

# The Gentleman and Scholar

by Roy Coverley

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THERE is always a certain magic in an autumn day in New York. True, there are almost never any trees to beguile the sight with bursts of russet and gold. True, also there are never any far-away cries of blue-jays flying to wherever blue-jays go to in the autumn, nor the distant cawing of rooks sounding through air hazy and scented with wood-smoke. Instead, there is a roar of traffic and the endless scurry of people frenziedly rushing to do nothing important, and the impatient bleat of automobile horns. But the sky is high and very blue, with frothy ruffles of new-washed, white clouds, and the air nips your nostrils and gently pinches your fingertips, and the sun pours down a gentle gold, transforming the horrid dirtiness of ugly buildings and filling dank alley-ways with a gilded expectancy.

It was on a day like this, in 1944, when I walked up Seventh Avenue in Harlem, enjoying the run-down handsomeness of the solid buildings, very conscious of my hand-woven Harris tweed jacket, my English bench-made shoes and yellow pigskin gloves. I was conscious of them because such clothes are rarely seen in Harlem and I was rather proud of being able to afford them. I had enjoyed a very exciting and profitable seven years in Europe, up to 1940, when I had to leave the Continent very quickly because Hitler had begun to overrun it.

From 1940 to 1941 I censored mail in England, then was sent out to Jamaica to do a job in Intelligence. In 1944 I was transferred to the United States to work in UNRRA in Washington and also to do some study at a university. I mention all this so as to point out that I felt I had some reason to feel rather proud of myself. I had not done so badly for a Jamaican who had left the island in his teens, as so many Jamaicans do, and had been knocking around, "making it," as the Americans say.

I was walking up Seventh Avenue to call on Elsie Benjamin, as she was then, who was in New York studying dramatics at the American Academy. At the entrance of the block of flats where Elsie lived, a distinguished figure turned in before me. He was of middle height, with a head chiselled out of a block of ivory gray-haired, with the sensitive nostrils of a gazelle, and a Vandyke beard. He rang the bell and I saw that his hands, in strange contrast to his face, were brown as with a suntan, but yet with that hint of translucence that marks the hands of sensitive people, and very quietly restless, if one can

understand that.

I bowed to him. "How do you do?" One bows to people like that. Elsie opened the door and said, "Roy, this is Adolphe Roberts." And, as he said, "How do you do?" I heard for the first time the voice that told you all about Adolphe Roberts, if you listened carefully, that told you all that Adolphe Roberts thought and felt, that echoed all that he had endured, good and bad, that also told you something of his dream, that sounded the sadness, the *joie de vivre* as well as the *weltschmerz*, those two imposters that followed Adolphe all through his life.

I felt, to use a cliché -- and clichés are sometimes more illuminating than any other mode of expression -- that here was a gentleman and a scholar. I got to know him very well after that, and found that I was right.

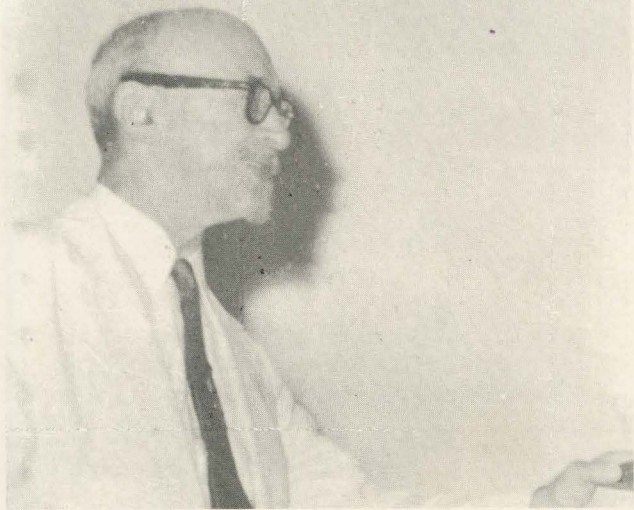
This is the point where I must say that on that afternoon and ever after, he made me feel very humble, a little tawdry and rather insignificant. My Harris tweeds, English shoes and pigskin gloves did not seem so wonderful, after all that. I found, as I got to know him better, that while he was always conscious of his talents, his capabilities, his standing and his potentialities, he regarded the people in the world around him as human beings from whom he could always learn something and to whom he could often -- if they asked for it -- give something. He was never a missionary, in that he never tried to inculcate things upon people if they didn't ask for it, but, if you asked him to give of his great store of learning, of his writer's skill, of his genuine -- though often concealed -- love for people, you received these in generous measure.

