

# **Color Bar**

**Bradley Stoke**



What a horrible place it was! Not at all the kind of place where Tizzy would have chosen to wait for her sister Edith. But she couldn't very well stand in the street. Certainly not in the twilight of this unfamiliar town under the gas lit street lamps. She'd only be asking to be arrested. And none of the other bars and hotels would have permitted a person of colour on their premises. But this hotel, the Breckinridge Inn, so close to the train station, had, according to Edith's letters, the only mixed bar in the whole of Tramville.

Tizzy wasn't really the kind of girl who'd normally choose to enter a bar at all, any more than would her sister, even though in Harlem there were many bars that welcomed coloured people: bars, in fact, where not only the bar stewards but the proprietors were themselves black, brown or yellow. Even so, she thought of them as places of ill repute, and although not an especially religious girl, she had many sympathies with the temperance movement. Drink was surely an excuse for vice and impropriety. And drunkenness was the disease of so many working families. Tizzy had read enough novels to know that the consequences of drink were generally bad ones.

But here she was, as arranged, at the battered heavy door to the Breckinridge Inn where she had arranged to wait for Edith who would come as soon as she had finished her day's work at the house where she worked as a maid. When Tizzy pushed open the door, she could see that there were not very many friendly Negro faces. There was one girl who looked coloured, but all the rest of the few people in the bar were all men and all white. But what could Tizzy do? After her long train journey

south, she couldn't very well just turn tail and return to New York.

She bravely drew in her breath, conscious of the eyes focussing on her, and then strode across the sawdust-strewn floor, past the piano by the corner, and with her handbag and umbrella gripped to her bosom. She dressed well. She knew that. Her job as a clerk in the factory had provided her with the income to dress as a lady. And her education at the college had equipped her with the taste and manners to carry it well. But here, she was just a Negro woman. No one in Tramville would see beyond her skin colour to the sophisticated lady underneath.

She strode towards the bar, careful to stand a distance from any of the men leaning against it and leering at her. The bar steward, an elderly man who was half Negro, half White, approached her. He didn't seem especially welcoming.

"What you doing here, miss? This ain't your beat, is it? They's other gals doing business here. They ain't gonna be anyways too pleased when they sees you here."

Tizzy had no idea what the bar steward was trying to say. His Southern accent didn't help her comprehension any. She smiled. "I'm meeting my sister here, sir. She works for the Tylers. She's a maid. I shall just be waiting for her here."

"You ain't no local gal, are you, miss? You're from the north, ain'tcha? So, what's it you'll be wanting. We ain't not got no fancy wines here in Tramville."

"Just a soda," Tizzy replied. "Soda and ice."

"We ain't got no ice. But we got soda plenty. You won't be wanting it with anything else?"

Tizzy shook her head. What did the bar steward think she was? A woman who drank in public? The next thing, he'd be expecting her to light a cigarette. Like that other Negro girl she could see through the blue haze of pipe and cigarette smoke at the other end of the bar. She was smoking a cigarette at the end of a long black holder and was surrounded by men. Tizzy wondered at moral values in these Southern States. No education, that's what it was. Coloured girls were just not behaving as they should. No wonder it was known that white men in the south treated women of colour so badly. Tizzy took her glass of soda and sat on a stool by a table as far from the bar and as close to the door as she could.

As she sat perched on the stool, crossing her legs so that her dress was raised above her ankles, showing the white stockings she'd so recently bought, she studied the bar with desultory interest. Darn! The place was filthy. No wonder bars had an unsavoury and disreputable reputation. If only there was a nicer place for her to wait in Tramville. Infuriatingly, more pleasant places than the Breckinridge Inn did exist. Quite a few of them. Tea shops, a drugstore, a couple of rather more pleasant looking hotels, but none of these places admitted coloureds. Indeed, one of the tea shops even went so far as to put up a small cardboard sign in the window: 'No Coloreds'. Tizzy had frowned when she saw that, but she could scarcely pretend that it was the first time she'd seen something like that. Such signs graced so many of the shops in downtown Manhattan. And, indeed, even some shops and hotels in Harlem didn't welcome people of colour. Tizzy sniffed, but this was the way of the world. It had been like that all her life. And it would probably be like that forever. Leastways, she

wasn't no slave. Thank the Merciful Lord for progress!

