

THE WAY IT IS

Wilbur's in the Army, Mary can't get a job. "If it wasn't so serious, I'd break down and laugh," says Mrs. Jackson. Ralph Ellison's profile of Harlem.



RALPH ELLISON wanted to continue his study of music, which he began as a youngster. He had knocked around as a waiter, elevator boy, dental assistant, after finishing high school in Oklahoma City, where he was born twenty-eight years ago. He finally wound up in New York where he met Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. Since then, he's been writing stories and literary criticism for "Direction," "New Masses," and the "Negro World." O'Brien's "Best American Short Stories, 1941" mentioned his work. Ellison is now managing editor of the "Negro Quarterly."

THE boy looked at me through the cracked door and stood staring with his large eyes until his mother came and invited me in. It was an average Harlem apartment, cool now with the shift in the fall weather. The room was clean and furnished with the old-fashioned furniture found so often up our way, two old upholstered chairs and a divan upon a faded blue and red rug. It was painfully clean, and the furniture crowded the narrow room.

"Sit right there, sir," the woman said. "It's where Wilbur use to sit before he went to camp, its pretty comfortable."

I watched her ease herself tiredly upon the divan, the light from the large red lamp reflected upon her face from the top of a mirrored side table.

She must have been fifty, her hair slightly graying. The portrait of a young soldier smiled back from the top of a radio cabinet beside her.

She pointed: "That's my boy Wilbur right there," she said proudly. "He's a sergeant."

"Wilbur's got a medal for shooting so good," the boy said.

"You just be quiet and go eat your supper," she said. "All you can think about is guns and shooting." She spoke with the harsh tenderness so often used by Negro mothers.

The boy went, reluctantly opening the door. The odor of peas and rice and pork chops drifted through.

"Who was it, Tommy?" shrilled a voice on the other side.

"You two be quiet in there and eat your supper now," Mrs. Jackson called. "Them two just keeps my hands full. They just get into something *all* the time. I was coming up the street the other day and like to got the fright of my life. There was Tommy hanging on the back of a streetcar! But didn't I tan his bottom! I bet he won't even *look* at a

streetcar for a long, long time. It ain't really that he's a *bad* child, it's just that he tries to do what he sees the other boys do. I wanted to send both him and his sister away to camp for the summer, but things was so tight this year that I couldn't do it. Raising kids in Harlem nowadays is more than a notion."

As is true so often in Negro American life, Mrs. Jackson, the mother, is the head of her family. Her husband had died several years ago; the smaller children were babies. She had kept going by doing domestic work and had kept the family together with the help of the older boy.

There is a quiet courage about Mrs. Jackson. And yet, now and then the clenching and unclenching of her work-hardened fingers betray an anxiety that does not register in her face. I offer to wait until after she has eaten, but she says no, that she is too tired right now and she would rather talk than eat.

"You finding the writing business any better since the war?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not," I said.

"Is that so? Well, I don't know nothing about the writing business. I just know that don't many colored go in for it. But I guess like everything else, some folks is doing good while others ain't. The other day I was over on 126th Street and saw them dispossessing a lawyer! Yes, sir, it was like back in the thirties. Things piled all over the sidewalk, the Negroes a-hanging out of the windows, and the poor man rushing around trying to get his stuff off the streets before it got dark, and everything."

I remembered the incident myself, having passed through the street that afternoon. Files, chest of drawers, bedsteads, tables, and barrels had been piled along the sidewalk; with pink, blue, and white mattresses and bundles of table linen and bed clothing piled on top. And the crowd had been as she described: some indignant, some curious, and all talking in subdued tones so as not to offend the evicted family. Law books had been piled upon the sidewalk near where a black and white kitten—and these are no writer's details—played games with itself in the coils of an upright bed springs. I told her I had seen the incident.

"Lord," she said. "And did you see all those law books he had? Looks like to me that anybody with all those books of law oughtn't to never get dispossessed."

"I was dispossessed, myself, back in thirty-seven, when we were all out of work. And they threatened me once since Wilbur's been in the Army, but I stood up for my rights and when the government sent the check we pulled through. Anybody's liable to get dispossessed though." She said it defensively.

"Just how do you find it otherwise?" I asked.

"Things is mighty tight, son. . . . You'll have to excuse me for calling you 'son,' because I suspect you must be just about Wilbur's age."

She sat back abruptly. "How come you not in the Army?" she asked.

"I've a wife and dependents," I said.

