At two o'clock the sun was at its peak in the sky, showering the land with yellow-pink rays which crawled beneath his coat so that he began to perspire. He shed his purple jacket, and, to keep them clean, rolled the legs of his cream-colored trousers to his knees. A butterfly fluttered in the air before him and he spoke to it. "Is you goin' up dere, too?" Dust thought he should like to fly so that he might get there quicker.

The youth passed the decaying fields where he had labored throughout the summer picking cotton for a few pennies which he had added to his savings in the tin can above his mother's iron stove. The fields, filled with dead bare stalks, were now like a cemetery. Balls of yellowish fluff that had fallen from the wagons on the way to the mill, were scattered about upon the flat terrain. A checked bandana lay near the side of the road and reminded him of the brown-skinned women who had worked at his side singing chant-like songs. The cloth, faded as the past summer, had been discarded at the edge of the road near a pail of scummy water. A fly struggled in the liquid and the youth set the insect free by lifting it by the flapping wings. He then walked northward, forgetting the hot ground of the fields that had bruised his naked feet during the picking seasons. He forgot the women's chants and the men's vulgar talk. He forgot the pains of back bending and the envelope that had held his fifteen dollars each week. He thought of nothing but the pretty tan girls with their scarlet lips and plump thighs milling up and down Lenox Avenue in the grand northern city.

Then near a fork in the road, he saw an old man sitting in the shade of a tulip tree. He was toothless and seemed but a mere mass of withering flesh on a frame of knotty bones. His hide seemed to be caked with soot, and his smile though friendly was strained if not forced. To Dust the man looked as though he had wandered too long in the reel sun and had been baked to a black but enormous ember.

"Where up to, son?" asked the man.
"Lenox Avenoo."
"Long way off. What's dere?"
"Gals."
"Ain't 'nough gals in Miss'ipp'?"
"Yes, suh. Dey's city gals up dere."
"You mean gals ain't gals all ovah?"
"No, suh. City ones is purtier and dey got lots ob money."
"An' knives an' big bucks for men folks," the old man continued.
"What chu mean?" asked Dust indignantly.
"Dey likes young south boys. Dey getcha in an alley, take all yoh savin's, and sic dere big buck husbands on yoh poh head."
"Ain't no gal gonna get my savin's. Iah done worked too hard in de sun."
The man picked up a twig that lay by his shoeless feet and threw it, far above the branches of the tulip tree, into the sky. Both watched its surging ascent and descent as though their very lives depended upon its movements. It fell upon the yellow grass where the man had first found it. He sat back against the trunk and scratched his bald head. There was a hawk-like gleam in his sharp eye and it pierced into the very marrow of Dust's bones.

"Wha's wrong?" the lad quavered.

"See dat stick?"

"Ya," he answered shifting the weight of his body from one foot to the other.

"Dat stick is you, brown and free of its ma, the tree. I flew it up in the sky and it done fell right back down to where Iah fust picked hit up."

"So."

"You go ahead on up dere an' see dem city gals. Afta dey take yoh savin's you gonna fin' yohsef right back heah, de very place you was bo'n in."

"Talk too much, o' man. Ain't tooth in yah face or brain in yoh head."

"Foolish talk come easy for youngins."

"An' smart talk is stale in o' men."

Dust brushed the dirt from his light colored pants and tossed his jacket over his shoulder. He began walking down the road leaving the man cackling like a mother hen with his bony hands clutching the knobs of his knees.

"Boy! Hey, boy!" he called, subduing his laughter. "Ain't you gonna give me somethin' for my advice?"

Dust stopped, wheeled around, and spat a gob of phlegm to the ground.

"You might as well give a hongry poh man yoh saviri's as to let a who'h steal hit from you."

"Ain't no woman gonna steal my savin's, Iah done said."

"Why don't you sit down outta de sun a bit. You look all hot."

Dust remained standing but edged closer into the cool of the shade. He pushed his fat hands into his pockets and jingled some coins. His coat dropped to the ground and the man cackled again. The youth was about to kick him for being so uppity and downright smart when a hound came trotting down the road with his tail straight as an arrow, and his teeth showing yellow and sinister. The dog stopped at a standstill when he spied the pair and, growling behind his evil-looking fangs, approached the tree. He sniffed the air and barked.

"Get on out of heah," shouted the man and he threw the tulip stick at the animal. "Get goin', ol' hound dog. He was about to take
a chunk outta yoh leg dere, son, iffen Iah didn’ get him on. Look kinda hungry like. Seemed like one of dem gals up on Lenox Avenoo ’bout to spring atcha an’ take yoh savin’s.”

The youth silently sat down by the tree. “Maybe he’s right,” he thought to himself.

“Dawg sho was mean lookin’. Spotted purty like, like dem gals wid all dat paint dey wea’, but sho was mean lookin’. How long you plannin’ to stay up dere, boy?”

Dust paid little mind to his question. He was thinking of the girls with their full bosoms and flashing eyes. He was wondering just how big were their men folks, and could see the glittering switch blades tearing his skin to threads in a dark alley.

“You walkin’ all de way? Sho do get col’ up dere in de winta time.”

The youth saw large flakes of snow, the size of saucers, falling to the ground and heard the roar of a wild wind. He shivered even though the sun had changed its position and he was sitting in the direct path of its orange rays.

“How de food up dere, o’ man?”

“Ain’t no good. Don’t raise chickens an’ greens. Ain’t neva hehd of chitlin’s o’ ribs, an co’npone is somethin’ nobody can affo’d.”

“You done been up dere, huh?”

“See dese nuked feet?” He waited for a nod of recognition from Dust. “I done walked dem nuked and nea’ly froze ’em to death up dere. No mo. I done come back to die in my own shinin’ lan’. You bes’ be gettin’ on, boy. Days ain’t long in de fall.”

“How far south you goin’, o’ man?”

“Jes’ a mile o’ two.”

“Min iffen Iah walk wid you? I believes I done lef’ my savin’s wid my ma. Iah clean walked off an’ lef’ it.”

The toothless man looked at the youth for a moment in utter disbelief and then began to laugh in a high bird-like screech. The laugh dragged through his throat rattling as it came, as if Death were pushing his last breath from his lungs. He sat beneath the tree shaking so fiercely that Dust thought he heard the man’s bones striking one another like sticks hitting together.

“Pick up yoh coat, boy, an’ les’ get goin’. Iah sho is hungry foh some of yoh ma’s cookin’.” He laughed again hysterically.

Dust was afraid the man had lost his mind or was suffering from a sun stroke, and he had an impulse to run away from the laughing fool, but instead of racing for safety he gave his hand to the aged beggar and helped him to his feet.

“Come on. My ma mus’ be fixin’ de suppah,” he said as the pair limped down the road that was already being washed with the blue of an early twilight.