

CHICK," SHE SAID, looking hard at his closed eyes as if he could see her.

He answered something that sounded like "Hog," his head rolling away from her. Still sleeping, he made himself comfortable by sticking his enormous rear over into her part of the seat.

"Okay," she said, "you jus go on an sleep. I'm going up in the club car and get me a drink."

She got up, stepped over his legs, and walked up the aisle. At the door

noting too that there was one chair but only one between her and the redheaded fellow. She gave him a long look, then the instant he returned it, swept her eyes away to the corner where the other man was sitting. That one was all bulges and sweat — smoking a cigar like Chick always did and reading the *Journal-American*. She wanted to run her eyes back down the length of the car to the Negro barman and the well-padded gal he was sitting next to, but she restrained herself. She knew they were watching her, hitting her with their eyes, then saying something, then hitting her with their eyes again. She let her fox jacket (it was getting kind of sick-looking at the cuffs — this spring was the end) fall back off her hunched shoulders. Out of her peeling red leather bag she brought a cigarette — one that had slipped from the pack and gotten a little crushed among her compact, comb and letters.

"Thank you," she said as she saw the lighted match coming toward her. Her neighbor said, "Wait a minute, we missed it," as the match went out; he struck another. Her thin upper lip slid over her teeth into her so-nice-of-you-to-applaud smile. One tooth on the left, hidden unless she smiled all-out like this, was gold, the payoff in a smile that was like a badge shown briefly: she didn't want him or anybody else to think she was trying to start a con-

PASSING STAR

A STORY

ROBERT LOWRY

she stopped and looked back down the car at him, batting her mascaraed eyelashes several times before pivoting on her high left heel and pulling at the doorhandle. Let him snore away there if he wants to, she thought as she crossed the grinding intersection of the cars. Anybody put as much away as him before we got on *ought* to sleep it off.

The club car was practically empty. She selected a seat halfway down, careful to take the chair with the standing ashtray beside it, and

versation or something because she didn't *have* to start no conversations.

"Did you get on at Penn Station too?" he asked.

She raised the penciled lines she replaced her shaved eyebrows with and glanced suspiciously at him. "That's right," she said. Unexpectedly she yawned, forgetting that she ought to cover it with her hand.

"Too early to get tired," he said. "I mean, if you're going all the way to Cincinnati."

"That's where I'm goin'." She noticed that his eyes had darted suddenly to the corner where the barman and his buxom girl friend were still shooting sly glances this way, and panic rising in her chest made her say something quick to draw his attention back: "But trains don't bother me much. I guess I ought to be used to them by now."

"You travel a lot?"

She didn't know why his question brought him into focus for the first time. He looked pretty regular — redheaded, with a thin, high-cheekboned face and some very dim freckles across a nose that was too short. She liked his eyes, that was it, even though they did make her uncomfortable. He was dressed kind of sloppy — gray sports jacket, wrinkled gray wool trousers, and gum-soled shoes that could stand a shine. She answered: "I'm always travelin'. That's my business."

"You mean traveling is *part* of your business?" he asked. "Or you

mean it's none of *my* business?"

"I'm an artist." She squinted her eyes and showed him the back of her head — feeling that kind of tightness there at the hairline on her forehead. It had been just to tell somebody this that she'd left Chick to his snoring and come up to the club car. *I'm an artist.*

"How about a drink?"

She turned back to him and saw that he'd motioned the barman over. The barman had an extra big grin on his shiny dark face — not only the four-inch one the Pennsylvania Railroad required of him, but a dividend of his own that she felt was meant for her.

"I drink scotch and soda," she said.

"Make that one bourbon-and-soda and one scotch-and-soda." He looked steadily at her after the barman went away. She saw the barman's girl friend smile as the barman went by her and into the bar alcove. "What kind of an artist do you mean?" the man asked. "Painter?"

"No," she said, and felt her forehead tighten again. "Musician."

"Yeah?" His eyes dropped momentarily to the soiled low-cut dress she was wearing. Hell, he didn't expect her to wear something good to sit up all night on the train, did he? "Classical stuff, you mean? Or popular?"

"I do classical," she said defensively. Then added: "But I sing

popular for a livin." She eyed him hard and direct for a minute, squinting a little, before she said, "I'm Kit-Kat Williams."

