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Sambo and the Snow Mountains

by

Walter de la Mare

(from his *Collected Stories for Children* [1947])

Sambo's *great*-grandfather had been a king in his own country, though it was only a small country. Sambo's *grandfather* was brought to the White Man's Land by a missionary, whose name was Grimble, the Rev. Silas Makepeace Grimble. He had been born in Aberdeen. Sambo's *father*, after being Mr. Grimble's eldest son's valet *and* coachman, set up in business as a barber. But though he merrily did his best, he couldn't get enough customers, either for haircutting, singeing, shampooing or shaving. He would sometimes sit for hours in his empty shop beside the basin, staring out into the sunny street. So at last he was compelled to pull down the blind, put up the shutters, and take down his pole; and he soon afterwards died; and was laid to rest beside his beloved Dinah.

That leaves Sambo. Sambo was *Dr.* Grimble's pageboy—*Dr.* Grimble being the Rev. Silas's great-nephew. The doctor lived in a tall brown house made of wood. It had three Lombardy poplar trees in front of it and honeysuckle grew over the porch. Sambo had many duties. With his twenty-one little silver buttons in front of his tunic, and a little peak behind over his tight trousers, he used to open the door to his master's patients and show them into his waiting-room. It was a small but cheerful room with mosquito-screens at the windows, black and white oilcloth on the floor, a picture over the fireplace, and a lovely fall of coloured horse-hair piled up in the grate beneath, all through the summer. This cascade hid the ugly bars of the grate. So in summer there was no need for Sambo to blacklead them.

Sambo also helped his master to mix his medicines. When the doctor had put the drugs into the bottle, Sambo added the water; when the doctor had rolled out his pills, Sambo put them into the pill-boxes. By means of a large stick of red sealing-wax and a little blue gas-jet, he used to seal down the paper after he had wrapped up the bottles and boxes. He enjoyed the sealing-wax part of his work far better than the bottle-washing—in a small square leaden sink under a tiny brass tap.

All this was in the early afternoon. When the bottles had been neatly wrapped and numbered, Sambo used to put them into his basket and carry them off to his master's patients. Sometimes he had to walk one mile, sometimes three, sometimes even five—and right into the country. The time so taken depended on how many candy shops, other boys, performing animals, street musicians, dog-fights and other pleasures or dangers he encountered on his way to and fro. So long as he was home again at his master's house by six, all was well. In the evening he waited on the doctor while he ate his supper, and this the doctor did very quickly. Sambo brought him his grog about nine, and then went to bed.

On the whole, Sambo was happy, though until he became unhappy he had not noticed it much. Though he scampered with beating heart at sound of his master's call, he admired the reddish hair that stood in a little wall above his forehead, his gold spectacles and handsome watch-chain. He had enough to eat, time to be lazy in, and a truckle bed with a flock pillow in a little box-room under the roof. There was only one thing against him. He was black. He was as black as all his ancestors. He was as black as a bale of velvet, as a cellar with no windows in it, as a chimney full of soot.

He might not himself have much noticed this if the palefaced boys of the town were not always reminding him of it—particularly a pug-nosed little rascal called William who was page to a dentist of the odd name of Tooth: Mr. Tooth. This William, whenever he met Sambo—partly because he was jealous of his buttons (which were silver), and even of his two-lidded basket (which was covered with mottled American cloth), but mostly because he knew no better—would yell at sight of him, 'Yah! Blackamoor! Yah! tar-face! Yah! you little grinning bandy-legged monkey-jibbed lump of bony! Off the streets with you! Streets is for white men!'

At this Sambo, pretending not to have heard him, would at once cross the road. White or black or coffee-coloured, it was beneath him, he told himself, to be seen fighting with a dentist's boy. But he knew in his heart he was afraid of William, and he crossed the road. Still, it was chiefly his black skin that was now on Sambo's mind. And *now* it troubled him not

only because of his enemies, the street boys, but for his own private sake also. After all, he knew that the rest of him, what was inside, was little different even from his master's. And even his skin was not his fault. Yet the more intently he pored over his young face in his bedroom scrap of looking-glass, the blacker he seemed to get.

This could not have been so in his own country. There, to be black was bliss. His great-grandfather, as he knew, had been a king in that country and it was white boys who would be laughable there. Indeed, when first the Rev. Silas Grimble appeared in Poojooboo, the black women and children laughed so much among themselves at his tall hat, pale face and silvery whiskers—supposing that his clothes were as much a part of him as its spots are part of a leopard—that at last they became quite friendly with him. They liked him because he looked so amusing. But not even they—not even the piccaninnies—laughed at him to his face. That was not their manners. If, then, William the dentist's boy had taken ship to Poojooboo to find Sambo on the throne, the boys in the streets under the breadfruit trees would have yelled their *Yahs* at *him*—but not out loud.

Sambo knew enough of all this, mused on it when he was alone, to make him feel not only unhappy but homesick. It was not, then, that he pined merely to be a white boy. There were white boys he knew by sight he wouldn't have pined to be for anything in the wide world. No, he only saddened more and more at having to stay black. He wanted to be *all* white and yet himself. This sorrowfulness came over him in curious ways.

On getting up in the morning, for example, he would remember again—if there had been any light to see him by—how black he must have looked between his sheets. Or again, after blowing out his candle on going to bed—and Dr. Grimble gave him only an inch at a time so that he should not undersleep himself—he would realise that without his nightshirt he could not be seen in the dark. There was nothing sad or dreadful in either of these facts—not really; but they stayed in Sambo's mind. They haunted him as a spectre might a corpse.