He was no angel. He had a fine, acid tongue, a contempt and impatience for humbug, a really hot anger at people who didn't try to do something real and constructive, and a very sane and very real conception of his standing as a novelist, as a writer, as a scholar and as a person. He did not allow false modesty to abberate his vision because no one knew better than he how hard he had worked, how he sweated to improve himself and acquire culture even though he never had to starve in a garret. He had *flair*.

We used to meet very often. We used to drink Fundador a Spanish Brandy -- and, in the course of tearing things apart, we found out how, since 1939, he had seen Jamaica as an independent country and how he thought that Independence was the only salvation for Jamaica. He would make us laugh with his stories of his days in Paris, in the 1920's, when writers went to Paris as to Mecca and he would also tell us stories of New Orleans which fascinated him and drew him because, in those days he spoke about, it was still an outpost of France or as much an outpost of France as a city in America could be. He loved New Orleans so much that he studied its history and out of this came his novels set in the town, "Royal Street" the most outstanding of them.

How do you characterize a very highly evolved human being, a gentleman, a brilliant scholar of West Indian history, a suave, sophisticated boulevardier, a distinguished novelist, when he is a friend of yours with whom you drink in a bed-sitting room in Harlem? Friendship of perhaps the most highly civilized human being you are ever likely to meet; you are grateful because, while he does not think very much of you as a writer, he is nevertheless quite ready and happy to advise you on writing if you ask him. You are terribly impressed because





a Jamaican, like yourself, was for years editor of Munsey's Magazine, the magazine that presented to the world most of the great names you know in writing. You are also delighted because he was also editor, once, of Photoplay Magazine which was for a great many years the Blue Book of the film industry in America, and he knew Olga Tetrova, Nita Naldi, Pauline Frederick, Theda Bara, Alice Brady, Valeska Surat and many more of those great stars of the silent screen who enchanted you when you were an adolescent boy.

You cannot characterize him because the keys of the typewriter get all entangled with your personal emotion. But you hope that Jamaica realized that she produced a very fine artist, a very fine scholar, a very fine writer, a very fine gentleman who proved himself in all these categories out in the big world, away from the very limited thinking, the very limited assessor powers of this wonderful but, at the moment, very *bourgeois* country.

A friend of mine has told me that Adolphe Roberts, in his opinion, went away to die because he was bitter, because he thought that Jamaica did not credit him with even a half of what he merited, because Jamaica did not recognize the man who, 25 years ago, first realized that this country should be independent, and said so, and because Jamaica also did not realize that in him she had a world figure of a scholar, writer, historian and very fine gentleman. I am very much inclined to agree, and I am very sorry that I am forced to agree. It is very easy, after a splendid man's death, to sit back and say how wonderful he was and to remember what he said to one two years ago. It is fashionable to speak well of the dead. I have always thought Shakespeare was wrong. The evil that men do does not live very long after them. It is the good that they do that survives, and now that Adolphe Roberts is gone, everyone is saying how splendid he was. I, for one, have always known how splendid he was, and I, too, am as much to blame as anyone else, because I did not see as much of him as I might, because I did not seize the opportunity to be close to him and to learn what I could from him.

But I have written this and I hope that, wherever he is, he knows that I have written it. We have been very fortunate, very blessed and very lucky to have had him.

*Pepperpot*