The wallpaper in the hotel was peeling, torn and stained yellow and brown by decades of tobacco smoking and from the flickering flame of the gaslights. The bar was both grimy and dirty. There were dried puddles of beer on the timbered floor. On the walls were faded posters for circuses that had passed by many years before, local elections that were long decided and, more troubling, sepia prints of women with voluminous petticoats and bare arms.

Tizzy sipped her soda slowly. She could see from the clock just above the bar that she had at least an hour to wait. She studied a nearby poster for the circus, amused by the lurid descriptions of freaks, clowns and acrobats. The coloured woman at the other end of the bar lifted herself off her stool and strode across floor of the bar towards her; arm-in-arm with a man she'd been talking to. When she approached Tizzy, she smiled at the man who disengaged his arm and entered through a plain door not many feet away from her. As it opened, it let free the most appalling stench. Tizzy had unwittingly chosen to sit right next to the door to the men's urinal. The black woman glared at Tizzy. She was dressed in a lurid red and black dress that was so loose at the bosom that Tizzy could see the very heave and contours of her breasts. As if that glimpse were not sufficient, the woman leaned over, her straight arms supporting her weight and the breasts very nearly falling out.

"Hey, girl!" She said in a not very friendly voice. "You're new here, ain'tcha? This once, and I mean this once, I'll take it you just don't know the rules of this here bar. But if I sees you here again, I'm gonna fucking kill you!"

Tizzy was shocked. She knew of the word ‘fuck’, of course. Who hadn’t? But she’d never heard it uttered before. She sat silent in shock as the woman left the premises, taking her male friend with her. Tizzy was quite puzzled. Was this woman one of those women of ill repute that she’d read about? One of those people she’d been warned so many times not to associate with?

As if in answer, three men approached her from across the bar where they had previously been engaged in conversation with the woman who had just left. They strode right over to the table where Tizzy was sitting, carrying their steel mugs in their hands. This was not welcome attention, but Tizzy didn’t know what to do. She couldn’t disappoint Edith by leaving the bar at this moment.

And then they sat down in the chairs around the table, imposing themselves on Tizzy without as much as a by your leave, and plonked their mugs on the table. Tizzy gasped, and pulled her handbag against her chest and picked up her glass in the hope that the soda could somehow defend her. The men were not dressed especially badly. And they had shaved their chins and cheeks. Tizzy could see that they weren’t workmen. But neither were they gentlemen as she understood it from her readings in popular fiction.

“You is sure a purty gal!” exclaimed one of the men, who was tall and slim with a thin moustache and wore a smart bowler hat. “You’re new here, ain’tcha?”

“And I don’t reckon old Emmie wants more competition on her turf, does she, gal?” sneered a second man, who also wore a bowler but whose moustache was very thick and who was perhaps nearer forty than thirty years old. “She gave you a bit of

friendly advice I could see there.”

“Well,” smirked the third, who was portly and wore a broad brimmed hat rather like farm workers were known to wear, with no moustache but very thick lenses on his steel-frame spectacles. “This gal’s damned lucky that it was Emmie and not Peggy or Bonnie who gave her a word.”

“Yeah!” agreed the first man. “Then there’d have been a fucking catfight!”

That word again! Tizzy gasped as the three men chortled and laughed at their imaginings. What horrible foul-mouthed men! Oh! If only Edith would arrive!

“So, gal! What’s your name?” asked the tall thin man.

“Name?” half-whispered Tizzy.