Those speckled, interested green eyes set wide apart in his bony face showed no recognition whatever. "My name is Jack Gibbons."

WHAT WAS he trying to pull? She reached into her bag and brought out a little wallet. Opening it, she saw her name typed out under the shiny cellophane of the identification tag. "You don't believe I'm Kit-Kat Williams, do you? Well, there it is, you can see for yourself."

He reached across the empty chair between them and held the wallet long enough to read the name Catherine "Kit-Kat" Williams. "I'm not very much up on musical things," he said. "I guess I ought to recognize your name, but I don't."

"Well, that's no skin off my nose." She snapped the bag shut on her wallet and put it on the chair between them — just so he wouldn't try to move over. Then to avoid him she tilted up her head to look at the operation the barman was performing in front of them — taking the caps off the miniature bottles of whiskey and pouring the contents into their glasses. The barman wasn't pulling any of his funny business now that he was standing so close to her, or she'd have put him in his place good and proper. But his woman was staring over.

It was the act of paying that made her relent toward Jack Gibbons a little — after all he *was* laying out a buck more than he'd have had to otherwise. But he spoiled all her better feelings immediately by saying, "Are you a blues singer like Billie Holliday?"

Could he tell? Did that mean he could tell? The barman was keeping his eyes to himself, but she knew he'd heard the question and was liking it. She watched his dark-skinned hand pick up the change Jack Gibbons had left in the silver saucer; she watched his back retreating up the aisle toward his girl friend.

"Billie Holliday!" she said. "I'm not in that class, thank you!"

"What's the matter with Billie Holliday?" He drank. "I've got two of her albums — I think she's really good."

So she switched her prejudice. "I jus don't like her style of singing," she said, and punched out her cigarette in the big ashtray by her knee. "Did you ever hear a song called *Moanin' Baby*?"

"You mean by Billie Holliday?"

"Billie Holliday!" She squinted her eyes and looked away up the car angrily. "It's *my* song — I wrote it, words and music both. It was on the Hit Parade in 1939. You know how I come to name it *Moanin' Baby*?"

"No," he said, "I never even heard —"

"I was in Paris playin at the Boeuf

Sur Le Toit and Ben Hecht came in one night, so I had this tune in my head and I didn't have any words yet. So I sat at his table and hummed this tune for him and asked him if he could suggest any words for a title or somethin'. He thought a minute and suggested *Moanin' Baby*, and that's what I called it. It was on the Hit Parade in 1939."

"I guess I missed it," Jack Gibbons said. "Matter of fact, I only got interested in jazz lately. What's your style of singing?"

"My own," Kit-Kat said. "I do everything the way it comes natural to me."

"I guess that's the best way. . . . You play your own accompaniment?"

"I'm an all-round entertainer," Kit-Kat said. "I can sing with a band or I can play my own piano." She thought a moment before she added a little hopefully, "I bet you don't even know who Ben Hecht is, do you?"

"Sure — he's an author. I've read some of his stuff."

"Yeah?" She looked away, let the silence drag out some. Finally she turned and asked, "You don't know anything about Cincinnati, do you?"

At that moment she heard the barman and his girl bust out in giggles, but she didn't take her eyes from his.

"I ought to," Jack said. "I was born and raised there."

She'd go down there and scratch

out a couple of nigger eyes if she thought that bitch was laughing about her. "I was jus wonderin if you could inform me about a place called The Little Rooster. That's where I'm booked to play."

"The Little Rooster," Jack said. "I've been there a couple times — before the war. If it's the one I'm thinking of out on Reading Road."

"What kind of a place is it?"

"Small," he said, and she felt herself blink. "It's a nice enough place. You know — a cocktail lounge. They didn't have any entertainment the couple times I was there. Just a juke box."

She shook her glass, made the ice clinkle. "I don't know what I'm gettin into this trip. Al's Chicago office booked it, so he couldn't tell me anything about it. All I know is I got confirmation. I don't go on any trip like this less I get confirmation?"

"Who's Al?"