"I see." She pondered. "Wilbur would have got married too, but he was helping me with the kids."

"That's the way it goes," I said.

"Things is tight," she said again. "With food so high and everything I sometimes don't know what's going to happen. Then too, with Wilbur in the Army we naturally misses the money he use to bring in."

She regarded me shrewdly, "So you want to know about how we're doing? Don't you live in Harlem?"

"Oh, yes, but I want to know what *you* think about it."

"So's you can write it up?"

"Some of it, sure. But I won't use your name."

"Oh I don't care bout that. I *want* them to know how I feel."

SHE became silent. Then, "You didn't tell me where you live, you know," she said cagily. I had to laugh and she laughed too.

"I live up near Amsterdam Avenue," I said.

"You telling me the truth?"

"Honest."

"And is your place a nice one?"

"Just average. You know how they go," I said.

"I bet you live up there on Sugar Hill."

"Not me," I said.

"And you're sure you're not one of these investigators?"

"Of course not."

"I bet you are too," she smiled.

I shook my head and she laughed.

"They always starting something new," she said. "You can't keep up with them."

But now she seemed reassured and settled down to talk, her hands clasped loosely in her lap against the checkered design of her dress.

"Well we're carrying on somehow. I'm still working and I manage to keep the younguns in school, and I pays the rent too. I guess maybe it would be a little better if the government would send the checks on time. . . ."

She paused and pointed across the room to the picture of a young woman:

"And it would be even better if Mary, that's my next oldest after Wilbur—if she could get some of that defense training so she could get a job what pays decent money. But don't look like she's going to get anything. She was out

to the Western Electric plant in Kearny, New Jersey, the other day and they give her some kind of test, but that was the end of that."

"Did she pass the test?" I asked.

"Sure she passed. But they just put her name down on a card and told her they would keep her in mind. They always do that. They ask her a lot of questions, then they want to know if she ever had any experience in running machines and when she says she ain't, they just take down her name. Now where is a colored girl going to get any experience in running all these kinds of machines they never even seen before?"

When I could not answer she threw up her hands.

"Well, there you have it, they got you any which way you turn. A few gets jobs, but most don't."

"Things are much better outside of New York," I said.

"So I hear," she said. "Guess if I was younger I'd take the kids and move to Jersey or up to Connecticut where I hear there's some jobs for colored. Or even down South. Only I keep hearing about the trouble they're having down there. And I don't want the kids to grow up down there nohow. Had enough of that when I was a kid..."

"Have any of your friends gotten work through the FEPC?"

She thought for a moment.

"No, son. It seems to me that that com-

mittee is doing something everywhere but here in New York. Maybe that's why it's so bad for us—and you know it's bad cause you're colored yourself."

As I heard the clatter of dishes coming from the kitchen, her face suddenly assumed an outraged expression.

"Now you take my sister's boy, William. God bless his poor soul. William went to the trade schools and learned all about machines. He got so he could take any kind of machine apart and fix it and put it together again. He was machine crazy! But he was a smart boy and a good boy. He got good marks in school too. But when he went to get a job in one of those factories where they make war machines of some kind, they wouldn't take him cause he was colored—and they told him so!"

She paused for breath, a red flush dyeing her skin. The tinted portrait of a brown mother holding a brown, shiny-haired baby posed madonna-like from a calendar above her head.

"Well, when they wouldn't take him some of the folks over to the church told him to take his case to the FEPC, and he did. But they had so many cases and it took so long that William got discouraged and joined up in the Merchant Marine. That poor boy was just so disgusted that he said that he would have enlisted in the Army, only that his mamma's got two little ones like I have. So he went out on that boat cause it paid good

money and a good bonus. It was really good money and he helped his mamma a heap, but it didn't last long before one of those submarines sunk the boat."

HER eyes strayed to the window, where a line of potted plants crowded the sill; a profusion of green things, slowly becoming silhouettes in the fading light. Snake plants, English ivy, and others, a potato plant in a glass jar, its vines twining around a cross of wood and its thousand thread-fine roots pushing hungrily against the wall of glass. A single red bloom pushed above the rest, and in one corner a corn plant threatened to touch the ceiling from the floor with its blade-like leaves.

The light was fading and her voice had slipped into the intense detachment of recent grief. "It was just about four months yesterday," she said. "He was such a fine boy. Everybody liked William."

She shook her head silently, her fingers gripping her folded arms as she swallowed tensely.