“Yeah! You got a name, ain’tcha? All God’s children got names,” continued the tall thin man. “I’m Tom. This here’s Jack.” The fat man nodded with the same unchanged smirk. “And this here’s Ollie.” The older man gave a thin inexpressive smile. “So, gal, what’s your name?”

“Theresa,” replied Tizzy, not for one moment intending to reveal the name she was most often known by.

“Turh Reeza? That’s a real fancy name, gal,” sniffed the man named Jack. “For a nigger. You ain’t from round these parts, are you?”

Tizzy shook her head. No, she wasn’t. And where *was* Edith? Help me.

“We got some Noo Yawk whore down for the day,” laughed Ollie. “You got tired of doing tricks in the nigger bars of Manhattan? Jerking off nigger dicks. You come down here for real southern meat?”

Tizzy blanched. "I. Am. Not. A. Whore." She spelt out. "I've come into this bar only to wait for my sister. She works for the Tylers, you know. Here in Tramville."

"Old Terence Tyler," Jack remarked. "The accountant. I never liked the man."

"Pah!" Tom snorted. "All nigger bitches are whores. Ain'tcha? What else could they be? They's be just gasping for a length of a white man's dick. C'mon gal. Whatcha got? And what's it cost? You don't have to worry about Emmie. She's gone now!"

Tizzy didn't answer. She looked down at her soda. Should she just leave now? Or try to finish her drink and hope that Edith would arrive soon.

"Hey girl. Don't ignore us," ordered Jack, the fat man. "You can't pretend you came in this bar not expecting a bit of attention. A purty gal like you. C'mon. Give a man a kiss." He leant towards her and puckered his lips. Tizzy turned away, not really able to disguise the expression of disgust on her face. But turning away from Jack brought her eyes in line with Ollie. Before she had a chance to do anything, he planted a kiss on her cheek.

"See, Jack!" boasted Ollie, while Tizzy tried wiping off the slimy memory of his kiss from her face with the back of her hand. "It's me she likes."

Tom laughed and grabbed Tizzy's hand from her face. "Don't worry, Jack. I'm sure she likes all of us. She's just a little shy. Ain'tcha girl?"

"I must be going now," said Tizzy weakly, seeing that she was surrounded on all three sides of her. And she could see that a couple of other men from the other side



---

of the bar were approaching in her direction. And they carried not looks of concern and reassurance, but leering unfriendly smirks like these horrible men. She put her drink down, still far from empty, and made to stand up. "I'll meet my sister outside."

"You ain't going nowhere, girl!" commanded Tom, in a rather less friendly manner. "Leastways not till you've given my friend here the courtesy of a kiss. That ain't too much to ask, is it?" He placed a hand on her shoulder, pushing her back down into her seat.

Tizzy was genuinely scared now. She looked around her at the five men surrounding her. The two new men wore broad-brimmed hats and their clothes were clean but designed for rough farm work. They pulled chairs over and sat at Tizzy's table. She pleaded with Tom. "Just a kiss. Is that all? Then I can leave."

Jack chortled. "A kiss that's all dearie. You have my word. Just a kiss."

Tizzy shivered. This was not good. She closed her eyes and breathed deep, while her heart thundered in her chest and threatened her composure. She pursed her lips in a kiss-like fashion and pushed her face towards where she thought Jack was. But what met her lips was not a cheek, but a tongue that was slobbery and wet and rubbery. Tizzy drew back in alarm.

"C'mon gal! A kiss!" commanded Tom.

"And one for all the boys!" ordered one of the new men, who was younger than the others, not even sporting a moustache, but with horrible cold blue eyes.

"No. I can't. I mustn't!"

"Are you telling us what to do, you nigger bitch whore!" growled a suddenly

rather aggressive Ollie. “All we want is a kiss. A purty nigger bitch comes into the Breckinridge. Waaall! A fellow expects a kiss, don’t he?” He grasped her wrist with a hand.

“Please leave me!” Tizzy cried, tears welling at the corner of her eyes.