"My agent — Al Klein. You ought to know *him*, he's one of the biggest theatrical agents in the country. When he says do something, I do it." The car began to rock drunkenly on a rough piece of track. "I had enough of agents before I got him; now I'm satisfied. You know I don't even have to pay for my ticket? He's got an account with the Pennsylvania Railroad — *every* railroad. So all I got to do is ask for my ticket and tell them to put it on his account. How do you like that?"

She thought his not answering showed scepticism, so she added, "Course he's supposed to hand me the bill for it at the end of the year. Only sometimes he forgets part of it. How do you like that?"

"Must be a pretty generous guy," he mumbled, and drank up.

"That's what he is, a *real* generous guy." The neck of her dress had slipped down to expose the top of her brassiere; she pulled it up. "He says this is going to be my big year. Columbia told him they might re-issue both my albums again this summer. And Capitol keeps callin him up trying to sign me. Only he says we got plenty of time to be particular."

"How about another drink?" Jack asked.

"I still got some." But she thought: I'll show that black number down there which one of us is gettin the drinks bought, and added quickly: "On the other hand, I guess I'll be needin one by the time he brings them."

THE BARMAN got up out of this comfortable seat in the corner when he saw Jack's two up-pointed fingers. After the drinks had come, Kit-Kat said, "What are you in?"

"What?"

"What do you do for a livin'?"

"For a living," he said, "I go to school."

She stared hard at him. Was he trying to make fun of somebody?

"I don't get it," she said. "If you think —"

"I'm going to art school on the G. I. Bill of Rights. Ninety bucks a month — so I call it going to school for a living."

"You a painter then?"

"Yeah. I hope so."

She considered him, squinting. Didn't look like no painter to her. She wondered maybe he was trying to say he was a painter because she'd proved who she was. Kit-Kat Williams. An artist. So now he got the idea to be an artist too. More likely a clerk or something like that.

"You were a soldier then, I guess," she said.

"Almost four years."

"You been abroad — Paris or London?"

"Both."

"I been in both too. *Before* the war. I played the Boeuf Sur Le Toit in Paris — you ever hear of that? The Ivy Club in London."

"I heard Josephine Baker in Africa," he said. "You know her?"

"How would I know anybody like that?" she demanded indignantly. A quick glance at the barman and his girl showed her they weren't paying attention. "Matter of fact I do know her slightly — professionally, I mean. One night at the Boeuf she came in to catch my act and thought she was pretty smart — talked all the way through it. You know what I did? I stopped right in the middle of a song and stood up and told her

to get out since she couldn't keep quiet. How do you like that?"

"Did she get out?"

"Sure she got out. I just stood there — what else could she do? Her and her friends both. I don't have to take anything like that from her kind." Her voice had grown shrill; now she added more calmly: "She can't sing anyhow. She's through."

"I thought she was pretty good," Jack said.

"She's through," Kit-Kat Williams said. "She was through years ago. She never did have a voice."

"I'd like to hear you," he said. "When are you starting at The Little Rooster?"

"Tonight."

"Tonight? How are you going to do that when you're on the train? Oh, you mean because it's after twelve." He glanced at his wrist-watch. "But it's only eleven-thirty."

"Okay then, tomorrow night." She liked to catch people on that gag when it was after midnight. "Sure thing, you come over and catch my act. I don't know anything about when I go on, but you'll find it in the paper. They *better* put it in the paper."

"Anyhow I can call up," he said. "Maybe we could have a drink together after you're through."

"May-be," she said, and gave him her profile, the way people in Paris did. "Then when you come back to New York you can see me at the

Polkadot Club. You know where that is? Fulton Street in Brooklyn."

"I'll look it up," he said.

She wrinkled her forehead and put on a tight, amused face for him. "You thought I was kiddin when I said I was Kit-Kat Williams, didn't you? Maybe you still think I'm kiddin."

"Oh no," he said. But he seemed a little uncomfortable, downing his drink. A big white man like him uncomfortable! And trying to tie her up with people like Holliday and Josephine Baker! She guessed she'd straightened him out on that subject; she could always work the trick when she wanted to. Two things gave her a big bitter thrill: telling people her name, Kit-Kat Williams, and letting them know which side of the line she was on.