Perhaps if Sambo had not been so slow in his mind he might soon have learned to be less vain. But he had never been told that to grieve over what one is not may be as vain as to simper at what one is. He had been told very little. So night and morning, Sambo stared at himself in the scrap of looking-glass he treasured. Round, glossy, solemn, his young face stared back at him; and alas, as black as jet!

But though Sambo was slow by nature, though his master always told him things twice over to make sure, though on his rounds he always walked much further than he needed to walk because he made mistakes in arranging the houses he had to walk to, Sambo was persevering, even stubborn. What he began he finished. If mere trying could have blanched him, he would soon have become as fair in aspect as an albino. He took the greatest pains.

First he prayed to be made white, and almost sobbed in his bed, watching in vain for the angel he had hoped might come down through the starry night at once in answer. Then he gave up the kitchen black bread that by rights was his, and lived on the white scraps of French rolls left over from his master's table. The doctor's livery was a dark green, with yellow edging. But Sambo was allowed to wear a white drill waiting-jacket in the mornings—after eleven o'clock. This he himself washed and ironed three times a week and wore in private whenever his master was out, particularly on the days when the doctor went to see his Aunt Clara and spent the night at her house. Often in fear Sambo slept with his head under his bedclothes lest the night itself darkened even the dark. But all such efforts were in vain.

At last one morning—but by no means for the first time—he heard the doctor mention scarlet fever, and that very afternoon he himself carried round a large bottle of medicine to the patient who was suffering from this sad malady. This gentleman lived in a square house covered with vines and creepers, and Sambo could see the shutters drawn close across the windows behind which he lay in bed—bright red, as Sambo supposed, from head to foot.

This reminded him of another patient of the doctor's—a lady who was from Mexico and whose fever had been yellow; and of a little girl with auburn curls who had been at death's door with yellow jaundice, and whose small brother was afterwards brought to the doctor suffering from pink eye. His master too had once had for cook a negro mammy who at full moon was always oppressed with what she called 'de blue debbles'. And what but the doctor's medicines had cured them all? Surely, pondered Sambo, if physic could take away scarlet, yellow, blue and pink, it could wash out black?

Sambo cast his eye towards his master's shelves of bottles and jars and could scarcely wait in patience until he was alone again. He had often been warned not to meddle with them. But then, what a happy surprise it would be for the doctor if one morning Sambo appeared in his bedroom to pull up his blinds as white as himself. He might double his wages.

So one by one Sambo tried every kind of medicine on the shelves in turn, except the poisons which were kept locked up in a small cupboard. Of each he took no more than the least sip and only one sip at a time. If, after removing the glass stopper, the medicine had a very pungent or nauseous smell, he took even less. As with the bottles, full of essences and tinctures, so with the powders and the pastes and the pills. Of every powder he took no more than half a saltspoonful; enough to cover the tip of his little finger of every paste; and half a pill of every kind and size.

Most of these medicines made no difference at all—but then, being little more than a child, Sambo did not at first venture to taste more than one of them at a time. Others made him giddy, or hot, or breathless, or limp, or excited, or silly, or talkative, or thirsty, or hungry—or just the reverse; and one or two of them made him sick. After these his face looked a little green, but even then it was only a black-green and soon passed away. In spite of all this pain and trouble, Sambo remained precisely as black as ever, then, if not a little blacker.

It was odd perhaps that the doctor never noticed either that any of his medicines were dwindling, or that Sambo sometimes looked peculiar. But then he was not an observant man, and he was short-sighted. Besides, though Sambo did not know it, it would have made no difference to his master if he were grey or brown, striped, dappled or piebald. So long, that is, as he did his work well. On the other hand, the doctor was quick enough to notice when Sambo made a mistake—let his little leaden tank run over, delivered a medicine at the wrong house, packed the wrong pills in the right box or *vice versa*. And then Sambo noticed *him*. But Sambo always made it a rule to take very little indeed from any jar or pot that was less than half full.

When Sambo had tasted every kind of physic in his master's dispensing-room—sweet, sour, salt, bitter, dry, oily, thick or thin, including even one or two little remedies that were kept for the doctor's best patients' pet or lap-dogs, stuff to make the eyes bright, or the hair grow, or the teeth clean, or the nails lustrous, and nothing was of any avail, he became sadder than ever. Still, he did not despair, and this was a blessing, for if he had, his poor heart might have become almost as black as his face. Instead of despairing, he began to read the doctor's books. But since of the words on every page he had to look into a dictionary to find the meanings of at least 20 up to 100, and then forgot them, he did not get on very fast or far.

And then one day—he had just brought in the doctor's grog on his salver—Sambo dared to ask him a question.

'If you please, Massa Doc'r,' he said, 's'posin' you'm wanted to be ebber so black like poor Sambo what fijjick would Massa take?'

Unfortunately the doctor was a little deaf as well as short-sighted, and all he said was, 'No, no; that will be all to-night.'

On hearing this, Sambo rejoiced. He thought his master meant that this very evening, after he himself was gone to bed, he would try to turn himself black: '*That*—the taking of the physic—will be all to-*night*!' It seems almost impossible, but Sambo did. And he waited up until he fell asleep about three in the morning kneeling at the doctor's keyhole in the hope of seeing it happen.

