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A NEW PHILOSOPHY FOR THE NEW NEGRO*

BY ROBERT W. BAGNALL

"MAY we not remain here; we don't want to go down," said the unborn soul at the portals of life in Maeterlinck's "Blue Bird." I can imagine those who see things as they are, hesitating in the same way as they are about to pass out of the cloistered life of this college into the maelstrom which is now the world.

Never have eyes of living men beheld the world in such plight. Kings have departed and democracies are hanging in the balance. Captains of industry are thrown from their pedestals and great fortunes are every day crashing in the dust. The wise men speak vainly and the prophets prophesy falsely. Things grow worse steadily and there is imminent danger of an economic collapse of this country and of the world. Civilization as we know it may perish. Revolution may come over night. Who knows? They who have thought themselves secure and have said: "Soul, take thine ease, thou hast goods for many years," find that their riches have taken wings. Today wealth disappears like snow before a torrid sun. Everywhere there is chaos. No man can say what tomorrow will bring.

*Commencement address at Hampton Institute, May 31, 1932.

The world into which you are about to enter is not one for gay adventuring but for serious business. The world needs every talent it can find; the world needs you. But to meet the new issues there must be new philosophy, new ideas.

The new Negro cannot for a moment accept this as the best of all possible worlds. Your job is to help make a better world. Certainly where one hundred and sixteen congressmen and various churches, as in the Massie case, appeal for the pardon of lynchers and murderers who have been convicted in a fair trial because they are white and the lynched victim was colored, there is something wrong with America's conception of ethics and of justice.

When the church of the Living God forbids human beings to worship God within their portals because they are colored, something is fundamentally wrong. There are so many instances of this that citation is utterly unnecessary.

Man has made a mess of human relations. Things have developed so fast that he cannot adjust himself to them or to his fellows. Human beings are yet guided by blind shibboleths, empty words, silly and childish codes in dealing with one another. Man confesses himself a savage when he can find no better method of settling a dispute than clubbing his disputant and far more so if the club is poison gas, high artillery and machine guns, and millions of innocent beings are murdered in the settlement of the dispute. The patriotism which would hallow wholesale murder is a shame and a disgrace.

Men cannot call themselves civilized who allow blind race prejudice to dominate their thought and their action. They make themselves silly fools when they imagine lack of skin pigmentation makes them superior to those who have more pigmentation. The cult of "the sacred white skin" is the most pitiable sight in this so-called civilized age.

There is only one thing more pitiable than the white man who believes his skin makes him superior, and that is the Negro who accepts such nonsense. Modern science comes to the aid of those who wish race relations on the only lasting basis—that of equality. Modern science could not be more positive than when it says: "Science knows no such thing as a superior or inferior race." In fact, it knows no pure races, or any races at all. It knows only one race, the human race, and the temporary divisions we call races may be backward or advanced, but never superior or inferior.

One by one the arguments which essay to prove race superiority have fallen to the ground. In this world, therefore, the New Negro must believe in himself and in his race. Most

Negroes are the victims of the pressure of false ideas around them in spite of protestations to the contrary. But it is impossible to count so largely as you are capable in this world, unless you believe in yourself. Furthermore, no white man can ever see democracy realized in America while he accepts a belief in Negro inferiority. Human nature is so constituted that it cannot believe an inferior needs as much as a superior or should receive as much.

The artillery of biology, anthropology, archeology and psychology is all on the Negro's side today. The sooner white and black face the truth, the better. Years ago I wrote a motto. It has spread wide. I would commend it to every Negro and every white youth today. It reads:

"No man is superior to me simply because he is white.

"No man is inferior to me simply because he is black.

"He alone is my superior who is superior in character, mentality, and attainments. He alone is my inferior who is inferior in these things."

White and black alike who believe this will never accept any teaching of "stay in your place." They will realize that any place which they are fitted to attain is theirs—in industry, in business, in commerce, in the professions, in political life. They will believe that the abler man should be in power whether he be white or black, and that there is no more reason why black men should be under white men than white men under black. They will determine to bring this about to the best of their ability.

They who believe in the sacredness of human personality and the essential equality of races will repudiate with indignation any advice which urges the Negro to be meek and patient and await the pleasure of the whites to gain his rights. The thinking Negro acknowledges that the meek inherit the earth—six feet of it. But he wants the world and the richness thereof, and he wants it *now*. The thinking Negro knows that patience is good, but the patience he believes in is that which enables him to fight on, never faltering, until the goal is won.

The new Negro must therefore be a protestant, filled with divine discontent, unwilling to accept without protest any denial of rights and seeking ever a way to secure full opportunity.

It is obvious that this demands courage. Peace-at-any-price men will always be underlings and slaves. It was in Virginia that Patrick Henry said what every patriot believes: "Is peace so dear or life so sweet as to be purchased at the price

of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God!" So says the new Negro today. Frederick Douglass was wise when he said: "The slave who fights back gets whipped least often." He had learned it only after he had fought Hovey, the slavebreaker, all day. They never whipped him again. "The slave who fights back gets whipped least often." You may get whipped but nothing like so much as if you were unresisting. There have been black men and white men who have bidden the Negro to keep silent and let white friends remedy your wrongs. And this silence has caused those who did the wrongs to cease to believe that the Negro had rights.

I would have the Negroes adopt a flag like the colonials of the Revolution. On a blue field I would place a black rattlesnake and on the banner I would inscribe the words—"Don't Tread on Me." I do not advocate that the Negro use force to obtain his rights simply because the odds are too many against him. I do advocate, however, that if force be invoked against him, he do what even a dog would do—defend himself and his own to the utmost. I do advise that he use what is tantamount to force, the weapons of defense given him by the government—the courts and the ballot.

