

## Chapter 2

# Acquiring a Negro Appearance

By Ray Sprigle

This thing of suddenly switching races after more than half a century of life as a white man has its problems and difficulties.

Remember all those romances you've read in which the hero is going to turn Hindu, or Arab or one or the other of the darker races. Remember how almost invariably he goes to "an old woman" in the nearby village and she gives him a lotion that turns him dark for weeks or months. Well, my trouble, I guess, was that I couldn't seem to find one of those old women. And in more than six months of searching I couldn't find any lotion or liquid that would turn a white hide brown or black and still be impervious to perspiration, soap and water and the ravages of ordinary wear and tear.

Wait a bit though. Let me modify that last statement. Both Mellon Institute in Pittsburgh and a Long Island chemist I consulted did come up with a permanent stain. Both recommended any one of a series of phenol compounds. But they thought it only fair to warn me that there was one little drawback. It seems that if you covered yourself thoroughly with one of them you'd find yourself thoroughly dead in from 15 minutes to 15 days, depending upon your resistance. I thanked them kindly for their assistance.

### **Tried Walnut Stain**

Naturally before I turned to chemists and make-up experts and the like I had recourse to that old reliable stain of boyhood memory, the juice of walnut hulls. Walnut juice will stain the human skin, I am able to report. I am also able to report that a day or two later it will neatly remove the human hide. Fortunately I took the precaution of applying it experimentally on a square foot or so of my chest. I was weeks in getting over that. I tried iodine, argyrol, pyrogallic acid, potassium permanganate. Come a little perspiration and I'd find myself striped like a tiger or spotted like a leopard.

Six months' search and experiments and the expenditure of a couple square feet of skin (mine) and close to a hundred dollars and I was no nearer to getting away from the white race than I was the day I started.

There was one thing left — sure fire — but with one big drawback, the time required. That was sunshine and not in homeopathic doses either. But Pennsylvania's sunshine is sometimes a mighty uncertain commodity. Now down in Florida — there the sunbeams were something else again. So to Florida I went.

I knew full well that one should be cautious in exposing tender human skin to the tropical sun. I knew that a half hour was the limit for a first day's sun bath. So I lay out in the sun for an hour and a half. With the result that I spent that night standing up and rubbing soothing unguents into

my flaming epidermis. Well, as a result of my researches I am also able to report that Florida sunshine will remove hide much more efficiently than will the juice of walnut hulls. I peeled like a snake from head to foot. But when I could no longer light a match by touching it to my incandescent skin, went back to the solarium to accumulate my disguise.

At the start I had shaved head, practically down to the skull, had my glasses reset in enormous black rims, and acquired a cap that drooped like a tam-o-shanter. I was all set for "passing," in reverse. This business of "passing" is a mighty private concern and how is anyone to get statistics on it?

But the fact remains that there are many thousands of Negroes in the South who could "pass" any day they wish. I talked to scores of them. Nearly every one had a sister or brother or some other relative who was living as a white man or woman in the North. Most Southern Negroes don't approve of "passing" and when one of their number does it he cuts himself off from the black race.

One of the most interesting families I encountered — I only encountered the black half of it — was that of a Southern planter in one of the Georgia counties. He had maintained his white wife in the pillared plantation home. He maintained his black mistress — this wasn't in slavery days when it was common — in a quite comfortable home on the plantation. He produced a mulatto son and a white daughter.

He must have been a reasonably fair-minded rascal at that because when he died he divided his plantation and his fortune equally between his black and white children. The son runs the plantation, turning over to his half-sister her share of the production of her half of the land. She is married and is a figure in Detroit white society — she IS white, of course. Several times her mulatto half brother has visited her and been entertained in her home. But when she comes South she has to stay at a hotel.

## **No Disguise Needed**

So at last I scurried back north to Washington, met my companion who was to pilot me through four weeks of life as a Negro, and that night we were on our way south, just a couple of Negroes Jim Crowing it through the Southland.

As a matter of fact, most of my concern over acquiring a dark skin was so much nonsense. Everywhere I went in the South I encountered scores of Negroes as white as I ever was back home in Pittsburgh. Stories of 20,000 Negroes a year "passing" to the white race are a lot of hooley.

Looks to me from where I sit, as just another light-skinned one of millions of other light-skinned Negroes, that the noble white man got hold of this racial purity thing a little late. Where does he think these millions of white, light, and brown Negroes came from?

Think the stork found 'em somewhere?