



THE SCHOOLING OF THE NEGRO

By JOSÉ CLARANA



SOONER or later, often and again, every colored man of intelligence and some colored men of no intelligence must face the question, "Which do you think is the better way of elevating your people—industrial or higher education?" Not infrequently this query takes the form, "Which of the two leaders of your race do you follow?" Assuming that one of two men can have absolute control over the destiny of ten millions of people who must in all places and under all circumstances blindly and unthinkingly regulate their conduct according to the supposed will of this demigod, the white solver of the Negro problem has been in the habit of formulating an answer to his own proposition in the following typical opinion of a sophomore debater in a Northern university, who had lived some time in Alabama.

"The Negroes are an inferior race, but though they can never equal the achievements of the white man, they ought to be trained to be useful members of society and to be self-dependent. The only way by which this end can be accomplished is by giving industrial education to the masses. It is true that a few individuals have displayed great mental capacity, but experience has shown that it is unwise to give to these men opportunities to cultivate their talents, for as soon as a Negro becomes highly educated he wants to marry a white woman. For this reason I am for educating the whole people industrially instead of wasting time and money in trying to give to the few privileges which they are bound to abuse. Of the two Negroes whose opinion is worth considering, the former position is held by Booker T. Washington, the latter by Du Bois. Washington is therefore the only real leader of his race.

"I do not believe in allowing Negroes to attend schools with white people in the North, for they are not allowed in the South. I once heard Booker T. Washington say that he did not want colored men to go to Yale and I suppose he would say the same thing of this university. Negro teachers should be trained for the Negro industrial schools,

but this work should be done at normal schools in the South, where the masses of the race will always be."

Fortunately the wisdom of this young fool readily became apparent to his fellow sophomores when the junior who had given rise to the color query chose to answer it in his own way by asking the questioner to name any co-ed who had expressed a willingness to marry a highly educated Negro, with or without his having particularly "wanted" to marry her; to reconcile the statement that the "only real leader" of the Negroes did not want his people to attend Northern schools with the fact that this same man had sent his own children to the best schools that would admit them and was at that moment searching these universities for colored graduates to teach the pupils of his school for colored people; to explain, finally, where the Negro teachers in the Negro normal schools, who would be the ultimate teachers in the Negro industrial schools, would get their training if not in the universities, North and South, which offer the broadest training to students who have had the fullest and most thorough preparation in high schools and colleges, North and South.

It is thus evident on the slightest investigation that "industrial" education for Negroes is inseparably dependent upon "higher" education and that, far from neglecting the latter for the supposed advantage of the former, both processes must go on at the same place and time if either is to succeed.

In America there can be no arbitrary selection of Negroes for high, higher or highest education and of Negroes for "lower" or industrial education, for in America there is no such selection of white people. The caste and class system of European educational methods has never been reproduced among white Americans, and there is no reason to suppose that it would be advantageous among Negro Americans. In Alabama, as in New York, all children should have equal educational opportunities at the public expense. When once these opportunities are secured, those Negro children who have the capacity and ambition to rise above their fellows will do so, just

as white children have done and are doing. Deny these opportunities to Negro children anywhere, and you defeat your purpose of uplifting the race by robbing it of its potential agents of self-dependence. No colored man who has the interest of his people at heart and can see far enough into its future could say otherwise.

The young sophomore was unable to state when or where he had heard a colored teacher say that colored men should not go to Yale. He had probably confused a statement of the dean of Yale College to the effect that that institution tolerated rather than encouraged Negroes. Had the debate taken place two years later the sophomore might have learned that one young man who declined to take a hint from the dean of Yale to the effect that his room was preferable to his company, stayed and got probably the first fellowship in economics ever conferred upon a Negro at that university. Surely no optimist of the future of the American Negro would seek to prevent a colored man from obtaining in Connecticut educational advantages which he may not have yet, and perhaps not soon, in his native Kentucky, or in Tennessee, or in Alabama.

It cannot be denied, however, that the most prominent and the most influential Negro has, I doubt not unintentionally, given to sophomores, deans and other white people in and out of college an untenably biased attitude toward the educational needs of his people by reiterating, in one way or another, the notion that certain excellent forms of mental training were not good for his people—an assumption that readily finds causation in the fact that this man has made his own remarkably successful career without having had such training. But this does not prove that he has not felt the lack of such training in the years when he was best able to absorb it; that he could not have been a more prominent, more influential, more successful man if his youthful schooling had not been confined almost solely to the grim struggle for existence of an orphan of slavery. Above all, it does not give him the right to say that other Negro children should not have privileges and opportunities which he himself has not enjoyed.