"It hurts to think about it," she said, getting up and snapping on another light, revealing a child's airplane model beneath the table. "Well, the folks from his union is being very nice to my sister, the whites as well as the colored. And you know," she added, leaning toward me, "it really makes you feel a little better when they come round—the whites ones, I mean—and really tries to help.



Stalingrad:

*"But Mother, Don't
We Have Allies?"*

From the *People's Voice*, New York Negro newspaper

Not like some of these ole relief investigators who come in wanting to run your life for you, but really like they interested in you. Something like colored folks in a way. We use to get after William for being with white folks so much, but these sure have shown themselves to be real friends."

She stared at me as though it was a fact she deeply feared to accept.

"Some of them is going to try and see that my sister gets some sort of defense work. But what I'm trying to tell you is that it's a sin and a shame that a fine boy like William had to go fooling round on them ships when ever since he was a little ole boy he'd been crazy bout machines."

"But don't you think that the Merchant Marine is helping to win the war?" I said. "It takes brave men to go out there, and they've done a lot."

"Sure they have," she said. "Sure they have. But I'm not talking about that. Anybody could do what they had him doing on that boat. Anybody can wait tables who's got sense enough to keep his fingernails clean! Waiting tables, when he could *make* things on a machine!"

"You see that radio there? Well William made that radio. It ain't no store set, no sir, even though it looks like one. William made it for the kids. Made everything but the cabinet, and you can hear way down to Cuba and Mexico with it. And to think of that boy! Oh, it makes me so mad I don't know what to do! He ought to be here right now helping his mamma and lil brother and sister. But what can you do? You educated, son, you one of our educated Negroes that's been to college and everything. Now you tell me, *what can we do?*" She paused. "I'm a colored woman, and colored women can take it. I can hit the chillies to the subway every morning and stand in the white folk's kitchen all day long, but so much is happening in the world that I don't know which way to turn. First it's my sister's boy and then they sends my own boy down to Fort Bragg. I tells you I'm even afraid to open Wilbur's letters, some of the things he tells is so awful. I'm even afraid to open letters that the *government* sends sometimes about his insurance or something like that, cause I'm afraid it might be a message that Wilbur's been beaten up or killed by some of those white folks down there. Then I gets so mad I don't know what to do. I use to pray, but praying don't do no good. And too, like the union folks was telling us when we was so broken up about William, we got to fight the big Hitler over yonder even with all the little Hitlers over here. I wish they'd hurry up and send Wilbur on out of the country cause then maybe my mind would know some ease. Lord!" she sighed, "if it wasn't so serious I'd break down and laugh at my ownself."

She smiled now and the tension eased from her face and she leaned back against the divan and laughed. Then she became serious again.

"But, son, you really can't laugh about it. Not honestly laugh like you can about some

things. It reminds me of that crazy man what's always running up and down the streets up here. You know, the one who's always holler-ing at the cars and making out like he's throwing bombs?"

"Of course, I've seen him often," I said.

"Sure you have. Well, I use to laugh at that poor man when he'd start acting the fool—you know how it is, you feel sorry for him but you can't help but laugh. They say he got that way in the last war. Well, I can understand him better now. Course I ain't had no bombs bursting in my ears like he had. But yet and still, with things pulling me thisaway and thataway I sometimes feel that I'm going to go screaming up and down the streets just like that poor fellow does."

"He's shell shocked," I said. "Sometimes I've seen him talking and acting just as normal as anyone."

"Is that so?" she said. "I always thought it was funny he never got hit by a car. I've seen them almost hit him, but he goes right back. One day I heard a man say, Lord, if that crazy fellow really had some bombs he'd get rid of every car in Harlem!"

We laughed and I prepared to go.

"Sorry you found me so gloomy today, son. But you know, things have a way of just piling up these days and I just had to talk about them. Anyway, you asked for me to tell you what I thought."

She walked with me to the door. Street lamps glowed on the avenue, lighting the early dark. The after-school cries of children drifted dimly in from the sidewalk.

She shivered close beside me.

"It's getting chilly already," she said. "I'm wondering what's going to happen this winter about the oil and coal situation. These ole holes we have to live in can get mighty cold. Now can't they though?"

I agreed.

"A friend of mine that moved up on Amsterdam Avenue about a month ago wanted to know why I don't move out of Harlem. So I told her it wouldn't do no good to move cause anywhere they let us go gets to be Harlem right on. I done moved round too much not to know that. Oh yes!"

She shook her head knowingly.

