It goes a long way back, some twenty years. All my life I had been
looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me
what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in
contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naive. I was looking
for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only
I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of
my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have
been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover
that I am an invisible man!

And yet I am no freak of nature, nor of history. I was in the cards,
other things having been equal (or unequal) eighty-five years ago. I am
not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed
of myself for having at one time been ashamed. About eighty-five years
ago they were told they were free, united with others of our country in
everything pertaining to the common good, and, in everything social,
separate like the fingers of the hand. And they believed it. They
exulted in it. They stayed in their place, worked hard, and brought up
my father to do the same. But my grandfather is the one. He was an odd
old guy, my grandfather, and I am told I take after him. It was he who
caused the trouble. On his deathbed he called my father to him and said,
"Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told
you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a
spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the
Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to
overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death
and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open."
They thought the old man had gone out of his mind. He had been the
meekest of men. The younger children were rushed from the room, the
shades drawn and the flame of the lamp turned so low that it sputtered
on the wick like the old man's breathing. "Learn it to the younguns," he
whispered fiercely; then he died.

But my folks were more alarmed over his last words than over his dying.
It was as though he had not died at all, his words caused so much
anxiety. I was warned emphatically to forget what he had said and,
indeed, this is the first time it has been mentioned outside the family
circle. It had a tremendous effect upon me, however. I could never be
sure of what he meant. Grandfather had been a quiet old man who never
made any trouble, yet on his deathbed he had called himself a traitor
and a spy, and he had spoken of his meekness as a dangerous activity. It
became a constant puzzle which lay unanswered in the back of my mind.
And whenever things went well for me I remembered my grandfather and
felt guilty and uncomfortable. It was as though I was carrying out his
advice in spite of myself. And to make it worse, everyone loved me for
it. I was praised by the most lily-white men in town. I was considered
an example of desirable conduct—just as my grandfather had been. And
what puzzled me was that the old man had defined it as treachery. When I
was praised for my conduct I felt a guilt that in some way I was doing
something that was really against the wishes of the white folks, that if
they had understood they would have desired me to act just the opposite,
that I should have been sulky and mean, and that that really would have
been what they wanted, even though they were fooled and thought they
wanted me to act as I did. It made me afraid that some day they would
look upon me as a traitor and I would be lost. Still I was more afraid
to act any other way because they didn't like that at all. The old man's
words were like a curse. On my graduation day I delivered an oration in
which I showed that humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of
progress. (Not that I believed this—how could I, remembering my
grandfather?—I only believed that it worked.) It was a great success.
Everyone praised me and I was invited to give the speech at a gathering
of the town's leading white citizens. It was a triumph for the whole
community.

It was in the main ballroom of the leading hotel. When I got there I
discovered that it was on the occasion of a smoker, and I was told that
since I was to be there anyway I might as well take part in the battle
royal to be fought by some of my schoolmates as part of the
entertainment. The battle royal came first.

All of the town's big shots were there in their tuxedoes, wolfing down
the buffet foods, drinking beer and whiskey and smoking black cigars. It
was a large room with a high ceiling. Chairs were arranged in neat rows
around three sides of a portable boxing ring. The fourth side was clear,
revealing a gleaming space of polished floor. I had some misgivings over
the battle royal, by the way. Not from a distaste for fighting but
because I didn't care too much for the other fellows who were to take
part. They were tough guys who seemed to have no grandfather's curse
worrying their minds. No one could mistake their toughness. And besides,
I suspected that fighting a battle royal might detract from the dignity
of my speech. In those pre-invisible days I visualized myself as a
potential Booker T. Washington. But the other fellows didn't care too
much for me either, and there were nine of them. I felt superior to them
in my way, and I didn't like the manner in which we were all crowded
together in the servants' elevator. Nor did they like my being there. In
fact, as the warmly lighted floors flashed past the elevator we had
words over the fact that I, by taking part in the fight, had knocked one
of their friends out of a night's work.