No colored educator has a more promising future of the humblest beginning than the young man who, on receiving from the University of Iowa the degree of Bachelor

of Philosophy—a degree which suggests familiarity with Greek roots rather than with potato sprouts—set out for Mississippi and established a school beneath a cedar tree, with a dilapidated barn for change of scenery when shade was turned to sunlight. Speaking of him the other day, a German cab driver said to a white classmate of the young Negro: "I knew Jones when he was night clerk in the O'Reilly Hotel at Iowa City, working his way through the State University. He used to put in most of his spare time studying, and whenever I was hanging around for the night trains he would practice his German on me. He was a 'live one' all right. I always knew that colored boy would show up somewhere." When this young man "shows up" in Europe on his quest of the man farthest down he will hardly need the services of a German-speaking secretary and companion.

The teaching of languages to Negroes has, I think, been the especial object of adverse criticism by the colored educator who receives the readiest hearing from white people. As to time and place, I am in as much of a quandary as was the sophomore, but I have a vague remembrance of an animadversion of Dr. Booker T. Washington upon a colored boy whom he saw sitting under a tree poring over a French grammar. This was industry with a vengeance, especially if the sun was hot. It was useful conservation of time and of bodily energy. But the apostle of industrial education thought the lad ought to have been picking cotton or husking corn.

I have, on the other hand, a very definite recollection of the young woman who came to a Northern university to fit herself for teaching at Tuskegee, the institution which had sent her out to teach in the small rural schools for Negroes in the South. She had the courage, and the courage presupposed the intelligence to do the work of this university. But prospective teachers of Tuskegee who wish to study even in an agricultural college are required to have a good knowledge not only of English, but of some modern foreign language as well. The young lady had the English, because she had not lived in a rural community in Alabama, but she did not have the French and could not acquire it in the time at her disposal and with the work that she was doing to support herself. She had never seen a French word in its Latin form.

She had heard much of potato roots, but had never had anything to do with a Greek root. At 22 she could not change her way of thinking and speaking as readily as she might have at 12. Her chemistry and physics were of the same stamp as her French, for these subjects are studied in Northern colleges mostly from books or from classroom demonstrations, and not from outdoor "object" lessons, with the emphasis on the object rather than on the lesson. The university authorities admired this young woman's pluck and, partly from a spirit of chivalry, they stretched her entrance units enough to let her attend the classes for just one term. Then they "busted" her. And this brave little soul returned to her home, rueing bitterly the day she had set out for far-away Alabama thinking that industry, usefulness to one's self and to others, capacity for adaptation to circumstances, were qualities which could be acquired only in some school labeled "industrial."

The acceptance of the dollar ideal of scholarship by colored people who prefer to have a "leader" think for them rather than to use their own minds is not a very encouraging aspect of the future of the American Negro. In Greater New York, with a colored population of more than 90,000, only seven young men are to receive diplomas from the high schools this year. The reason assigned by the hundreds who have failed to use the opportunities so fully and freely given to them is not far to seek: "There is nothing for us to do with a good education. We could only use it among our own people and they are in the South. We do not want to go down South, so we quit school and work for enough to keep body and soul together, though we can always find a little change for dancing and a little time for the street corners. Ain' nothin' we can git out o' school. Ain' no money in books."

The problem of finding employment for an educated colored man is undeniably difficult, but it is becoming less and less difficult proportionately with the increase of educated colored men. The greater breadth of vision insures keener and quicker perception of opportunities. The possession of a good education is more often an incentive rather than a detriment to industry and respect for labor. The difference between the waiter, the bricklayer, the coachman who knows Greek and algebra and the one who does not is

that the one who knows must get a chance to do something else if he will only try hard enough, whereas the one who does not know anything else but waiting can never expect to do something to which he has not been trained to adapt himself. As a matter of fact, colored men hold positions in New York and other Northern cities that they could never occupy in the South because they are not white, and their own people have no such places to offer. These men have the courage and the patience to seek their positions, and their courage rests on the knowledge that they have the ability to fill the positions which they seek.

