discovered that I was going to have another baby. This time I went to the law, but discovered that this fellow was already married.

"My reputation at home had become very bad but I only felt that I had hard luck and didn't feel that I was really bad. My mother was good and kind to me during all of my trouble. I got a job in service, sleeping in, at five dollars a week. Most of the five dollars I got, I sent to my mother who was keeping the children.

"One Thursday when I was off I met Jim who was working at the local oil mill. He asked to be my beau and I consented. After going with him for a few months I found that I was to become a mother for the third time.

"He didn't marry me right away but instead came to New Jersey to work in a brick yard. He made very good money there, and after the baby was born he sent for me and we were married. After the first summer, he got a job in Newark running an elevator and I started doing work by the day and cooking special dinners and preparing special dishes for parties. I had learned to prepare these dishes at school, and from my mother who has been a good cook all her life.

"My husband worked as elevator operator for about a year; then the people put self-service elevators in the building. With my husband out of work and with me not making enough to support five of us and with a fourth child on the way, we applied for relief. We were given relief, and my first child came about the same time as our first check.

"I guess we were some of the first people on relief under President Roosevelt because my husband worked under all the systems of work relief.

"He was working when you had to do a certain amount of work to get any relief, he was working when you got paid every night, he worked when you got relief for your food and clothing, and had to work on the side for every thing else. He is still working on WPA.

"During this time I have had four more children which makes eight altogether; Two of them are twins. In August I will have another addition to my family. I hope it's a boy, because my only son says he needs someone to play with.

"At present my mother lives with me. She is a great help because she can do my cooking and take care of the smaller children while I am out working.

"My husband is very faithful about spending his WPA check for the children and the rent. The relief still gives us food. We deny ourselves all of the luxuries and many of the necessities. We try to send the children to school looking nice. We hope they will repay us someday for our sacrifices."

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Out of this tenement, and down the darkening street. Past the roller skating rink and sounds of music and laughing kids. They snatch their fun in greedy mouthfuls but there's not much they can get without paying for it....Past the bar rooms and sounds of nickleodeons and drunken voices....past the dimly lighted rooms and tired, wornout people sitting on front steps.....

These are the sounds and colors that bind the Third Ward together like a gaudily wrapped birthday present, like a jack-in-the-box that surprises you everytime you lift the lid even though you know he's there all the time. There is a nation underneath that lid and it takes more than lifting the cover to understand what makes this little world of the Third Ward go around.

Superficially gaudy, tawdry, humorous or pathetic, there is more to this Third Ward which is represented in every city in this country, and more to its people, than we could guess from the types we have been made familiar with through caricature in literature, the theatre and radio.

Beside the normal slum problems of housing, health, education and recreation, there is segregation with all of its implications, to be considered in understanding the urbanized Negro. By these conditions are developed complex attitudes toward the outside world, and conflicts within the group itself. At the core of these problems is the beginning of a well-defined, if embryonic, culture and a national unity that has arisen from the history of the Negro people.

It is the obligation of those who have had the opportunity to observe these dynamisms in operation, to clarify and present them to others. This is what we have tried to do, so that all persons, Negro and White alike, may better see what lies behind what the Negro thinks, what the Negro says and



what the Negro does. This we have tried to do in the hope that facts will cross the superficial barrier of physical difference to make way for a willingness to understand others.