He asked his master only one more question, and this was the last question he had ever need to ask. He had thought it over and over for three whole days before. It was a much bolder and braver thing to do even than to call back at the dentist's boy, 'Yah! Chalk-face! Yah! Mammy's milkysop! Off of de streets wid you! Streets am for gentlemen!'

At nine o'clock as usual the following evening he went into the doctor's room with the silver grog-tray in his hand—but nothing on it. It so chanced the doctor was asleep in his chair with his mouth open. So Sambo had to clank with his salver on the table to wake him up. That made the doctor vexed.

Then he noticed the tray was empty, and he said, 'What's that for?'

And Sambo said, 'Dere isn't no rum left, Massa Doc'r'—for rum was the doctor's fancy.

'Where is it gone?' said the doctor.

'*Me* had it, Massa Doc'r,' said Sambo.

'You!' shouted the doctor. 'What for?'

'Oh, Massa,' said Sambo, falling on his knees, 'to make pore Sambo lose his black. To wash him grey, Massa Doc'r, then

white like the little lambs, like Massa Doc'r himsel'. Oh, sir, begorra, I wash and wash and wash, and scrub and scrub and scrub, and rum only polish Sambo's nose and smart his eyes.

*A pill, a pill, is all he ask,
Dat take away his ink-black mask,
And make him quicker at his task.'*

Sambo had spent exactly eight hours and a half in making up and learning this piteous rhyme. He thought his master could not but understand that if he had taken so much trouble he *must* be in earnest. He thought that the instant his master knew the rum had made no difference to Sambo's black he would tell him what would. Instead, the doctor, who, disappointed of his grog, was now very angry, lifted Sambo up in one hand, boxed each of his ears in turn with the other, opened the door, and dropped him on the mat outside it. And so poor Sambo had failed again.

Still, the doctor was not an unkind-hearted man, and next morning he had forgotten all about the rum. In fear that he might remember, however, Sambo had been wise enough to smear a little blacking on the polish which so much rubbing had made of the tip of his broad nose. But there had been no real need to do this. The doctor had quite forgotten, and the same day a whole keg of the best Jamaica rum went down into his cellar.

So the days and even weeks went by. Sambo did not dare to dream even of asking his master any more questions. Instead with a faint heart he tried mixing together one or two and even three of the different drugs and powders, and, thumb and finger clutching his nose, he swallowed these. On his annual half-holiday he even went so far as to swallow a pill which he had mixed with sal volatile and paregoric and then dried into a larger pill with some of the doctor's medical soap and a pinch of senna. It was a very big pill and he nearly choked in the effort, as he sat in the doctor's garden under a blossoming pear-tree. But though a sort of dusky pallor crept over his cheek, it was at least twenty tints away from being as white as the myriad flowers over his head: and by the evening, when he was better, Sambo was wholly his natural black again.

Last of all, his rolling eye glanced along the row of locked-up medicines called Poisons in the doctor's cabinet. *Could* some of them be poisons simply because they would turn a white man into a blackamoor, he wondered? And was the doctor afraid of taking one himself by mistake? *Could* they? But Sambo dared not tamper with the lock.

And still he pined. Lying awake sometimes between his white sheets, the full moon silvering his fuzzy head and gleaming in his treacle-black eyes, he would gaze at her till they ached in his head. Up there, he thought, perhaps.... But before he could follow this fancy far, he was usually fast asleep.

One afternoon, out on his rounds, he met the dentist's boy again. His heart all but choking him, he set down his basket on the 'sidewalk', put his fingers into his ears to keep out the hated *Yahs*, and waited until William had come up with him. Then, trembling all over, he asked the pug-nosed urchin in a shrill quavering voice what was the matter with being black.

'What's the matter?' squeaked the urchin, mimicking him; 'why, dat,' slapping him on one cheek, 'and *dat!*' slapping him on the other. And with redoubled *Yahs* off he went.

So Sambo grew sadder and sadder. Yet by this time he was sure that he knew almost as much about doctoring and physicking, pilling and draughting as his master. And he had all but worn out the dictionary. One of his jobs every day—after whitening the three steps on to the street, polishing up the knocker and the bell-handle, sweeping out the waiting-room, and making the doctor's coffee, was to arrange his master's letters (that had been brought by the postman) on a tray. These he carried in, after thumping at the doctor's bedroom door, with his coffee.

And there came one morning a letter addressed to his master in a most beautiful handwriting. Sambo had never seen such spidery letters, such exquisite curves. Besides this, a most delicious perfume and odour eddied up from the speckless paper to his nose. He lifted the envelope and sniffed and sniffed again. What valerian is to a cat, so was the scent of his envelope to Sambo. He longed to have it for his own.

It seems indeed that Sambo's Satan must have been by at this moment, though he himself could not imagine how Satan could spare the time to tempt so small a darkey. Sambo's night-dark oily eyes glanced around him. He *saw* no one near. And instead of taking up the letter at once to his master, he undid three of his round silver buttons and pushed it in under his tunic. There it remained throughout the morning—the unhappiest he ever had. When he came in the afternoon to a high wall under some bushy linden trees, he sat down beside his basket in the sunshine and shadow, opened the letter, and set

to spelling it out.