We were led out of the elevator through a rococo hall into an anteroom
and told to get into our fighting togs. Each of us was issued a pair of
boxing gloves and ushered out into the big mirrored hall, which we
entered looking cautiously about us and whispering, lest we might
accidentally be heard above the noise of the room. It was foggy with
cigar smoke. And already the whiskey was taking effect. I was shocked to
see some of the most important men of the town quite tipsy. They were
all there—bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers,
merchants. Even one of the more fashionable pastors. Something we could
not see was going on up front. A clarinet was vibrating sensuously and
the men were standing up and moving eagerly forward. We were a small
tight group, clustered together, our bare upper bodies touching and
shining with anticipatory sweat: while up front the big shots were
becoming increasingly excited over something we still could not see.
Suddenly I heard the school superintendent, who had told me to come,
yell, "Bring up the shines, gentlemen! Bring up the little shines!"

We were rushed up to the front of the ballroom, where it smelled even
more strongly of tobacco and whiskey. Then we were pushed into place. I
almost wet my pants. A sea of faces, some hostile, some amused, ringed
around us, and in the center, facing us, stood a magnificent
blonde—stark naked. There was dead silence. I felt a blast of cold air
chill me. I tried to back away, but they were behind me and around me.
Some of the boys stood with lowered heads, trembling. I felt a wave of
irrational guilt and fear. My teeth chattered, my skin turned to goose
flesh, my knees knocked. Yet I was strongly attracted and looked in
spite of myself. Had the price of looking been blindness, I would have
looked. The hair was yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll, the face
heavily powdered and rouged, as though to form an abstract mask, the
eyes hollow and smeared a cool blue, the color of a baboon's butt. I
felt a desire to spit upon her as my eyes brushed slowly over her body.
Her breasts were firm and round as the domes of East Indian temples, and
I stood so close as to see the fine skin texture and beads of pearly
perspiration glistening like dew around the pink and erected buds of her
nipples. I wanted at one and the same time to run from the room, to sink
through the floor, or go to her and cover her from my eyes and the eyes
of the others with my body; to feel the soft thighs, to caress her and
destroy her, to love her and to murder her, to hide from her, and yet to
stroke where below the small American flag tattooed upon her belly her
thighs formed a capital V. I had a notion that of all in the room she
saw only me with her impersonal eyes.

And then she began to dance, a slow sensuous movement; the smoke of a
hundred cigars clinging to her like the thinnest of veils. She seemed
like a fair bird-girl girdled in veils calling to me from the angry
surface of some gray and threatening sea. I was transported. Then I
became aware of the clarinet playing and the big shots yelling at us.
Some threatened us if we looked and others if we did not. On my right I
saw one boy faint. And now a man grabbed a silver pitcher from a table
and stepped close as he dashed ice water upon him and stood him up and
forced two of us to support him as his head hung and moans issued from
his thick bluish lips. Another boy began to plead to go home. He was the
largest of the group, wearing dark red fighting trunks much too small to
conceal the erection which projected from him as though in answer to the
insinuating low-registered moaning of the clarinet. He tried to hide
himself with his boxing gloves.

And all the while the blonde continued dancing, smiling faintly at the
big shots who watched her with fascination, and faintly smiling at our
fear. I noticed a certain merchant who followed her hungrily, his lips
loose and drooling. He was a large man who wore diamond studs in a
shirtfront which swelled with the ample paunch underneath, and each time
the blonde swayed her undulating hips he ran his hand through the thin
hair of his bald head and, with his arms upheld, his posture clumsy like
that of an intoxicated panda, wound his belly in a slow and obscene
grind. This creature was completely hypnotized. The music had quickened.
As the dancer flung herself about with a detached expression on her
face, the men began reaching out to touch her. I could see their beefy
fingers sink into her soft flesh. Some of the others tried to stop them
and she began to move around the floor in graceful circles, as they gave
chase, slipping and sliding over the polished floor. It was mad. Chairs
went crashing, drinks were spilt, as they ran laughing and howling after
her. They caught her just as she reached a door, raised her from the
floor, and tossed her as college boys are tossed at a hazing, and above
her red, fixed-smiling lips I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes,
almost like my own terror and that which I saw in some of the other
boys. As I watched, they tossed her twice and her soft breasts seemed to
flatten against the air and her legs flung wildly as she spun. Some of
the more sober ones helped her to escape. And I started off the floor,
heading for the anteroom with the rest of the boys.

