

The Negro Woman

I.—Social and Moral Decadence

By Eleanor Tayleur

THE most anomalous and portentous figure in America today is the negro woman. Little account has been taken of her in the discussion of the race problem, yet if the key to that dark riddle is ever found, hers must be the hand that first discovers it.

It is an axiom that no people can rise higher than their source. The measure of its womanhood is the measure of the potentialities of a race. If this be virtuous, clean of mind and body, filled with high ideals and noble aspirations, all things are possible to its sons. If, on the contrary, it be unchaste, diseased physically and morally, with groveling and material desires, the race is doomed, for death and decadence have set their seal upon it. Women mold the character of a people. It is eternally true that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. In the great crises of life the thing that determines the action of the great majority of men is not the code of ethics of their mature years, or the system of philosophy that they have reasoned out. It is the teaching that they imbibed at their mother's knee—it is the memory of old prayers they lisped in childhood, old songs and stories, a mother's kiss, a mother's tears that have crystallized into character, and that at

the crucial moment decides their action for right or wrong, and whether they shall go forward or backward. Before a mother's influence political decrees are as empty and powerless as sounding brass and tinkling cymbals, and even the education of books and schools falls back impotent and defeated. At the last it is the woman who bears the race who determines its destiny.

It is this that gives a somber interest to the negro woman, for she is the pivot upon which the great race question turns. It is her hand that rocks the cradle in which the little pickaninny sleeps; it is she who sweeps the cabin floor, and makes it a home that is clean and bright or else an abode of disease; it is she who bequeaths to the child that is bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh, soundness of body and soul or else the tendencies that make it a moral and physical leper; it is her hand that sets the little feet about her knee on the road which they are to travel in life. All that the white woman is to the white race, the negro woman is to the black. Her influence is just as potent, and she is the dominant factor that must be reckoned with in every effort to help the negro.

In the Northern cities there are many, and in the South a few, negro women

who in intelligence, nobility of character, and refinement would challenge comparison with any women in the world. These are exceptions, and it is not proposed to consider them here, but the great dark, helpless, hopeless mass of the women of their race as they are found leading their lawless and purposeless lives in the cane and cotton field, or herded together in the streets of the cities.

As she exists in the South to-day the negro woman is the Frankenstein product of civilization, a being created out of conditions of sectional hate and revenge, and set in motion by wild experimentalists who knew not what they did; and within the length and breadth of Christendom there is no other figure so forlorn and pathetic as she. Doubly cursed by her color and her sex, on her has fallen alike the heaviest burden of the negro and of womanhood. Shut out by her blood from the privileges of the white woman and by her sex from the opportunities of the negro man, she is the victim of every injustice of society, and she revenges herself upon it by striking at the very foundations of the political and social structure. She has always been a hapless sacrifice to the lust of man, and retribution has made of her a Nemesis who has forged the thunderbolts of the race question for the white man, and who stands a sinister figure behind the black man, forever dragging him downward.

No women in the world ever went through such a radical change as has taken place among the negro women since the Civil War. For them emancipation meant the severing of every association, habit, and custom of their lives, and the inauguration of a new heaven and a new earth; and the negro woman of to-day, in character and thought, in aspiration and ideal, is no more like the negro woman of ante-bellum days than if a thousand generations, instead of one or two, rolled between them. History records no change of the women of a whole race so rapid and so radical; and the sadly significant feature of this change is that it has been for the worse and not for the better.

Many explanations may be offered to

account for the decadence of the negro woman. First and foremost is the abolition of the home; for woman's highest virtues, whatever her color or her race, are garden flowers that flourish best about her doorstep, and lacking this congenial soil they wither and die. Whatever the burdens and wrongs of slavery, and they were great and many, it at least gave the negro woman a home in which she was sure of food and warmth and privacy; and when within the four walls of her cabin, or her quarters in the city mansion, she was as truly and completely mistress of her home as the chateau of her castle. So much was the slave's unquestioned right; but now, when the negro must pay rent for the roof that shelters him, whole herds of them crowd together in a single room, like rabbits in a warren, without regard to age or sex or consanguinity. Under such conditions all privacy, or even decency, is impossible.

In the country the cabin may still be seen with the gourd vine trained above the door, with its beds covered with gay patchwork, with its floors scrubbed until they shine with glistening whiteness, and these homes furnish the great percentage of the respectable, thrifty, and industrious men and women of the negro race. In the cities the majority of negro women have no homes, but a room which they oftener than not share with strangers. The beds are unmade, the dishes unwashed, the floor unswept. Here children are born to be thrust out into the street as soon as possible to get them out of the way, and thus the mother and the child are deprived of the home influence that is one of the strongest powers for good in the world.

Another reason for the decadence of the negro woman is that she no longer has the uplift of close personal association with white women. Before the war the negro woman was brought into intimate contact with the refined and educated women of the dominant race. Essentially imitative as negroes are, they copied the manners and the morals of the mistress they served. Many a black woman was a grande dame who would have graced a court, and imbued with as high and lofty a sense of loyalty and fealty as any

knight; and among the most cherished recollections of the old South are the memories of these women, between whom and their owners existed a bond of affection that only death could sever.