“Without a kiss?” snarled Tom, taking her other wrist and holding her to her chair. “That’s not polite, that ain’t. You just gonna have to satisfy all the boys here.”

“I wager that bitch has got the biggest fucking mamas you seen!” suddenly interspersed the younger man. “These nigger whores. They’ve always got a mother of a bosom.” He leaned over and pressed his large hands on both of Tizzy’s breasts. Tizzy cried out in alarm and shame, but a hand from someone, she didn’t know who, had grasped her round her chin, pulling back her neck. Her forehead broke out in sweat and her eyes popped with terror.

“How they feel, Bob? Juicy and firm?”

“This bitch has got big cocksucking lips, Ollie.”

“I’ll lock the goddamn door, fellows.”

“I can’t tell what she’s got under all these damned layers of her goddamn dress.”

“She’s got real black skin, ain’t she? They say the darker the nigger the more stupid. That’s cos they ain’t like civilised white men.”

“She don’t look like she’s happy none.”

“These nigger bitches are always hot for it. That’s what my grandpappy said when he had all them slaves back then.”

“I wanna see this whore’s tits.”

Through the tears which clouded her vision, Tizzy watched the faces of the men tormenting her, so close to her face, and behind them, taunting her, but impressing itself on her consciousness, was a poster for a circus. And then after this, events became clouded and uncertain. The sequence became muddled and indistinct. But always painful. Always horrible. And with no let up.

First her blouse was torn from her from the front, by one of the men, probably the younger man who’d been groping her so roughly through her dress. It didn’t tear smoothly. It was roughly tugged and pulled by rough violent hands, while her hands were pulled back behind her, her head pulled back and then in a series of rips and tears and rents, she felt the covering over her bosom come off and then the unfamiliar sensation of air against her breasts.

“This bitch ain’t got no special big tits, has she?”

“They’re black. But they ain’t mamas! Peggy’s are twice, three times the size than these little things.”

“I thought all nigger bitches had big tits.”

“They all got big asses, though!”

“And fucking big cunts!”

Two words that shocked and horrified Tizzy coming through the mist of her terror. But the words were not all. The next few minutes saw her pushed onto the ground, and her back held by one of the men, her legs spread out on either side of her and pulled apart, her hands and head restrained, her breasts revealed, their nipples

reflected in the smoked glass of the mirror opposite. And then her petticoats and knickers were as roughly torn from her as her blouse, so her legs were bare. She was wearing the torn rags of her smart clothes, the starched white of her underwear visible and contrasting with the blackness of her skin.

The men were strangely quiet now. Somehow they had lost the need or even the desire to speak. They were panting heavily. Their faces had become even uglier: wild and bestial with their desire.

“Let her have it!” said one.

“Yeah. The bitch was asking for it. She’s just a northern whore come down to muscle in our gals’ territory.”

“These nigger bitches like it anyway. You’s can tell. Nigger bitches always gagging for white man’s cock.”

Another foul word! But one that was so soon substantiated as Tizzy caught a glimpse of erect penises that were pulled free of their pants. She had never seen a penis before. Well, not since her kid brother’s. Unless you counted the marble ones on the statues in the Met. And they had all been very tiny. But these ones weren’t tiny. They were horrible and huge. And so ugly! Long and thick and veiny. At their end was a stiff purple knob with a leering grin, but one tilted on the vertical axis. But Tizzy had no chance to study this new sight. Indeed she had little chance to see the penises at all. She felt rough hands against her thighs, and then the friction of hairy thigh against her stockinged leg, and then the shock, the pain, the trauma of violation.

Tizzy had never been this close before. A kiss with a boy at the college one

evening. A prolonged mistletoe embrace one Christmas. Furtively held hands in the park one winter. But never this physical violence. And so much more painful than she imagined. Exacerbated by her shame, confusion and fear. A pain greater than the slaps that hit her face as she struggled to get free. Or the grip on her arms and ankles that tightened as she jerked and thrashed about. Or the occasional bite and pinch on her breasts by one of the men who roughly held her down with his face on her bare bosom.