Some were still crying and in hysteria. But as we tried to leave we were
stopped and ordered to get into the ring. There was nothing to do but
what we were told. All ten of us climbed under the ropes and allowed
ourselves to be blindfolded with broad bands of white cloth. One of the
men seemed to feel a bit sympathetic and tried to cheer us up as we
stood with our backs against the ropes. Some of us tried to grin. "See
that boy over there?" one of the men said. "I want you to run across at
the bell and give it to him right in the belly. If you don't get him,
I'm going to get you. I don't like his looks." Each of us was told the
same. The blindfolds were put on. Yet even then I had been going over my
speech. In my mind each word was as bright as a flame. I felt the cloth
pressed into place, and frowned so that it would be loosened when I
relaxed.

But now I felt a sudden fit of blind terror. I was unused to darkness,
it was as though I had suddenly found myself in a dark room filled with
poisonous cottonmouths. I could hear the bleary voices yelling
insistently for the battle royal to begin.

"Get going in there!"

"Let me at that big nigger!"

I strained to pick up the school superintendent's voice, as though to
squeeze some security out of that slightly more familiar sound.

"Let me at those black sonsabitches!" someone yelled.

"No, Jackson, no!" another voice yelled. "Here, somebody, help me hold
Jack."

"I want to get at that ginger-colored nigger. Tear him limb from limb,"
the first voice yelled.

I stood against the ropes trembling. For in those days I was what they
called ginger-colored, and he sounded as though he might crunch me
between his teeth like a crisp ginger cookie.

Quite a struggle was going on. Chairs were being kicked about and I
could hear voices grunting as with terrific effort. I wanted to see, to
see more desperately than ever before. But the blindfold was as tight as
a thick skin, puckering scab and when I raised my gloved hands to push
the layers of white aside a voice yelled, “Oh, no you don't, black
bastard! Leave that alone!"

"Ring the bell before Jackson kills him a coon!" someone boomed in the
sudden silence. And I heard the bell clang and the sound of the feet
scuffling forward.

A glove smacked against my head. I pivoted, striking out stiffly as
someone went past, and felt the jar ripple along the length of my arm to
my shoulder. Then it seemed as though all nine of the boys had turned
upon me at once. Blows pounded me from all sides while I struck out as
best I could. So many blows landed upon me that I wondered if I were not
the only blindfolded fighter in the ring, or if the man called Jackson
hadn't succeeded in getting me after all.

Blindfolded, I could no longer control my motions. I had no dignity. I
stumbled about like a baby or a drunken man. The smoke had become
thicker and with each new blow it seemed to sear and further restrict my
lungs. My saliva became like hot bitter glue. A glove connected with my
head, filling my mouth with warm blood. It was everywhere. I could not
tell if the moisture I felt upon my body was sweat or blood. A blow
landed hard against the nape of my neck. I felt myself going over, my
head hitting the floor. Streaks of blue light filled the black world
behind the blindfold. I lay prone, pretending that I was knocked out,
but felt myself seized by hands and yanked to my feet. "Get going, black
boy! Mix it up!" My arms were like lead, my head smarting from blows. I
managed to feel my way to the ropes and held on, trying to catch my
breath. A glove landed in my midsection and I went over again, feeling
as though the smoke had be- come a knife jabbed into my guts. Pushed
this way and that by the legs milling around me, I finally pulled erect
and discovered that I could see the black, sweat- washed forms weaving
in the smoky, blue atmosphere like drunken dancers weaving to the rapid
drum-like thuds of blows.

Everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought
everybody else. No group fought together for long. Two, three, four,
fought one, then turned to fight each other, were themselves attacked.
Blows landed below the belt and in the kidney, with the gloves open as
well as closed, and with my eye partly opened now there was not so much
terror. I moved carefully, avoiding blows, although not too many to
attract attention, fighting group to group. The boys groped about like
blind, cautious crabs crouching to protect their midsections, their
heads pulled in short against their shoulders, their arms stretched
nervously before them, with their fists testing the smoke-filled air
like the knobbed feelers of hypersensitive snails. In one comer I
glimpsed a boy violently punching the air and heard him scream in pain
as he smashed his hand against a ring post. For a second I saw him bent
over holding his hand, then going down as a blow caught his unprotected
head. I played one group against the other, slip- ping in and throwing a
punch then stepping out of range while pushing the others into the melee
to take the blows blindly aimed at me. The smoke was agonizing and there
were no rounds, no bells at three minute intervals to relieve our
exhaustion. The room spun round me, a swirl of lights, smoke, sweating
bodies surrounded by tense white faces. I bled from both nose and mouth,
the blood spattering upon my chest.

The men kept yelling, "Slug him, black boy! Knock his guts out!"

"Uppercut him! Kill him! Kill that big boy!"

Taking a fake fall, I saw a boy going down heavily beside me as though
we were felled by a single blow, saw a sneaker-clad foot shoot into his
groin as the two who had knocked him down stumbled upon him. I rolled
out of range, feeling a twinge of nausea.

The harder we fought the more threatening the men became. And yet, I had
begun to worry about my speech again. How would it go? Would they
recognize my ability? What would they give me?

I was fighting automatically when suddenly I noticed that one after
another of the boys was leaving the ring. I was surprised, filled with
panic, as though I had been left alone with an unknown danger. Then I
understood. The boys had arranged it among themselves. It was the custom
for the two men left in the ring to slug it out for the winner's prize.
I discovered this too late. When the bell sounded two men in tuxedoes
leaped into the ring and removed the blindfold. I found myself facing
Tatlock, the biggest of the gang. I felt sick at my stomach. Hardly had
the bell stopped ringing in my ears than it clanged again and I saw him
moving swiftly toward me. Thinking of nothing else to do I hit him smash
on the nose. He kept coming, bringing the rank sharp violence of stale
sweat. His face was a black blank of a face, only his eyes alive—with
hate of me and aglow with a feverish terror from what had happened to us
all. I became anxious. I wanted to deliver my speech and he came at me
as though he meant to beat it out of me. I smashed him again and again,
taking his blows as they came. Then on a sudden impulse I struck him
lightly and we clinched. I whispered, "Fake like I knocked you out, you
can have the prize."

"I'll break your behind," he whispered hoarsely.

"For them?"

"For me, sonafabitch!”

They were yelling for us to break it up and Tatlock spun me half around
with a blow, and as a joggled camera sweeps in a reeling scene, I saw
the howling red faces crouching tense beneath the cloud of blue-gray
smoke. For a moment the world wavered, unraveled, flowed, then my head
cleared and Tatlock bounced before me. That fluttering shadow before my
eyes was his jabbing left hand. Then falling forward, my head against
his damp shoulder, I whispered.

"I'll make it five dollars more."

"Go to hell!"

But his muscles relaxed a trifle beneath my pressure and I breathed,
"Seven?"

"Give it to your ma," he said, ripping me beneath the heart.

And while I still held him I butted him and moved away. I felt myself
bombarded with punches. I fought back with hopeless desperation. I
wanted to deliver my speech more than anything else in the world,
because I felt that only these men could judge truly my ability, and now
this stupid clown was ruining my chances. I began fighting carefully
now, moving in to punch him and out again with my greater speed. A lucky
blow to his chin and I had him going too—until I heard a loud voice
yell, "I got my money on the big boy."