First came the address from which it had been written: *White Slopes, The Snow Mountains*. And this, after half-an-hour's patient endeavour, was what Sambo read:

The last Miss Bleech presents her compliments to Dr. Grimble, and wishes to say that she is a very old woman now and ill in bed. She would be much obligated if the doctor would bring physic and come and see her as soon as he can.

In ten minutes Sambo had spelled it through again. He could not understand why this letter began not with 'Dear', as all the few other letters he had ever seen began, but in this strange fashion: *The last Miss Bleech*. Yet perhaps it was her very name that made him in his small mind's eye see this old lady; as plainly as if she lay in her bed before him under the linden trees! Her face wore the kindest of smiles. But it was her address still more that fascinated him. It was like the stare of a snake at a canary. That sudden sweep of frosty whiteness—it shone in on his sorrowful spirit with a radiance he could hardly bear. If only he had wings! Here, the streets were often dark with rain and wind, the doctor's house was at best a gloomy abode, and the white faces of everyone he saw seldom met him with any but the blackest of looks. There was neither help nor hope anywhere to bring the change he pined for. If only his master would send *him* on this journey, tell him what to do, and what physic and juleps and lotions to take with him in his stead!

Sambo knew well this was impossible. He should have driven the very thought of it out of his head. But even under the green lime trees the Satan he feared must have been there beside him. He pushed back the letter under his tunic, hooked his basket over his arm, and finished his afternoon's round. He had made up his mind. He would say nothing about the letter. He would pack up the physics himself. When he got to where the letter said, he would tell this old lady, the last Miss Bleech, that the doctor had sent him. And there, surely, would be the end of all his troubles. This sinful plan had grown up within him as quick as Jonah's gourd. He went home on fire with it; and waited only until the next time the doctor went off, to visit his Aunt Clara, to carry it out.

Poor Sambo. His master had told him little about his oughts; and though he knew that borrowing money without leave was wrong, he did not know that it was almost as wicked as *stealing*. He had been kept 'in the dark'. But he did know that it might be a very long way to the Snow Mountains, that he would have to travel there in a train, and that to travel in a train you must go to the railway station and buy a ticket. In the middle of that night, then—and the doctor had gone off with his little black bag about three in the afternoon—Sambo crept downstairs, opened his master's drawer, and took out from it in greenbacks and silver dollars about half of the money he found in the little tin box inside it. For a moment he stood listening, his bulging eyes ashine in the candlelight, his pale-palmed hands trembling. But no sound at all came out of the empty night. If in his dreams his master *was* watching him, he had not uttered a word.

The money safe in his pocket, he stole up to a room where the doctor's old mother used to sleep when she was alive. He had sometimes glanced sharply in here before, in dread of her ghost, and once in curiosity and in the bright light of day, he had peeped too into the wardrobe that stood facing the empty bed. His lighted candle in his hand, his black feet bare, his small ivory-white teeth chattering, he crept soundlessly and more darkly than a shadow into this chamber. He opened the great wardrobe door. From every hook there hung limp and lifeless the old clothes of the doctor's old mother—gowns and shawls and mantles; puce and violet, mauve and purple; and on a hook all to itself a little satin bodice, lovelier than any and of a faded vermilion, which must have been worn by her when she was young. Sambo gasped for delight at sight of all these colours, these silks and satins. He gently put out his finger as if to touch them. For Sambo's master, even though he had a quick temper, had been very fond of his mother, and so could not bear to part with her clothes.

Else, Sambo perhaps would never have reached the Snow Mountains. For among them there hung a cloak made only of ermine. This had been a present from the doctor to his mother on her seventieth birthday, and must have cost a mint of money. For love of her son and for pride in it she always wore it after that when she went out at night to hear music or to sup with her friends, though this was seldom.

Sambo carefully placed his candlestick on the dressing-table in front of the large dark looking-glass, and standing on a chair took down the cloak from its hook. He not only took it down, he put it on. Then he got up on to a stool, and by the flickering beam of his candle surveyed himself in the glass. Out of its quiet depths showed his round black fuzzy head, his dark liquid eyes, gleaming teeth, small black hands—and from chin to heel flowed down this silken, silvery, soft white fur—except for the little black tufts on it.

Sambo had never seen so marvellous a thing before. He could hardly even sigh for wonder. This it was then to be the great-grandson of a king! There was but one small trouble in his mind—the tufts. And lo and behold, on the dressing-table there lay a pair of the old lady's embroidery scissors, of silver and mother-of-pearl, and with tapering steel points. Sambo sat down on the floor, and heedless of how the cold night hours glided away, snipped out with the scissors every single tuft of black he found in the cloak. He gathered them up, opened a bandbox, put them in, huddled up the cloak into a bundle, took his candle and went back to his master's room.

There, for his candle was now guttering out, he lit the gas and turned it low. From the shelves above his head, since he could not borrow from all, he took down the third and seventh bottles of the powders from every shelf—his small heart being dark with superstitions—and he put a little of each of their contents into some pill-boxes. He took only powders because he was afraid on a long journey that bottles might break. Now Dr. Grimble served up his pills in boxes of different colours, according to what ailment the pills were for. So Sambo had ten boxes in all, two of which were of the same colour, as there were five shelves. These ten boxes he put into his basket. In other boxes he put some of his favourite pills, and he could not resist one bottle of Nicey-Nicey, as the doctor called it. It was this nicey-nicey that he mixed with his medicines to make them go down sweeter. Sambo also put into his basket one or two little shiny knives, some long scissors, a slim wooden pipe with a cup at the end of it for listening to hearts with, and a pair of dark-glassed tortoiseshell spectacles: and that was all.