No such conditions prevail to-day, save in the rare instances when a family is fortunate enough to attach to itself some negress whose ideals and traditions were formed in the days of slavery, when, as foster-sister to some white child, or handmaiden to some white woman, she imbibed the precepts of honor and honesty and duty that must alike guide both races. The modern negro woman has no such object-lesson in morality or morals or modesty, and she wants none. She hates the white woman with a hatred born of hopeless envy, and her most exquisite pleasure is in insulting her with childlike brutality. She does this in a thousand little puerile ways—by rudely jostling her in a crowd, by pushing her off the sidewalk, and—favorite method of all—by invariably speaking of her own race as “ladies and gentlemen” and the white as “men and women.” Thus the announcement by your maid that a lady wishes to speak to you sends you down the back stairs to interview a dusky charwoman, while, when you are told that there is a strange woman downstairs, you prepare to receive your friend of a most aristocratic lineage and exquisite refinement. When the black woman imitates the white, she only imitates what is worst in her. She copies her extravagance in tawdry finery that is a grotesque exaggeration of fashion, she copies her independence in utter abandon of all restraints, she copies her vices and adds to them frills of her own, and it is as if one saw a vulgar picture ineffably coarsened by being reproduced in hideous and glaring colors that emphasized every unlovely detail.

Before the war the negro women also had the uplifting influence of honest work. They were taught the various branches of domestic labor, and had the pride in their work that comes from skillful craftsmanship. But the Aunt Dinahs, ample of girth, clad in clean cottonade, who boasted that they laid a heavy hand on the seasoning when they compounded dainties, and who at din-

ner would poke an anxious head through the doorway to hear the compliments bestowed upon their art, are almost as extinct as the dodo. Gone, too, are the neat housemaids in guinea-blue calicoes, starched until they rattled like the best taffeta, who felt a personal pride in keeping the mahogany shining like a mirror, and whose ministrations were benedictions, so filled were they with loving care and solicitude. Gone, also, are the old black mammies on whose broad breasts childish sorrows sobbed themselves to sleep and broken baby hearts were mended.

In their places is an ignorant creature in dirty finery, the first article of whose faith is a settled determination not to work. For the time being this has been shaken by hunger or a desire to buy a sleazy silk dress, and she condescends to preside in your kitchen or make your beds, but she does it under protest. She has no pride in her occupation, or desire to do it well. She does not burden her mind with the insignificant details that go to make good cooking. She dashes a lot of things together, and if they turn out all right, well and good. If not, also well and good. All that she is interested in is in drawing her wages, and carrying back and forth the basket that is the commissary department of a horde of idle and shiftless friends.

In the peculiar code of ethics that governs the new negro woman any way of obtaining a livelihood is more honorable and respectable than working for it. The colored Mrs. Grundy does not frown on the demi-mondaine, nor does the conviction of theft call forth any social ostracism. Nor is this surprising. It was to have been expected that a childish race, suddenly freed from slavery, would mistake liberty for license, and that the men and women whose own backs had been bowed with toil should wish to save their children from the burdens they had borne. More than that, the masters and mistresses they idealized did not work with their hands, and so the distorted belief prevails among the negroes that the first step toward being a lady or a gentleman is to be idle. In this the young of both sexes are encouraged by their parents; and

nothing could be more grotesquely sad than the feeble old black mothers who are bending over washtubs and cooking-stoves earning the money to support strapping sons and daughters, while they boast proudly that their children never did a lick of work!

So far, education has done but little for the great mass of negro women. Here and there a girl achieves the common-school education, and in rare instances one even develops the ability to take a college course; but these latter cases are as unusual as genius is among the whites. Negroes are avid of schooling, and it is nothing uncommon to see a girl go to school, session after session, for eight or ten years, without achieving anything more than the ability to read and write like a child in the second grade, while the superior elegance of saying "have come," and scorning the humble and admiring mother who goes out scrubbing to support her, entitles her to a diploma. It may be that this tentative education, whose uplifting influence is unseen and unfelt as yet, is the little leaven that will eventually leaven the whole lump and raise the entire race to a higher level; but as yet the only visible result has been to teach the girl a scorn of the work she is fitted to do, and to implant in her breast an insatiable ambition to be a school-teacher—an ambition that must be futile unless the supply of scholars can be miraculously increased, or the Government subsidizes every kinky-headed little coon and farms him out among the several million negro girls in the South who are looking forward to the glorious career of being schoolma'ams. Never was the truth of the old adage that a little learning is a dangerous thing so fully illustrated as by these imperfectly educated women; yet it is this half-awakened intelligence, struggling with problems that it is too ignorant to understand, misreading both the past and the present, drawing false meanings from history and philosophy, that is one of the menaces of our time.