Hearing this, I almost dropped my guard. I was confused: Should I try to
win against the voice out there? Would not this go against my speech,
and was not this a moment for humility, for nonresistance? A blow to my
head as I danced about sent my right eye popping like a jack-in-the-box
and settled my dilemma. The room went red as I fell. It was a dream
fall, my body languid and fastidious as to where to land, until the
floor became impatient and smashed up to meet me. A moment later I came
to. An hypnotic voice said FIVE emphatically. And I lay there, hazily
watching a dark red spot of my own blood shaping itself into a
butterfly, glistening and soaking into the soiled gray world of the
canvas.

When the voice drawled TEN I was lifted up and dragged to a chair. I sat
dazed. My eye pained and swelled with each throb of my pounding heart
and I wondered if now I would be allowed to speak. I was wringing wet,
my mouth still bleeding. We were grouped

along the wall now. The other boys ignored me as they congratulated
Tatlock and speculated as to how much they would be paid. One boy
whimpered over his smashed hand. Looking up front, I saw attendants in
white jackets rolling the Portable ring away and placing a small square
rug in the vacant space surrounded by chain. Perhaps, I thought, I will
stand on the mg to deliver my speech.

Then the M.C. called to us. "Come on up here boys and get your money."

We ran forward to where the men laughed and talked in their chairs,
waiting. Everyone seemed friendly now.

"There it is on the rug," the man said. I saw the mg covered with coins
of all dimensions and a few crumpled bills. But what excited me,
scattered here and there, were the gold pieces.

"Boys, it's all yours," the man said. "You get all you grab."

"That's right, Sambo," a blond man said, winking at me confidentially.

I trembled with excitement, forgetting my pain. I would get the gold and
the bills. I thought. I would use both hands. I would throw my body
against the boys nearest me to block them from the gold.

"Get down around the rug now," the man commanded, "and don't anyone
touch it until I give the signal."

"This ought to be good," I heard.

As told, we got around the square rug on our knees. Slowly the man
raised his freckled hand as we followed it upward with our eyes.

I heard, "These niggers look like they're about to pray!"

Then, "Ready", the man said. "Go!"

I lunged for a yellow coin lying on the blue design of the carpet,
touching it and sending a surprised shriek to join those around me. I
tried frantically to remove my hand but could not let go. A hot, violent
force tore through my body, shaking me like a wet rat. The rug was
electrified. The hair bristled up on my head as I shook myself free. My
muscles jumped, my nerves jangled, writhed. But I saw that this was not
stopping the other boys. Laughing in fear and embarrassment, some were
holding back and scooping up the coins knocked off by the painful
contortions of others. The men roared above us as we struggled.

"Pick it up, goddamnit, pick it up!" someone called like a bass-voiced
parrot. "Go on, get it!"

I crawled rapidly around the floor, picking up the coins, trying to
avoid the coppers and to get greenbacks and the gold. Ignoring the shock
by laughing, as I brushed the coins off quickly, I discovered that I
could contain the electricity—a contradiction but it works. Then the
men began to push us onto the rug. Laughing embarrassedly, we struggled
out of their hands and kept after the coins. We were all wet and
slippery and hard to hold. Suddenly I saw a boy lifted into the air,
glistening with sweat like a circus seat, and dropped, his wet back
landing flush upon the charged rug, heard him yell and saw him literally
dance upon his back, his elbows beating a frenzied tattoo upon the
floor, his muscles twitching like the flesh of a horse stung by many
flies. When be finally rolled off, his face was gray and no one stopped
him when he ran from the floor amid booming laughter.

"Get the money," the M.C. called. "That's good hard American cash!"