"Harlem's like that old song says:

*It's so high you can't get over it
So low, you can't get under it,
And so wide, you can't get round it. . . .*

"That's the way it really is," she said. "Well goodbye, son."

And as I went down the dimmed-out street the verse completed itself in my mind, *You must come through by the living gate. . . .*

SO THERE you have Mrs. Jackson. And that's the way "it really is" for her and many like her who are searching for that gate of freedom. In the very texture of their lives there is confusion, war-made confusion. And the problem is to get around, over, under, and through this confusion. They do not ask for a lighter share of necessary war

sacrifices than other Americans have to bear. But they do ask for equal reasons to believe that their sacrifices are worth while, and they *do* want to be rid of the heavy resentment and bitterness which has been theirs for long before the war.

Forced in normal times to live at standards much lower than those the war has brought to the United States generally, they find it emotionally difficult to give their attention to the war. The struggle for existence constitutes a war in itself. The Mrs. Jacksons of Harlem offer one of the best arguments for the stabilization of prices and the freezing of rents. For twenty-five percent of those still on relief come from our five percent of New York's population. Mrs. Jackson finds it increasingly difficult to feed her children. She must pay six cents more on the dollar for food than do the mothers of similar-income sections of the city. And with the prospect of a heatless winter, Harlem, with its poor housing and high tuberculosis death rate, will know an increase of hardship.

It is an old story. Touch any phase of urban living in our democracy and its worst aspects are to be found in Harlem. Our housing is the poorest, and our rents the highest. Our people are the sickest, and Harlem Hospital the most overcrowded and understaffed. Our unemployment is the greatest, and our cost of food the most exorbitant. Our crime the most understandable and easily corrected, but the policemen sent among us the most brutal. Our desire to rid the world of fascism the most burning, and the obstacles placed in our way the most frustrating. Our need to see the war as a struggle between democracy and fascism the most intense, and our temptation to interpret it as a "color" war the most compelling. Our need to believe in the age of the "common man" the most hope-inspiring, and our reasons to doubt that it will include us the most disheartening (this is no Whitmanesque catalogue of democratic exultations, while more than anything else we wish that it could be). And that's the way it is.

Many of Mrs. Jackson's neighbors are joining in the fight to freeze rents and for the broadening of the FEPC, for Negroes and all other Americans. Their very lives demand that they back the President's stabilization program. That they must be victorious is one of the necessities upon which our democratic freedom rests. The Mrs. Jacksons cannot make the sacrifices necessary to participate in a total war if the conditions under which they live, the very ground on which they must fight, continues its offensive against them. Nor is this something to be solved by propaganda. Morale grows out of realities, not out of words alone. Only concrete action will be effective—lest irritation and confusion turn into exasperation, and exasperation change to disgust and finally into anti-war sentiment (and there is such a danger). Mrs. Jackson's reality must be democratized so that she may clarify her thinking and her emotions. And that's the way it really is.

RALPH ELLISON.

THE NOT SO SOLID SOUTH

President Roosevelt leads the Democratic Party but does its southern wing follow? Earl Browder's fourth article traces the battle of southern liberalism against the poll tax and "white supremacy."

THE main currents of public life in the United States continue to develop within the channels of the traditional two-party system, through the Republican and Democratic parties. There is no immediate prospect of a fundamental change in the formal aspects of this political system.

Beneath the surface appearance of two long-standing rival political parties representing conflicting programs for the country, however, the realities of life are not so static. On the contrary, most profound changes are taking place. The institutionalized party structure, preserved by tradition and habit, as well as by its being imbedded in statutory law, furnishes only the shell within which the political life of the country evolves. And within each major party structure all political currents and ideas find expression, some more, some less, without much apparent system or coherence. The apparent simplicity of American politics hides a complexity equal to that of any other country.

There is a certain arbitrariness, therefore, in dealing with our national politics by examining the Republican and Democratic parties separately. It is apparent to every student that the real political forces in our country, engaged in struggle to determine the policies of the nation, cut across all party lines; that in the political battles that take place, the party structure serves only as a sort of fixed fortification sometimes occupied by one side, sometimes by another; in some places by the one, in other places by the other. The structures themselves furnish no reliable guide to the battle lines.

This is especially true in relation to the problems of national unity and the policies required for victory. Party labels come to mean less and less. No firm attitude permeates either the Republican or the Democratic Party, whether they be examined nationally, regionally, by states, or locally, on any of the questions of the day.