When he had finished packing his basket the grey of dawn was showing through the cracks of the window shutters. His cheek almost as grey itself, though he did not know it, he stole downstairs. His basket on one side of him, and a bundle—containing his money, both his nightshirts and two old bandana handkerchiefs—on the other, he sat down to breakfast. It was still early morning when, having eaten the doctor's breakfast as well as his own, Sambo let himself out of the house, crept past the whispering poplar trees, and ran off.

It was a bad thing to do, but perhaps if the dentist's boy had told Sambo what was the matter with being black, he might never have gone at all. But go he did; and all that day until evening fell, he hid in one of the mangers in the stables of an old empty house that he had often noticed on his rounds—its rambling garden deep with grass and busy with birds. Part of the time he nodded off to sleep, but most of it he sat with clammy hands and open mouth listening in dread of the baying of the bloodhounds sniffing him out; of Satan; but far more, of never reaching the Snow Mountains. Only once he ventured from his hiding-place to see if any of last year's apples were still mouldering in the grass. He found none, and had to go hungry.

In the dusk, his basket and ermine cloak over his arm, he skulked off to the railway station and asked for a ticket to the nearest station to the Snow Mountains.

'Who wants it?' said the man.

'Massa, sir,' said Sambo.

'If he wants a ticket for the Snow Mountains, why doesn't he say so?' said the man.

'Me no know,' said Sambo, and the man gave him a ticket. Sambo dared ask nobody any other questions, but spied about until he saw a tall wooden pole surmounted with a finger-board. On this was scrawled in charcoal: 'To the Snow Mountains'. It pointed to a train—standing empty in the murky gloom of a siding—and an ancient, faded, blistered, ramshackle train it looked.

There was not a human soul to be seen here, or even sign of any, not even of the engine-driver. And when Sambo at last sidled up to enquire of a huddled shape sitting in the dark in how many hours' time the train would be starting, no tongue answered, and he found he had been whispering to a huge sack of bran! So without more ado he climbed up into one of the carriages—and very dark and musty it was inside—lay down on the hard wooden seat, covered himself with his ermine cloak, and in less than no time he fell asleep.

He awoke in a dreadful nightmare, not knowing where he was, and supposing there had been an earthquake. When he scrambled to his knees and looked out of the window, he found that the train was jerking and jolting along over a very narrow track in the light of the moon, and on either side the track was nothing but the wide glare and glitter and whiteness of ice and snow. The scene stretched on into the distance, a waste of frozen snow. It was a strange thing that any train could have gone rambling off so quick into the north like this. But then Sambo had been fast asleep, nor knew how long. And but one glance at the glory of the snow did him more good than if he had swallowed the whole of his

master's medicines, including the poisons.

The train went on, clanking and clattering—Sambo could even hear the tinkle of the broken ice, and still the moon shone down, and now it began to snow again, but very sparsely. Sambo hung as far as he could out of the narrow window to peep into the carriages ahead of and behind him. Both it seemed were empty. Now and again he saw a house, but it was always only a little house and far away. And once the track made so sharp a curve that he could see even the twinkle of the fire in the engine-cabin and what looked like a black man crouching there, though he couldn't be sure. And as they were scuttling along as fast as ever, and Sambo was soon drowsy again with watching the snow, he lay down on his hard seat in the warmth of the cloak and once more fell asleep.

When he awoke, the train was at a standstill. Sambo heard a bell ringing, and looked out of the window. It was bright full morning. And there he saw a low narrow platform crusted thick with snow, and an open shed. Above the shed were the words: 'The Snow Mountains. *Change!*' He had only time enough to take out his basket and his bundle and his cloak before there came a long mournful hoot from the engine, and in a moment the train was gone.

And still there was no one to be seen. So Sambo, who was cold, put on his cloak, and, with his basket under it on one arm, and his bundle in his hand, he came to the wicket gate of the station. An old man with a beard was standing there, a lighted lantern in his hand, though the sun had risen. This old man asked Sambo for his ticket. And Sambo, having given him the ticket, asked the old man where the last Miss Bleech lived. '*White Slopes* am de name,' he said.

'You go along and along there,' mumbled the old man, pointing to a winding narrow road beyond the station, 'until you begin to go up and up. Then up and up you go and follow the trees.'

Sambo thanked him and went on his way. In spite of his long and heavy sleep in the train, his leg bones ached and he was very weary. His basket grew heavier, his cloak hotter, the path steeper. The sun shone down on the whiteness and dazzled his eyes. The pine trees by the wayside had hours ago gone far beyond his counting. He could not even guess how many miles he had tramped scrunching on through the snow when of a sudden he came round a bluff in the hills and saw with joy indeed what he felt sure must be *White Slopes*. For there was the strangest house in all the world. Peaked and sloping, wide and narrow, and clotted with snow, its shining roofs stood high above its walls and windows. It was not a house but a great Mansion. Up, up, into the solitary mountains Sambo had climbed, following the pine trees that marked his narrow path, and here at last was where he longed to be. What should he do next?