And we snatched and grabbed, snatched and grabbed. I was careful not to
come too close to the rug now, and when I felt the hot whiskey breath
descend upon me like a cloud of foul air I reached out and grabbed the
leg of a chair. It was occupied and I held on desperately.

"Leggo, nigger! Leggo!"

The huge face wavered down to mine as he tried to push me free. But my
body was slippery and he was too drunk. It was Mr. Colcord, who owned a
chain of movie houses and "entertainment palaces." Each time he grabbed
me I slipped out of his hands. It became a real struggle. I feared the
rug more than I did the drunk, so I held on, surprising myself for a
moment by trying to topple him upon the rug. It was such an enormous
idea that I found myself actually carrying it out. I tried not to be
obvious, yet when I grabbed his leg, trying to tumble him out of the
chair, he raised up roaring with laughter, and, looking at me with
soberness dead in the eye, kicked me viciously in the chest. The chair
leg flew out of my hand and I felt myself going and rolled. It was as
though I had rolled through a bed of hot coals. It seemed a whole
century would pass before I would roll free, a century in which I was
seared through the deepest levels of my body to the fearful breath
within me and the breath seared and heated to the point of explosion.
It'll all be over in a flash, I thought as I rolled clear. It'll all be
over in a flash.

But not yet, the men on the other side were waiting, red faces swollen
as though from apoplexy as they bent forward in their chairs. Seeing
their fingers coming toward me I rolled away as a fumbled football rolls
off the receiver's finger, tips, back into the coals. That time I
luckily sent the rug sliding out of place and heard the coins ringing
against the floor and the boys scuffling to pick them up and the M.C.
calling, "All right, boys, that's all. Go get dressed and get your
money."

I was limp as a dish rag. My back felt as though it had been beaten with
wires.

When we had dressed the M.C. came in and gave us each five dollars,
except Tatiock, who got ten for being the last in the ring. Then he told
us to leave. I was not to get a chance to deliver my speech, I thought.
I was going out into the dim alley in despair when I was stopped and
told to go back. I returned to the ballroom, where the men were pushing
back their chairs and gathering in small groups to talk.

The M.C. knocked on a table for quiet. "Gentlemen," he said, "we almost
forgot an important part of the program. A most serious part, gentlemen.
This boy was brought here to deliver a speech which he made at his
graduation yesterday . . ."

"Bravo!"

"I'm told that he is the smartest boy we've got out there in Greenwood.
I'm told that he knows more big words than a pocket-sized dictionary."

Much applause and laughter.

"So now, gentlemen, I want you to give him your attention."

There was still laughter as I faced them, my mouth dry, my eyes
throbbing. I began slowly, but evidently my throat was tense, because
they began shouting.

"Louder! Louder!"

"We of the younger generation extol the wisdom of that great leader and
educator," I shouted, "who first spoke these flaming words of wisdom: 'A
ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From
the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal: "Water, water; we
die of thirst!" The answer from the friendly vessel came back: "Cast
down your bucket where you are." The captain of the distressed vessel,
at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket, and it came up
full of fresh sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River.' And
like him I say, and in his words, 'To those of my race who depend upon
bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the
importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white
man, who is his next-door neighbor, I would say: "Cast down your bucket
where you are"—cast it down in making friends in every manly way of
the people of all races by whom we are surrounded . . .' "

I spoke automatically and with such fervor that I did not realize that
the men were still talking and laughing until my dry mouth, filling up
with blood from the cut, almost strangled me. I coughed, wanting to stop
and go to one of the tall brass, sand-filled spittoons to relieve
myself, but a few of the men, especially the superintendent, were
listening and I was afraid. So I gulped it down, blood, saliva and all,
and continued. (What powers of endurance I had during those days! What
enthusiasm! What a belief in the rightness of things!) I spoke even
louder in spite of the pain. But still they talked and still they
laughed, as though deaf with cotton in dirty ears. So I spoke with
greater emotional emphasis. I closed my ears and swallowed blood until I
was nauseated. The speech seemed a hundred times as long as before, but
I could not leave out a single word. All had to be said, each memorized
nuance considered, rendered. Nor was that all. Whenever I uttered a word
of three or more syllables a group of voices would yell for me to repeat
it. I used the phrase "social responsibility" and they yelled:

"What's the word you say, boy?"