UNQUESTIONABLY the Democratic Party, which is the administration party, gathering over twenty-seven million votes in the 1940 elections for President Roosevelt, is the chief factor in the matter of national unity, in so far as political parties are concerned. It not only retains the backing of a great national majority but it also furnishes the chief political foundations for the wartime administration, the most important organizational strongholds and rallying centers for the broadest national unity. At the same time, however, it must be noted that the Democratic Party contains within itself some of the most damaging Fifth Column forces, that by its reliance upon the "solid South" of poll tax and "white

superiority" it is resting upon a dangerously rotten foundation, and that it is honeycombed with defeatist and appeaser elements busily conspiring behind the scenes against an all-out drive for victory in the war.

The most important single factor in the Democratic Party is, of course, the man who is Commander-in-Chief of the potentially strongest nation on earth, and thereby one of the most important factors in the world situation—President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

IN THE period of fatal confusions, from the end of 1939 to the first half of 1941, I have spoken and written many bitter words of criticism against President Roosevelt. Since those words are, at this moment, being recalled as obstacles in the way of complete national unity, I am forced to deal with them again, at a time when I would much prefer to devote myself exclusively to the present necessity of strengthening the hands of our Commander-in-Chief for the tasks of this historic moment of crisis. Therefore, I perforce must review the past in order to establish a perspective which will help disarm those enemies who desire for one or another special reason to perpetuate the old confusions into the present.

From early in 1936, American Communists developed a positive appreciation of President Roosevelt and his role in the worldwide struggle against Nazism. Our earlier suspicions against him, because of the late Gen. Hugh Johnson's dominant role with his half-baked fascist ideology, had been dissipated by Johnson's dismissal from his position as advisor to the President and head of the NRA. We were further stimulated by the emergence of a clearly defined anti-Roosevelt movement of a fascist-Nazi character in the Liberty League. In 1936, as the Communist candidate for the Presidency, I conducted a campaign designed to help build up Roosevelt's vote rather than that of my own party, because of the thinly disguised fascist character of his opposition, which we considered the main danger to our country.

In 1937 the Communist Party was the only national political organization of any kind which unitedly supported President Roosevelt. The issues of that year were: the fight about the Supreme Court, and the President's Chicago speech advocating "quarantine of the aggressor nations." The President's own party deserted him on both issues, and even the liberals deserted him on the "quarantine" issue, which was the issue of "collective security."

In 1938 American Communists were among the most aggressive and consistent supporters of the President. Within this support, for the first time in three years, we had to include a sharp note of criticism against his abandon-

ment of the Spanish republic, and against allowing his lieutenants to claim for him "credit" for the Munich betrayal.

In 1939 American Communists strengthened their support of the President. On September 1, when the war broke out, our National Committee was meeting in Chicago, with 650 members and delegates from forty-eight states, the central object of its deliberations being how to help elect President Roosevelt for a third term. As late as September 11 our party addressed itself to the President in his support.

In October 1939 we came out in opposition to the President against the hostile attitude rising in Washington toward the Soviet Union. We considered this a mistake disastrous to the national interests of our own country. And when Washington actively supported Baron von Mannerheim, Hitler's present willing vassal, the break between American Communists and the President became complete for eighteen months. The very moment when Churchill and Roosevelt joined in that great turn which reversed the anti-Soviet policy, and took the road which has resulted in the mighty construction of the United Nations, American Communists were in the most energetic support of the President again.

THAT is the record. I do not wish at this time to argue again the merits of the old disagreements, on either side. It is sufficient for this argument to establish the fact that American Communists since 1935 subordinated their own special program to the support of the domestic and international policies of President Roosevelt, seeing in them the only hope of orderly and peaceful development of our country and the world. When we broke with the President, it was on a principled disagreement as to which direction lay the true interests of the United States. When this disagreement was wiped out by history, by events, we resumed our consistent and effective support of the President.

For us, then, to discuss the problems of national unity, of world policy, or of the Democratic Party as a central factor, from the starting point of the leading role of President Roosevelt, is neither difficult nor "abnormal." The difficult and abnormal period, for us, was that in which the most unfortunate chain of events had thrown us for a time into the position of a "minority opposition."

That which Nicholas Murray Butler said of the Republican Party, that there are millions of Republican voters but no party, could be said with equal truth of the Democratic Party—except for the unifying role of the President which, operating across all party lines, is felt with especial force among traditional and nominal Democrats of all tenden-