Before he started he had thought he would tell the old lady that his master had sent him. 'Massa Doc'r ill in bed, he say: *he* sent Sambo.' There would be the words he would use. Then he would mix a little of the powder from each of his coloured boxes in turn with some of the nicey-nicey and a little water, and would give her one teaspoonful of each of them every day. He knew his physics now by heart; and though they had done him no good, not at any rate the kind of good he longed for, they had done him no harm.

As long as the medicines lasted, he felt sure the old lady would let him stay with her. When she was better again, perhaps she might ask him to be her house-boy. How happy that would be! For if only, poor Sambo felt certain, he could remain long enough in this white shining mansion among the mountains, and in these radiant wastes of snow, surely, surely, his black would slowly vanish away. Had not his master's window curtains, even in sunlight incomparably less fair and bright than this, turned from blue to faded grey?

The faintest of breezes came sighing through the air, so faint that it scarcely stirred the glittering crystals at Sambo's feet. He shivered. And his thoughts grew darker. Supposing the old lady, when he appeared before her great bed, did not believe that his master had sent him? Supposing she asked him questions, discovered that he had stolen his medicines; that he was a little black cheat? What then?

He eyed again the strange house, rising in solitude under the blue sky among the slopes of the mountains. He fancied that in the distance he saw living shapes, moving on the terraces beneath it, though he could not detect what they were. What then? he asked himself again, and began to be afraid. And though even Sambo himself could not have believed that Satan would ever venture into a place so full of light and peace as this, an even wickeder thought had stolen into his mind. Why should he not pretend that he himself was his master, that *he* was the Doctor? There had been not a word in the letter to say that the last Miss Bleech knew his master. Not one word. That was perhaps why she hadn't begun her letter with the word 'dear'. Perhaps then, if he himself gave her only half the doses he had intended to give her, she would get better only half as quickly. Then he might stay on and on and on—and never go back. No, never.

As he sat there in his ermine in the snow with this thought in his mind, there suddenly sprang into view beneath him a wild white buck rabbit, with eyes like burning coals. At least Sambo thought it was a rabbit, though it was much bigger than any he had ever seen before. Stiff as a post in the snow and for the best part of a minute, it glared at Sambo—not fiercely but because its eyes were so full of light. Then, as if assured he meant it no harm, it made a little noise that was almost like laughter, and scuffled its hind legs rapidly in the snow. Other creatures like it answered. And soon the whole expanse beneath Sambo—and there was a dark lake of ice encircled with frosted trees at its foot—was alive with rabbits—hundreds and hundreds of rabbits, large and small. They paid no heed to Sambo, no more than if he had been as spotlessly white as they were themselves. Perhaps, thought he, they had not noticed his hands or his face. But the old lady would. When she saw he was black, she would not only not believe he was a doctor, but might tremble with scorn and hatred. What then?

He was so tired and hungry he could think no more. So, his basket on his arm, he set off again, and presently came to the back parts of the house. Apart from the faint-coloured shadows cast by the sunlight on its roofs and walls, it was white all over. Here there were many little outhouses like beehives capped with snow, and they seemed to have been all of them freshly whitened. Peeping about Sambo saw in a corner under the house a large tub or butt, put there as if to catch the rain. He stole over and lifting himself by his hands to its edge, peeped in. The butt was half full of a thick white liquid, like whitewash. He hauled himself up, and stooping over, broke the thin sheet of ice that wrinkled its surface and dipped in his finger. It came out white as milk. If the tip of a finger, why not his whole body? Surely here was the end of all his troubles!

He hesitated no more. He stripped off his ermine cloak, his silver-buttoned tunic, his black trousers, his shirt, his shoes, everything he had on. And there and then, naked and shuddering with the cold, he climbed up over the edge of the butt, let himself down, and three times over dipped himself head to foot in the creamy ice-cold water—face, hands, woolly hair and all. Once safely out, he ran about until he was caked dry. Then he put on his clothes again. No one, it seemed, had heard his splashing; no one had seen him. But as he was snapping-to the silver clasp of the cloak at his throat, having put on his master's goggles from out of his basket, he heard a little noise. Out of its dark shining eyes a gentle deer stood watching him in the snow. It was hornless and as white as he himself; nor did it start back or hasten away when he came near. He put out his white crudded hand and stroked its gentle head. And because of the friendliness of the deer, he was afraid no more. Cloaked and peering, he went round to the front of the house, and mounting the steps, knocked solemnly on the great door.

It was opened by the butler. At least Sambo guessed him to be the butler, for he had seen many butlers. But he had never seen one so old or so odd to look at. Over a long starched waistcoat his spotless swallow-tailed coat almost brushed the floor. His nose was even broader and flatter than Sambo's, his lips as thick and his hair as woolly, and, except for his face, he was almost as white. He looked sorrowful, too, and full of care. And though Sambo's lips were stiff, partly with the whitewash and partly because he was telling a lie, Sambo told him not who he was but who he was *not*. He then asked him how his mistress did, and if she were well enough to see the doctor.

'Ah, massa, massa,' replied the old butler, lifting his hands in grief; 'worser and worser!' And without another word he led Sambo up the wide white staircase and along a corridor whose windows looked out upon the mountains; and then he tapped at a door.

