

Chapter 27

In Chapter 27, Wiley interacts with Daniel Decatur Emmett of the Virginia Minstrels, who seeks a replacement for their missing tenor. Having lost their vocalist during a drunken episode on a train, Emmett wants to recruit a slave he believes has a beautiful singing voice. He hands Wiley tickets to their performance and expresses admiration for the slave's vocal talent, implying it surpasses that of their lost performer, Raleigh Nuggets.

Wiley is taken aback by Emmett's proposition to purchase the slave, Jim. Ethical dilemmas arise as Wiley acknowledges Jim's lack of a bill of sale, while also recognizing the legal notion that possession equals ownership. Emmett promptly offers two hundred dollars for Jim, a sum that astonishes Wiley.

As the conversation unfolds, Emmett clarifies that they perform in blackface, explaining their strange practice of using boot polish to mimic black performers, which Wiley finds amusing. Despite his reservations, Wiley reluctantly agrees to the sale, referring to Jim derogatorily while Emmett insists on acquiring a bill of sale to formalize the transaction.

Wiley directs Easter to fetch paper, demonstrating his reluctance to openly connect himself to the sale. When the paper arrives, Jim contemplates the nature of his own agency, realizing that his fate is being decided without his input. This interaction serves as a poignant reflection on his status as property—an object deemed valuable for his singing rather than acknowledged as a person.

After the exchange of money and a bill of sale, Emmett introduces himself to Jim, offering a handshake—a gesture that disorients both Wiley and Easter. Despite the circumstances, Jim reciprocates, marking the beginning of a new chapter in his life. Emmett is optimistic about integrating Jim into their performances, and the group of minstrels welcomes him aboard, leaving the stable as a newly united ensemble. This scene encapsulates the complexities of race, identity, and ownership in the context of the minstrel show and highlights Jim's transition from property to performer under new, yet still precarious, circumstances.