"Social responsibility," I said.

"What?"

"Social . . ."

"Louder."

". . . responsibility."

"More!”

"Respon—"

“Repeat!"

"—sibility."

The room filled with the uproar of laughter until, no doubt, distracted
by having to gulp down my blood, I made a mistake and yelled a phrase I
had often seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in
private.

"Social . . ."

"What?" they yelled.

". . . equality—.”

The laughter hung smokelike in the sudden stillness. I opened my eyes,
puzzled. Sounds of displeasure filled the room. The M.C. rushed forward.
They shouted hostile phrases at me. But I did not understand.

A small dry mustached man in the front row blared out, “Say that
slowly, son!

"What, sir?"

"What you just said!"

"Social responsibility, sir,” I said.

"You weren't being smart, were you boy?" he said, not unkindly.

"No, Sir!"

"You sure that about 'equality' was a mistake?"

"Oh, yes, Sir," I said. "I was swallowing blood."

"Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to
do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times. All
right, now, go on with your speech."

I was afraid. I wanted to leave but I wanted also to speak and I was
afraid they'd snatch me down.

"T'hank you, Sir," I said, beginning where I had left off, and having
them ignore me as before.

Yet when I finished there was a thunderous applause. I was surprised to
see the superintendent come forth with a package wrapped in white tissue
paper, and, gesturing for quiet, address the men.

"Gentlemen, you see that I did not overpraise the boy. He makes a good
speech and some day he'll lead his people in the proper paths. And I
don't have to tell you that this is important in these days and times.
This is a good, smart boy, and so to encourage him in the right
direction, in the name of the Board of Education I wish to present him a
prize in the form of this . . ."

He paused, removing the tissue paper and revealing a gleaming calfskin
briefcase.

". . . in the form of this first-class article from Shad Whitmore's
shop."

"Boy," he said, addressing me, "take this prize and keep it well.
Consider it a badge of office. Prize it. Keep developing as you are and
some day it will be filled with important papers that will help shape
the destiny of your people."

I was so moved that I could hardly express my thanks. A rope of bloody
saliva forming a shape like an undiscovered continent drooled upon the
leather and I wiped it quickly away. I felt an importance that I had
never dreamed.

"Open it and see what's inside," I was told.

My fingers a-tremble, I complied, smelling fresh leather and finding an
official-looking document inside. It was a scholarship to the state
college for Negroes. My eyes filled with tears and I ran awkwardly off
the floor.

I was overjoyed; I did not even mind when I discovered the gold pieces I
had scrambled for were brass pocket tokens advertising a certain make of
automobile.

When I reached home everyone was excited. Next day the neighbors came to
congratulate me. I even felt safe from grandfather, whose deathbed curse
usually spoiled my triumphs. I stood beneath his photograph with my
briefcase in hand and smiled triumphantly into his stolid black
peasant's face. It was a face that fascinated me. The eyes seemed to
follow everywhere I went.

That night I dreamed I was at a circus with him and that he refused to
laugh at the clowns no matter what they did. Then later he told me to
open my briefcase and read what was inside and I did, finding an
official envelope stamped with the state seal: and inside the envelope I
found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of
weariness. "Them's years," he said. "Now open that one." And I did and
in it I found an engraved stamp containing a short message in letters of
gold. "Read it," my grandfather said. "Out loud."

"To Whom It May Concern," I intoned. "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."

I awoke with the old man's laughter ringing in my ears.

(It was a dream I was to remember and dream again for many years after.
But at the time I had no insight into its meaning. First I had to attend
college.)