

Maurice Hunter as a Wise Man from the East

## A Novelty in Blue

A Story by JULIAN ELIHU BAGLEY

CCHEMING hordes of get-rich-I quick migrants had poured into the Magic City of Florida for three years. Now the town was crowded with adventurers and the cost of living, already advanced threefold, was rising as steadily as mercury in a thermometer on a sweltering July morning. Work was plentiful but there was an excessive supply of workers. Thus it came to the point that whenever a job was chalked up on the bulletin board of the employment bureau, men-and women, too, as a matter of fact,leaped at it like a cage of hungry lions leap at a hunk of raw meat.

But the workers were not alone in their gamble for a chance in this new El Dorado. Rich folk were playing the game too, and scarcely a day passed without seeing some one of them make or lose a fortune. Sometimes the trick was turned at the Casino, but more likely it happened in the exchange or sale of a piece of land, or a hotel, or a restaurant, or any and everything that could be leased, sold, bought or ex-Thus it was in some such labyrinth of scheming as this that one blues that most near set me crazy. John Ketchem got possession of the Lyric Theater. And in the beginning the new owner had made the house pay, but when a rival capitalist opened the Crispus Attucks Theater for Negroes and the Negroes deserted the gallery of the Lyric for the more comfortable main floor of the Attucks, there was a noticeable decrease in the Lyric's receipts.

"Well, let the darkies go," John Ketchem had told his house manager, "in a month or so we'll fill that gallery with white folks-even if we have to cut down on the price of admission.

TY/ELL, the month or so passed. W And true to his promise, John Ketchem cut down on his price of But the gallery vacated by the Negroes remained empty. Meantime there had been much talk among the white folk about the fine singing, the furious dancing, and the genuine comedy down at the new theater for the colored people. And how had the white folk heard all this? From their servants, of course. Listen to Roseanna: "Oh! Miss Annie, you jus' oughtto been down at the Lyric last night! It was too wonderful for words. There was a fellow who danced the Buck like you never seen it danced befo'. I declare, it 66 TY/ELL, I hate to admit it," he seems jus' like his foots took a fit the minute he give 'em the first fling. ager, "but the darkies have got us scenes: handshakes . . . poses . . .

Then there was a man who played like he had to git drunk to keep from being scared of his wife. And there was a woman name' Ma Rayford, who sung I hear they are going to put on

for the white folks sometime soon. And

'cause you'll surely have the time of

But Roseanna was not the only ser-

vant boosting the Attucks shows. Here and there chauffeurs dropped casual ers at work chanted Ma Rayford's blues till their white foremen inquired in a while, when some tourist innocently inquired if "Charlie," the bellboy, was going to see the girl friend that night, "Charlie" was almost sure to respond: "Yes, sir, I'm going to take her to the Attucks." And it required Lee "had all the native chirpers beat a no prompting on the part of the tourist to find out just how good the shows at the Attucks were. So when the midnight shows at the Negro theater became an actual fact white theater patrons were curious enough to turn out en masse.

And John Ketchem was among the first to take advantage of the opportunity, for he attended the premiere.

licked. They're giving the folks what they want down there. And we've got to change our whole show. We've got to put more pep in our productions. Our patrons want something different-something like the darkies are giving 'em. And we've got to hurry up and give it to 'em, too. Otherwise one of these days we'll wake up and find ourselves playing to more empty seats."

Well the house manager and John Ketchem put their heads together and within a couple of weeks they had worked out a program which bade fair to catch the public's fancy. Then through the daily papers and on the screen of the theater, the patrons were told about it. "A stupendous production of My Lady of the South," so the announcement read, "for one week only, with an all-star white cast, singing and acting so much like the people they're portraying that you'll think you're right back on the old plantation. And in between the acts there'll be sketches and dances. And for the last night, as a special extraordinary added attraction, we'll present Miss Virginia Lee, a little blues singer, who has all the native chirpers special midnight Buck and Wing beat a mile. So come along, folks, Dance and a Blues Singing Contest and hear this little lady sing. You'll rave over her, we know. For she's if they do, you must go, Miss Annie, the bluest warbling warbler that ever warbled blues."

AME Saturday night, and the final hints to their employers regarding the performance of My Lady of the merits of the productions; black labor- South. For this gala event John Ketchem had filled the Lyric. But it had taken no little energy and scheming to the source of their origin, and, once do it. Tickets had been sold to the whites at cut-rates, and they had bought out the orchestra and balcony, while the Negroes, lured into coming by free passes to certain loquacious ones and the extravagant claim that Miss Virginia mile," had crowded the gallery to its very doors.

It's ten o'clock now. The curtain has just fallen on the last act of the play. The house is still dark. But the spotlight of attention is focused on A Novelty in Blue. This is flashed on the screen: "Miss Virginia Lee, noted blues singer, arrives in the Magic City for a one night engagement at the Lyric and is met at the station by city officials and the owner of the W confided to his house man- Lyric." Then there were the usual

December, 1928