"If you're from Cincinnati," she said, reaching into her bag for a cigarette and waiting for his light, "maybe you heard me when I got my start. I started singing on WFBE — it was called then. Now it's WCPO. Didn't you ever hear me?"

"I probably did, I don't remember. But then your home's in Cincinnati too, isn't it?"

"My home's in Norwood — or used to be. My mother moved up to New York a long, long time ago when I first got popular, and I haven't been back in over ten years. I don't know anybody there. You

know what I mean? I keep strickly to myself."

"How come you don't know The Little Rooster then, if you're from Norwood?"

She hesitated, sensing that the answer was the give-away; and while she did, a funny look came on his face. He knew! The bastard was guessing something! She answered quick: "Look, you don't think my mother was letting me go round to night clubs when I was only thirteen, do you? That's when I started singing on the radio — thirteen years old."

"Pretty young," he said, and was going to say something else when the conductor came in. This was a new conductor. Must have got on at that last stop, Altoona. He took a seat two chairs away from the fat man on the other side, glanced at Kit-Kat and her companion, then began checking over his tickets. But he didn't ask for anybody's ticket receipts; he'd probably seen them stuck in the seats.

WASN'T HE awful young for a conductor? The one out of New York had been old as Methuselah. Now he looked at her again, giving her the old eye. Lady-killing white man sizing her up; heavy lips and wicked around the eyes. But there was one answer he wasn't getting, she could tell that.

"Could you inform me what time we get into Cincinnati?"

He cracked his face in a smile, as if he thought she was joking. His eyes on their way down to look at the watch he took from his vest pocket brushed over her skinny legs. "We're twenty minutes late now," he said, "but you'll probably make up the time out of Pittsburgh and get there on schedule. Eight-thirty."

"Train time or their time?"

"Train time," he said. "I don't know anything about their time."

"Is train time the same as Cincinnati time?" she asked Jack Gibbons.

"I haven't been back there in three years," he said. "I seem to remember something about Day-light Savings."

"You're pretty much in a hurry to get there, aren't you?" the conductor asked. He was trying to be cute — staring at her low neck. She knew where she'd stand with him if he weren't on duty. Maybe even if he was. She felt a cold trill of laughter run all through her — the same funny feeling she'd had playing for the first time before a big white audience with the spotlight on her. Like a cruel joke or something. But not on her.

"No, I'm very comfortable in your train," she answered. "Long as I can sit here in the club car. Is it open all night?"

"He goes to bed around twelve," the conductor said, indicating the negro barman with his thumb.

"That means there won't be any more drinks, but you can sit here as long as you want. Somebody might take your seat at Pittsburgh if you don't watch out."

"I ain't worried —" She checked herself for fear he'd ask why.

"Well, you can sit here and talk to me then," the conductor said. "I'll point out the spots of interest."

His manner was so fresh — he didn't seem to care if he *was* on duty.

"You stay on all the way to Cincinnati?" she asked.

"No. I'm through at Pittsburgh. About three hours from now."

"I wish I had a job like that," she said, feeling somehow compelled to force the conversation. "Just take a little ride on the train and that's that."

"Yeah? What do you do?"

She felt the kind of tightness at her hairline. "I'm an artist," she said.

"Yeah?" His eyes went from hers to Jack Gibbons' and back to hers again. She felt he'd done that to see whether Jack Gibbons was her escort or just somebody on the same train; he ought to be able to tell by the vacant chair between them. "Well, I'm an artist too." He gave Jack Gibbons his cracked smile. "I painted my house last week!"

"Anybody want any more drinks," the barman said, "I'm closin up the bar."

"How about it?" Jack Gibbons

asked.

"No, thank you," she said. "I got most of my glass here."

The fat man up in the corner raised his head from his newspaper as if brought back from a long way off. Then he folded the paper neatly, struggled up to a standing position, dusted something off his right pants leg with a fat flipper of a hand, and lumbered out of the car — leaving just the five of them. The barman was wiping off a glass while his girl friend stared soberly out the window opposite her, out into the night. She sat like that until he was almost finished with his duties. Then she stood up, pulled her dress down out of the crease under the bulge of her belly, and yawned elaborately. Giving the barman a big personality smile, she went up the aisle and out of the car. After a few more useless wipes with his cloth, he folded it, placed it neatly on a shelf under the bar, and followed her. The train lurched as he reached the short corridor that led to the door.