When Sambo saw the last Miss Bleech in her great bed, her high, narrow, silvery head reclining on the pillows, her far-away blue eyes fixed on the window in front of her, he knew that she was not long for this world. And he wept inside to think it. It seemed she must be at least ninety-eight, if not even ninety-nine. Her voice was so small and low he could scarcely hear what she said to him. But when the butler told her who this visitor was, she smiled at Sambo. She was rejoiced to see him, even though she could see him but dimly. Not too dimly, however, to realise that this was not only the whitest of doctors that had ever come to do her good, but the whitest of human beings. All her other doctors, though she had needed few since her childhood, had been dressed up in solemn long black coats to match their hats and trousers; and of all things in the world she liked black least. Or rather, she loved white best; though Sambo did not know this, then.

But first, she thought only of *his* comfort. She bade the butler show him to his room. It had been specially prepared against the coming of the visitor whom she had been pining so much to see, and it was next her own. She told Sambo, as he stood there—small, staring, and motionless at the foot of her bed—that she knew how cold and wearisome a journey his had been. Nor did the old lady so much as sigh when she said she would not be troubling him for long. Her one hope

was that he would stay with her as many days as he could spare.

Sambo, who had often mimicked his master's speech and manners behind his back, imitated them, as well as he could, now. He told the old lady that he thought she was looking a little better, and that he would do his best to make her quite well again. So long as there is breath in the body, he said, there is hope. 'Care, fijjick, sleep,' he said, lifting a finger. But he kept his dark spectacles turned away from the light of the window as he spoke, in terror lest she should look close into his whitewashed face and know him for a cheat.

When Sambo was alone in the lofty room that had been made ready, when he looked round him at the tall bed canopied with white velvet, the sofa, the carpet—deep and thick as moss, but white too itself as snow—he sat down on a stool, and burst out crying. He was young, he was alone, he was weary; but it was his villainy that weighed heaviest. Still, he cried only for a few moments, and at once hastened over to the great glass on the dressing-table, to see if his tears had left their traces on his cheek. No; he had dipped deep in the whitewash, and stains there were none. Indeed, at first glimpse of himself—that sheeted face, small hoary hands, a dwarf in ermine—terror seized him. It was as if he had met his own ghost. And then he sighed. He was whiter even than his master! He eased the buckle at his throat, turned his head, and looked out of the window.

Beneath him the mountain fell away in snowy terraces towards the valley far below. Trees and bushes heaped in snow and glistening in the sun of evening met his wondering gaze. The sweet yet sorrowful cry of winter curlews wafting their way through the windless air came to his ear. And beneath them strayed strange creatures he had neither seen before nor knew the name of. Some were antlered, some were small and nimble, and all of so pale a colouring that they could scarcely be seen against the snow. And though, so vast was the view from his window, they were scattered far apart, they seemed to be at peace with one another. Not a voice yelled *Yah*, no cry of wrath or pain pierced the air. It was as if, gazing out over these snow mountains and valleys, smooth and radiant beneath the blue, Sambo had been transported into the place called *Nowhere*. And for a while he forgot that he was black.

Day after day he tended the old lady, putting so infinitesimal a pinch of his master's powders into her physic-bottles and so much nicey-nicey that she enjoyed taking her medicine, and would even sip instead of merely swallowing. Sambo would sit for hours in silence at her bedside, touching her hand now and again with his rough-washed fingers, not in order to tell if she were feverish but merely to comfort her, and to prove that he was there. And the longer he stayed with her the more she came to find ease and comfort in his company, and the sadder Sambo grew: first, to think that she was now too old ever to be young again, and next, that he was deceiving her. But try as he might, and though he often lay long hours awake brooding on this, he could not find words to tell the old lady, whom he now loved dearly, what a dreadful net of falsehood he was in.

Once when the black was beginning to dim his whitewash he had to steal down to the outhouses for another coat. And though this time the sudden shock of cold from his tub brought on a hacking cough, fortunately, packed up in his basket, he had brought with him a powder good for coughs, and as his patient did not need it, he took it himself.

When his cough was better, he would sometimes sing to her, in his shrill falsetto, songs of his own people that he had heard as a child. Among her favourites, and his, was the lament beginning, 'Weep no more, my lady!' And as he sang it, the black rolling eyes of the child would meet the faded blue of his friend's, and it was as if by the mere grace of the music they shared an unsearchable secret.

*Weep no more, my lady,
O, weep no more to-day!
We will sing one song for the old Kentucky home,
For the old Kentucky home, far away....*

And then, for better cheer, Sambo would warble up, 'Shine, shine, Moon!' or, 'So Early in the Morning'; though at the words—

*When I was young, I used to wait,
On Massa's table lay the plate,
Pass the bottle when him dry,
Brush away the blue-tail fly....*

his memory ran back in a flash to his master, and his voice shook.

At length, one afternoon, after a long silence, as he sat on his customary stool by the great bed, he asked the old lady if she minded things *looking* what they are *not*. And he turned his face full into the light as he said it.

'Why, but no, my dear kind doctor,' she replied to him. 'It is not what things *look* like that matters *most*; but what they are.' When she was young, she went on—almost as if, without knowing it, she were reading his thoughts—once, when she was young, she had loved colours—every faintest colour and hue and tint visible in the rainbow; though some of them of course were her favourites. But all colours, her father had explained to her, even when she was a little girl with short pigtailed dangles round her head, lie hidden in *white*. 'White,' her father had told her, 'is not a colour at all; it is *all* colours.' She had never forgotten that. And the longer she lived, she told Sambo, the more she had come to delight in white: snowdrops, anemones, the convolvulus; dew before the sun rises; hoarfrost; foam of falling water; the sea's spray. So at last she had come to live in these mountains where there was snow nearly all the year round, and all living creatures shared in its splendour.