Important, however, as is the relation of the negro woman to the white race, it is not so important as her relations to her own. Among her own people her

position is one peculiar among the women of the world, and it is one full of cruel injustice and bitter suffering. No other woman among civilized people is so little protected, so little cherished, and evokes so little chivalry from the men of her race. All the hardships that other women endure she bears, and more. She loves, but no sense of loyalty, no convention of faithfulness, binds her lover to her. She may marry, but with no certainty of the tie being permanent. She bears children, but with oftener than not no husband's sympathy to cheer her, no husband's hand to even provide the food and clothing. When she toils, it is only too frequently to have her meager wage taken from her by a drunken brute.

There are, of course, negro men who are admirable husbands, but among the vast majority of them the responsibility of the marriage relationship as white people understand it does not exist. The wedding ceremony and the divorce decree are held in light esteem as ornaments that one may have, but that are not necessities by any means; and the average negro man manifests absolutely no sense of obligation about providing for his wife and children. That burden falls upon the woman. His wage, if he works, is generally spent upon his own pleasures and vices. On every Saturday afternoon throughout the South pathetic groups of these defrauded wives may be witnessed, waiting humbly with their empty baskets on the outskirts of the cotton-gin, or factory, or sawmill where their husbands work, trying to wheedle a little of their week's salary out of their lords and masters to feed the hungry mouths at home. Often the man does not work at all, but lives in a paradise of ease and luxury on the dainties his wife purloins from the pantry of the white people for whom she cooks. No other race in the world shows such a number of men supported by women as does the negro race. The answer to the question, how the vast idle male negro population in the South lives without work, finds its answer in the basket that the cooks invariably carry back and forth between their home and the kitchen in which they are employed.

As a general thing, the negro woman

is of a tropical temperament, and loves madly and passionately. When roused to jealousy, she is a furious demon who not infrequently kills her rival or the lover who forsakes her. Often her love is as brief as it is stormy, but there are innumerable cases where she displays a dog-like devotion, and follows, year after year, the footsteps of the man who beats her, and mistreats her, and is faithless to her, and sometimes even brings another wife to live under the very roof-tree that her own hard toil supports. For her children she has a fierce passion of maternity that seems to be purely animal, and that seldom goes beyond their childhood. When they are little, she indulges them blindly when she is in good humor, and beats them cruelly when she is angry; and once past their childhood her affection for them appears to be exhausted. She exhibits none of the brooding mother-love and anxiety which the white woman sends after her children as long as they live. Infanticide is not regarded as a crime among negroes, but it is so appallingly common that if the statistics could be obtained on this subject they would send a shudder through the world. The story of many negro midwives, who are veritable female Herods, is not a thing to be told.

The negro woman also occupies a unique position in this, that of all women she is the one who personally best illustrates the fallacy of the theory of free love and the abolition of all the conventions and laws that hedge about matrimony. She is literally "the woman who did" of Mr. Richard Grant White's dream. All that the most advanced theorists who rail at the bondage of marriage advocate she does, and under ideal conditions. There is no public opinion to be defied, no society to turn the cold shoulder upon her. She loses no caste changing husbands as the whim seizes her, and no odium is attached to the possession of what she graphically and picturesquely described as a "bandanna family"—meaning thereby one in which each child is a different color.

Yet, with all of these advantages of freedom in securing a soul mate, and, if she makes a mistake in selecting the first time, in being able to seek an affin-

ity to the third and fourth and hundredth time if she pleases, the negro woman is the most unanswerable refutation that the imagination could devise to those who believe that love should never be fettered. A forlorn and warning figure, forsaken and deserted, with her own burdens a hundredfold heavier because no man is bound to help her bear them, crushed under the weight of a motherhood that no fatherhood lightens, the negro woman stands at the gate of the garden of free-loveism, and cries out that it is a false paradise—that all of its fruit are apples of Sodom, and that nowhere else is a woman's sorrow so incapable, and her lot so bitter, as in that mockery of freedom.

Such is the negro woman of to-day, the most unfortunate and sinned-against creature in all the world, the victim of heredity, of social conditions, of environment, the very sport and plaything of destiny, yet holding in her hands the fate of a race. There is something almost sardonically humorous in the thought of this woman, with the brain of a child and the passions of a woman, steeped in centuries of ignorance and savagery, and wrapped about with immemorial vices, playing with the die of fate.

Yet there she sits, unthinking, unknowing, with no desire save of the senses, no ambitions, no aspirations, and the most momentous problem of our day is how to rouse this lethargic giantess to a sense of her responsibilities. In the home all the real progress of a people must begin. You cannot raise a race above its motherhood. Until that is done, until the childhood of the little negro girl is safeguarded, until the negro woman is inspired with ideals of virtue, until the mother teaches the child at her knee the precepts of right and honest living, there can be no real uplift for the negro race, and no solving of the race problem.

The mission of the white woman of this country is to the black woman. If ever there was a God given and appointed task set to the womanhood of any people, it is to the women of America to take these lowly sisters by the hand and lift them out of the pit into which they

have fallen. Humanity pleads for it, Christianity prays for it, the very salvation of the country demands it, for be assured unless we succor these Hagars who have been thrust out into the desert of their own ignorance and superstition and sin, they will raise up Ishmaels whose hands shall be against our sons forever.

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