"G'night, everybody," he said, opening the door.

He got silence for an answer. The door closed.

"I guess him and Aunt Jemima are fixing to make some pancakes tonight," the conductor said, looking at Jack.

Kit-Kat heard herself laugh — high and hysterical, almost like a scream. Jack Gibbons looked at her. The conductor looked at her. She

started to reach into her bag for a cigarette but stopped herself. Had to get out of here, all the excitement had worn off and she was starting to act funny. Would Chick be awake? He could sleep for ten hours solid after he'd hung one on. Her "manager." "Mistuh Chick, my manager." Sure he was her "manager": didn't he manage to spend every penny she picked up on these lousy little two-week dates she was getting since the war? She'd never get rid of him less she bought him off. Please God, she thought suddenly, let Capitol Records sign me for a new album. Please God, let Al Klein have the contract all set for me when I get back in two weeks. Let him get me my old spot at Café Society too . . . the Blue Angel. . . . And let me get rid of Chick.

She'd been thinking so hard she must have missed Jack Gibbons' reply. But glancing at him she realized he hadn't answered — the conductor had been left in silence after his little remark. She started to feel grateful, then checked herself. Because of me! she thought. That's why the son of a bitch didn't answer, because of me!

She stood up. "Guess I'll go on back and get some rest." Their eyes were square on her. "Eight-thirty can't come around any too soon to suit me." She hated them both. Hated Jack Gibbons most, because he knew. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Jack Gibbons said. The conductor was looking at her. He smiled.

She was almost to the door, when it opened and there was Chick. His shirt-tail was half out, his bloated face was like a fat stewed prune. She opened her mouth to say something when the conductor spoke behind her.

"The bar's closed," the conductor said.

"I came for my wife," Chick said thickly, not taking his eyes from hers. "I'm not interested in no bar."

"Your *wife*?" the conductor said. She heard him stand up. "This woman your *wife*?"

She'd fooled *him*! She'd fooled *him* good and proper! She might not have fooled Jack Gibbons, but she'd fooled that conductor all right! Her nostrils strained big, her throat tensed.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Chick said, paying no attention to the conductor. Nasty with sleep and drink — he had her by the wrist and was pulling her along the short corridor that led to the door.

"His wife!" she could hear the conductor saying to Jack Gibbons.

She wanted to hear Jack Gibbons' answer, but the door closed on his first word. As they went through the darkened car and dropped safely into their seats, an hysterical elation lifted her from the depths to which she'd fallen, and all the tightness in her forehead was gone.

Cucking with Gas

or, Sportsmen, Arise!

DR. PUTZI SZCZERBOWSKI, LL.D.M.

What we need is a new slant, a new reaction to all this, we told ourselves last month, waving our arm out over the American scene. We can't see the trees for the ~~unbark~~. So we decided to send our visiting culture critic, Dr. Szczerbowski (famous for his critique of Miss Truman's Voice, Feb. '50) out to cover the sports show at Grand Central Palace in New York City. This is what he came back with.

EVER SINCE MY adolescent days at my *Hochschule* in Berlin, the picture of the "sporting" American has remained with me. The healthy, enviable, extrovert Yankee, in his generously-cut knickerbockers, torn sweater and pearl-gray derby, who devotes himself to the sulky, or better, the horse race with the highest *Idealismus* — the way a writer devotes himself to bookmaking — forgetting family and home and all the problems of the hearthside in the

pursuit of his pastime and the enchanted hours among his companions in the sporting-house . . . this man will always have more meaning for me than even Calvin Coolidge of whom I used to cherish a woodcut-likeness on the wall of my *Gymnasium*, right next to a pair of boxing-gloves which unfortunately I never had the opportunity to use.

I see I have just written a typically German sentence. In German the action so often comes at the end, and to me that is not only bad, it is ridiculous. I must write like an American, for it is in spite of my being here no longer than six months that I American am, since my mother was the only fool-bludded Shawnee in Saxony, having left a touring Medical Show to marry my father and it is from her that I inherit my American citizenship as well as my taste for cigars, my right to the title Princess