

THE WRONG MAN

By E. Sopp West

THE LATE WILLIE BRYANT, a celebrity of stage and screen and one-time Mayor of Harlem, is credited with authoring the tale of The Wrong Man. Willie, who was so Caucasian that even his own mother was puzzled about his origin, told this story about himself.

There is no question that the perennial Mayor of Harlem employed great measure of poetic liberty, but we would wager a yard, or two, that he was also strongly influenced by Mr. Fleischman's 'discovery'. However, if Willie had not added the thespian touch, the story would not have been nearly so humorous.

When Willie Bryant first told this story, it was during the times of even darker dark ages in that 'foreign country' located far south of the lines of democracy. It must have been some thirty years ago, well before the time that our federal Interstate Commerce Commission outlawed the Jim Crow laws on public conveyances, when Willie first told "The Wrong Man".

Our man was traveling by train from some place down in "Bam" to some other KKK fortress down thataway. He had to change trains in a town that we will call Hangaspook, Alasippi. The train schedules were just as bad then as they are now. Willie had to spend the night in Hangaspook. His train for No Dogs & No Spooks, Missibama did not leave until eight the following morning. Willie was dog-tired and wanted to cop a few ZZZZZ's, so as to be ready for Freddie when he got to No Dog.

He went across the street from the depot to the town's hotel. The desk clerk told Willie that a convention was in town and that every room was taken. Manufacturers of rope, tar, and wooden crosses were advertising their wares in Hangaspook. The night clerk, sympathetic with Willie's plight, told the Mayor of Harlem, "If you don't mind puttin' up with them Spooks over in Jim Town, you might get a room to rest your weary bones for the night."

WILLIE TOOK A CAB across the railroad tracks to the spook hotel. He had the cabbie wait while he ran in to inquire about a room for the night. The colored desk clerk woke up when Willie asked, for the third time, "Have y'all got a pad where a man can pound his ear for the night?"

The clerk, still half asleep, took a quick gander at the 'white man' standing on the other side of the counter, and answered, "Yea we got plenty of pads, but we ain't got none for white folks. You'll have to go over in white town."

Willie acted on second thought when he saw the clerk curl up in his chair and, quick as you please, fall off into nod land. He didn't even bother to explain to the cat he was a soul brother too. He just walked dejectedly back to the cab, and told the cabbie about his hard luck.

"Boss," said the gabby cabby, "you ain't got no problem to put Mose on. That spook sleeps so hard that it's a wonder he even noticed that you were white."

"Let me take you over to Doc Lynch's drug store and get you fixed up so you can come back here and get yourself a room."

"How you gonna do it?", Willie asked.

"We gonna get some cork and turn you into a spook!

"I dig you, Daddy-o. Now, why didn't I think of that?", Willie retorted.

Doc Lynch, although he was dead against a white man sleeping under the same roof with a bunch of musty spooks, sold our man a jar of indelible jet-black grease paint, and told Willie, "You can come back here in my private quarters and get yourself fixed up." Willie was an old hand at putting on black-face, so, within a matter of only a couple of minutes he was back in the waiting cab.

Willie was a little shook when the cabbie turned around, and in a most unfriendly tone of voice yelled, "N....r, get your black a.. out of this

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cab. You must be one of them trouble-makin' spooks from up north."

After collecting himself, Willie laughed and then said, "Rave on McBeth, I'm the same man that is going to pull the caper on Mose. Let's split for Jim Town, man, I got to get me some ZZZ's."

The cabbie made some remarks about Willie looking more like a spook than a sure enough spook, as he delivered his passenger back to the 'other-side-of-the-tracks' hotel.

Willie had no problem getting a room. Mose aroused himself enough to take our man up to his room, and let him in. Willie laid some bread on Mose, and told him that he had an 8 o'clock train to make, and that he wanted to be awakened at seven so that he would have plenty of time to freshen up before catching his train. "I got you covered, baby," Mose replied, "just call me early-bird."

Willie fell across the bed and was dead asleep before God could get the news. He didn't even bother to take his hat off. He not only slept soundly, but he also slept fast. Mose was doing the same thing downstairs behind the desk.

They both ZZZZZ'ed right through the whole night. At quarter to eight, Mose woke up with a start. He glanced at the clock, and remembering the man in 202 who had to make the 8 o'clock, he raced up to Willie's room, bolted through the door, and shook our man vigorously. "Wake up, man, I goofed. You got to split right now if you 'spect to catch that rattler."

Willie jumped out of bed, grabbed his satchel, and both he and Mose made it out to Mose's car, and they split for the depot, getting there just as the train was starting to ease off.

Willie, with bag in hand, sprinted toward the train, and jumped aboard just as the rattler was picking up speed. Willie had got on the parlor car. He flopped down in one of the chairs to get his wind, and recoup from the frantic experience of racing to make the train.


Within a few minutes the conductor was making his rounds through the car when he saw this black man relaxing in one of the parlor car chairs. He was furious. "Ni...r, whatin'ell are you doin sittin' up here in the white folks car? Get your black a.. back there where you belong."

Willie got a kick out of the conductor's reaction, and he rolled up his sleeve, took out his handkerchief, moistened it with saliva, and began to rub off some of the grease paint, as he started to relate his experience of the previous night. Willie, rubbing furiously, trying to remove the black make-up, was shocked to see that the damn stuff wasn't coming off even a little bit. The stuff was indelible and required a special solvent to remove it.

Willie had quickly recounted his experience right up to the moment he had jumped aboard the moving train.

Seeing that none of the black was rubbing off, and that the conductor was not buying his story, Willie shouted, in a state of profound confusion, "That damn fool, Mose, woke up the wrong man."

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