But why expect to see a green or yellow-back to every book you open? In education the Negro must "cast down his bucket" where he is, but he need not stop casting and hauling if he cannot draw a load of gold every time. Not all commodities are equally readily exchangeable for money. Cotton and corn and cane will sell almost anywhere and at any time, because their value, like their cost, is comparatively less than that of Greek, French or German, for which the market is not always apparent, though always real and enduring. You can grow cotton at any time without having gone to any school, provided only you have the sense, the interest and the experience to do it. Sam McCall, an illiterate ex-slave, 75 years old, grew eight bales of cotton on an acre of land that would not have produced one-eighth of a bale when he got it. The experts of the United States Department of Agriculture have never done likewise; no other farmer, white or Negro, has ever approached this achievement.

But Sam McCall, at 75, could hardly make much headway with an English copy book or a French grammar, for although Cato began to study Greek at 80, he was already acquainted with Roman letters. Without the study and the schooling no amount of sense and interest will open to you the treasures of other people's mind and thought as expressed in their language; no amount of patient hope and longing will give you that contact with other people which is the basis of all civilization and without which human beings speedily degenerate to the level of the Bleasites of South Carolina, who dismembered a dead Negro in order to get and take away souvenirs of a lynching party that had reached their man too late.

It is this broadening, civilizing, humanizing aspect of the so-called "higher" education that makes it so essentially and so practically valuable to Negroes and to whites alike. A young sailor on a United States warship is sent to ship's prison for five days' solitary confinement on bread and water for wanting to read when his work is done and for telling a white petty officer not to call him *Rastus*. While he is supposed to be brooding over the consequences of a Negro's "insolence" to a white man, he strengthens the foundation of a knowledge of Italian from a grammar book which he has had smuggled in to him. Some months later, when the ship is at an Italian port, the same Negro boy has the satisfaction of seeing himself appealed to by every other man on the ship, the captain and the brutal petty officer included, to act as interpreter. He gets no dollars and scant thanks from them, but though dollars enough have since come in to pay several times over the cost of that Italian grammar, the greatest factor in the subsequent career of this young man can be traced to the wholesome use of those five days on bread and water, and not the least important part of this career has been the winning of the friendship of Italians, dead and living.

Again, a Negro enters a candy store in New York and, before the proprietor comes to him, his eye is attracted by a Greek daily paper lying on the counter. When the proprietor does come he wants the Negro to read aloud something from the paper. The colored man who reads Greek, ancient or modern, is not the one who was struck on the head with a bottle by a Hellenic restaurateur.

The Shaw Settlement House in Boston very wisely provides instruction in French as well as in cooking and waiting. The colored waiter who knows French is far less likely to have a dispute with a Parisian chef than the servitor whose only recommendation to the good graces of a white man is his dark skin and his half-understood speech. More than this, the Negro who reads the

letters of Toussaint l'Ouverture and the novels of Dumas in the original will see for himself that Theodore Parker, the Boston abolitionist, was wrong in saying that a colored man could at best be only a good waiter. The Negro who reads in Spanish the poems of Plácido, the novels and speeches of Morúa Delgado, of Gualberto Gómez and of other representative colored men of Cuba, cannot fail to receive new inspiration and new confidence in the power of black blood to redeem itself, without as well as within the United States.

These observations may not prove anything, but they have an important bearing on the Negro problem. Those who look out for the future of the American Negro cannot fail to see that the component elements of white America are changing and have rapidly changed since the Civil War. The faithful old Negro was more or less thoroughly "understood" by his aristocratic master, his red-shirt neighbor and rival, and his philanthropic liberator. But the new Negro who wants to be faithful to himself as well as to others must adapt himself to the character of his new neighbors—the Italian in the South, the cosmopolitan immigrant everywhere in the North. The Negro's best hope for a place in the new America lies in learning to understand the new Americans. He can best do this by going to school with them, using the same books they use, thinking the same thoughts they think. Where the humanizing influence of this contact is denied to them, colored youth may still insist on equality of opportunity for the broadest and fullest education that their white fellows receive. "Cast down your buckets where you are" is the gospel to Negro boys and girls of school age. If there be no well of knowledge in sight, then go where you can find one, or insist that your elders make you one. Do not stop to assay the haul, but cast a bucket now and always and everywhere for high, higher, highest education, for without this you could have no industrial education—you could have no education at all.