'Listen, doctor, is it not the voice of birds I hear? Look out, now, at their wings of light!'

Sambo lifted his heavy head and looked out of the window. But the birds must have been in the old lady's mind. There were none in the heavens.

He asked her then if she had ever travelled in the Black Man's Land, in the country of the Darkeys. Was it not a dreadful thing, he entreated her, to be born like that? Black?

'Why, no, dear doctor,' she assured him eagerly. 'Never to me. That again is what my father used to tell me. White gives back all colours; black welcomes them in. What is the centre of every seeing human eye, he would say; *black*. Besides all things on earth have an out and an in. Even an apple hangs there on its twig for the sake of its seeds. A black man whose mind is free from darkness and his heart from cruelty is in truth whiter than *any* one whose soul is in the shades.' And she smiled to herself after listening to this little sermon to one so learned as a doctor; but she had seen that Sambo was in some trouble of mind.

'Ay,' said Sambo in a lamentable voice. 'And de blackest ob all dings, lady, *dat* is a lie!' And he hastened out of the room.

It was curious perhaps that one so young as he, and with so little royal blood left in him by now, should have wept as he did at the thought of a lie. But weep he did.

That night, after he had given the old lady her physic, and it was all but all of it nicey-nicey, for most of his powders were gone; when he had seen that she was in comfort, and had lit her wax candle in the silver candlestick beside her bed, he bade her goodnight, and locked himself into his room.

A shallow tin white bath lay underneath his bed. He dragged it out in front of his dressing-table and emptied the cold water out of his jug into it. There was no more than an inch or two of water in the shallow bath, and he was three coats thick with whitewash. So that it took him a long time to sponge and rub and scrape himself black again, or as nearly black as he could manage. When he had finished and was dry, he lay down on the sofa to rest awhile, for he wished to rise at daybreak. Then he would tell the old lady all he was, his one fear being that it might make her worse. But it was impossible the next morning to make the last Miss Bleech worse, for when Sambo, having unlocked his door, went in at daybreak, she was dead.

He stood at the foot of the bed, gazing out of his blackness at the placid face upon the pillow, at the birdlike hands on the counterpane. And he nodded his woolly head, in his grief, as if to say, Too late! At last he stole nearer and ventured to put out his ink-black fingers and touch her ice-cold hand.

'*Sambo* am here, lady,' he whispered.

But there was no look in his friend's fixed eyes to show that she had heard. And as in his misery he stood there, he saw beside the candlestick a slip of paper folded in two. 'My last wishes' was written on it and beside it was a long envelope, sealed down. Sambo took the slip of paper to the window, and though the handwriting was very spidery and shaky he had learned it long since under the linden trees, and in a few minutes he had read the message within.

'Dear friend, and far more than Doctor,' it said, 'after your kindness and goodness to me, beyond any physic, I wish to leave you all I have. You will see that my butler and the others shall never want. Take care of the animals, and never put

on anything but white for me. And may heaven bless you. *Emily Bleech.*'

Sambo read this over and over; then put it back where he had found it. His grief and love were almost greater than he could bear, but there was only one thing he could do. Having emptied his bath-water out of the window, he hastened downstairs. Not a soul was stirring. It was as if the strangers of night had but a moment before left the round beehive outhouses to their daily solitude. Three times Sambo dipped himself from crown to sole in the great tub; and came out like chalk. He was doing what his friend wished him to do.

After a few days had gone by, and Sambo's heart was less troubled, he did one or two things that he wished for himself. When he ran off from his master he had no thought of money except what would take him to the Mountains. It was only time he pined for in which to grow white. And now time stretched out before him like the sands of the desert, the face of the sea. And he thought again of what was past. He made up a parcel of money—containing twice as much as he had borrowed from his master; one single Stars-and-Stripes bank-note with a great many noughts on it to pay for the ermine cloak; and a hundred dollars over for the missing medicine. This parcel he despatched secretly to the doctor, with *From Sambo* written inside the paper but no address. At the same time he sent fifty dollars to the most famous candy shop in the doctor's town, telling them to deliver to Mr. Tooth-the-Dentist's boy a large jar of Maple Sugar, a keg of dates, a cake of a black dainty made of molasses called brandy-bread, and a blue-and-white pot of the finest Chinese ginger.

After all, Sambo thought, he might never have come to the Snow Mountains if it had not been for this caterwauling young vagabond, and he would know by this that Sambo was 'off the streets'! As for the butler and the other servants, they could never even have hoped for a kinder master. 'Of all de massas he was best.'

And yet, in the years that followed, as he lived on at peace in his mansion in the Snow Mountains, gazing out of his window—a thing he never wearied of—a strange craving at times would creep into Sambo's mind. And the fear would take him that Satan was nearing again. At this he would steal to his looking-glass, and confront, on and on, that speckless face of chalk from eyes as motionless and dark as basalt.

'O but for a moment,' a voice would cry out on him as if from the very recesses of his being. 'O but for a moment, to be black again!' And always, to silence the voice, Sambo would pick a few snowflowers and go down and lay them on his old friend's grave. There he would stay for a few moments, alone in the valley, looking up at the tranquil hills; and then, slowly and solemnly shaking his whitewashed head, would return again—comforted.

[End of *Sambo and the Snow Mountains* by Walter de la Mare]