And all through this, while it was happening, as much as in her later memory, a disjointed series of images. Of looming, leering, cruel faces. Of the peeling wallpaper and posters lit up by the flickering gaslights. Of the grunts and pants and wheezes. Of her own salty sweet tears and the snot which bubbled out from her nostrils. Of the chafing of men's thighs and knees against her own. Of the roughness and violence of her deflowering.

Edith had no notion of course of what was happening to her sister when she arrived at the entrance to the Breckinridge Inn. She hoped that her sister hadn't had to wait long, and she was sorry that she couldn't have arranged anywhere better to meet up. But she knew how very unfriendly people could be towards women of colour. The local constable had once arrested her one evening when she was checking the timetable at the train station, accusing her of soliciting when all she'd been doing was asking the time from one of the passengers who were alighting from a train. But the Breckinridge Inn was a mixed bar. Some of the senior male Negro servants at the Tylers' went there, and she'd sometimes seen Negro women go through the doors.

They were dressed very extravagantly, but Edith had no real idea of what their profession might be. Like Tizzy, she had been brought up by strict parents who had inculcated her with strong principles of virtue and propriety, and had left her innocent of very much in the world.

But the bar was closed when she got there, although an elderly half-caste man was standing by the door smoking a rolled-up cigarette. She spoke to him.

“Good evening, sir. I’m looking for my sister. She was due to be waiting for me at this here bar.”

“Your sister?” the man asked with a quizzical frown. “Coloured girl, like you? Yeah, she’s waiting for you.”

Edith smiled broadly. “That’s wonderful! I’ve been looking forward to seeing her for so many months. In fact, ever since I last saw her on Thanksgiving at my parents’ farm.”

“She’ll be mighty pleased to see you too, ma’am.”

“So, can I get in to see her then?”

“Well. That ain’t real easy now. She’s being entertained by some of the guests. We’ll just have to wait till they finish their entertaining.”

““Entertaining”? I don’t understand.”

“You will, ma’am. You will.”

And indeed Edith would soon enough. The bar steward assiduously avoided being especially clear of what he meant, and carefully steered the conversation towards the coming and going at the Tylers’. He cussed a little, which Edith did not

appreciate, and mysteriously referred to his clientele as the worst kind of scum. “They’s mighty fine men when it comes to their business. But their souls. Well. They ain’t going to heaven, nohow. It ain’t right some times what they do.”

Edith had no idea what the bar steward was alluding to. “Why don’t you persuade them to behave better, then?”

“Well, that ain’t easy, ma’am. They don’t sees me as a real person. They’s don’t see no nigger as a real person. And if they’s do anything, they’s nothing I could do to stop them. Not even going to the law. That Constable Aaron. He’s a mighty mean son of a bitch when it comes to niggers keeping to the law, but he ain’t so particular when it comes to white folks.”

Eventually, the door to the bar opened and a series of men filed out, straightening their ties and straightening their hats. After the last man left, the bar steward put his head through the door. “It’s a real quiet place now, ma’am. I knew they’d be no custom after the entertaining. That’s always the way. Leave the tidying up to us coloured folks.”

And the ‘tidying up’ as Edith discovered, related to her poor sister Tizzy. The girl lay on the ground, drool and saliva slipping out of the side of a face slumped onto the ground, her bare legs still wide open and her bosom uncovered. Edith burst into tears. Almost suddenly and without thought. Her hands pushed against her mouth as she looked in concern and anxiety at her sister, who was breathing heavily and loudly. And, yes, there were a few blotches of red on her stockings and petticoat that proved her virtue thus far. But, as Edith prayed to the Lord in her moment of need, she could

see that ahead of her, and of course for Tizzy, that the nightmare had not just finished.

In truth, it had only just begun.