No Negro should remain content with disfranchisement when organized court action will give him his ballot. The Supreme Court of Virginia has spoken, the United States Supreme Court has spoken, guaranteeing him the right to vote in the primary and election. His ballot, if used as a united power, will secure for him better schools, better streets, cleaner surroundings, better taxes, better jobs, greater justice in the courts, fairer laws. The courts, especially the higher ones, will deal fairly by Negroes, prejudiced as are many who administer them. Precedents which are far reaching are established and so justice is done.

Negroes are oppressed and exploited because they remain supine and cowards. No wrong should ever be done a Negro but every voice should be lifted in loud protest and every proper method should be used to right that wrong. Only thus will wrongs cease. But will this not irritate some whites? Yes, until they get accustomed to Negroes acting like other men. But what if it does? What if it even bring hardship to some? If in the end, the attitude of white America can be changed, it would be a small price to pay.

Often I think the brand of religion taught the Negro is responsible for his fear to die, if needs be, for freedom. Too much emphasis is placed on death. We must die anyway with-

in a few years. If we die earlier in an attempt to win not only full freedom and justice for the Negro but true democracy for America, what better use could there be for a life? Nor think you that I speak as an arm-chair doctrinaire. I have spoken boldly in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina, where my life has been threatened, should I speak, nor have I abated one jot or tittle of what I had to say.

The New Negro in this turbulent world must have *Vision* which will enable him to see over the mountain top and behold the beauty of the sea beyond. This vision will enable him to escape the pitfall of individualism which so sorely afflicts the life of America. He who seeks only his own good, his money, his pleasure, his fame—never attains even these in their fullness. Only by lifting the scale of the whole race can the Negro securely find a higher footing. If he has no interest in worthwhile movements, no interest in the man lower down on whom rests his fortunes, whatever be his business or profession, sooner or later those lower down will cease to have interest in him and disaster will follow. Nor is the man aught but an idle dreamer who lives today the life of selfish individualism, thinking that some day in the future he will become a cooperative soul. The coil of habit is now binding him tighter each day in his individualism. No man is living whose life ends in himself. The world calls for you to help mankind to a better day.

Counter to individualism is the cooperative spirit. This leads to unity and organization whereby the economic, political, civic, and social life of the Negro can gain strength and betterment. And when one speaks of organization, one comes to that crux of the Negro's status in America—*compulsory segregation*. It is based on a contempt for the Negro's personality. It is a caste system whose coils are strangling democracy in this country. Its idea is two separate worlds—one white and the other black, within the state, and always a white over-world and a black under-world. It says Negroes and whites cannot live together on any basis of equality; they cannot eat together, travel together, play together, worship together, be educated together, sleep in the same place, be treated in the same hospitals and wards, lie in the same cemetery at death. In life and in death, compulsory segregation would separate the races. It says no Negro must have the best jobs or be over white men. It says no Negro must be allowed to rise to the top. It says no Negro ever must rule in the state. In fact, it is the flaming sword that shuts the Negro from the Eden of opportunity. It

claims that it exists to preserve the purity of the white race, a thing which has no existence except in myth. It fails in preventing race mixture and rather accelerates the rate of such mixture. Just because of segregation, according to an eminent sociologist, 90,000 fair Negroes in ten years went white and mixed their blood with whites.

If the Negro accepts compulsory segregation, he accepts an unreasonable and illogical thing, based on prejudice which must condemn him perpetually to the backwash of the world's civilization. So far as any chance at equality in opportunity or rights, the Negro is doomed in America unless he succeeds in breaking through the barrier of compulsory segregation and integrating himself into the general life of America.

The Negro who advocates an "imperium in imperio" would condemn his race to remaining as a small side show in the world's great circus. The Negro business man must have a white and a black market. The Negro teacher must teach just children, white as well as black. The Negro physician, surgeon, and dentist must have white and black patients. The Negro engineer must build structures and spans for both races. Think of Roland Hayes—twenty years ago when he sang only to black audiences, he had only the black world as a market at fifty dollars a recital. Think of him now with the world as his market at twenty-five hundred dollars a night. There you have the exact difference between the fate of the Negro under compulsory segregation and integrated fully into American life. The more we accept segregation, the more it becomes fixed as a custom. The more we protest and fight it, the more the possibility of ending it. It is already crumbling, although slowly. This crumbling is seen in the very presence of white men and white women here, who come not as missionaries to an inferior race to work for them, but as men who enter upon life's work because of its worth, working with equals.

Today white and black students in the South eat and drink together, talk and play together, and know each other as equals. In the South many faculty members openly long for the day when Negroes will be admitted to their colleges. In the North, Negroes here and there break through barriers more and more frequently. No system so vicious as compulsory segregation can last if persistently and insistently and ably attacked. Not long will colored people find themselves in the majority among those attacking compulsory segregation if with faith and courage, in sufficient numbers, they carry on the fight.

Those who stand for segregation are opportunists who see only the immediate good and in accepting it destroy or postpone the larger ultimate good. Or they are defeatists who cry out for the flesh-pots of Egypt because they cannot believe they can reach the promised land.

I plead that you play the man and stand against this narrowing force, both for yourselves and for America.

One word more: the New Negro must hold to idealism while accepting realism. He has not learned to see "to whom a primrose is but a primrose still." Your education is to open a thousand windows for you which otherwise were closed. It is to make your life infinitely fuller, to enable you to evaluate things of worth, and to discriminate between gold and tinsel. Your education is to push back the margin so that your horizon will ever extend. It is to broaden your interest and deepen your love for all humanity. You go forth to battle. May you be happy warriors. Like King Christophe of Haiti you cry, "So much to do and so little time to do it." May the Giver of wisdom and power guide you aright so that your lives may make of this old, troubled world a better place.

LIGHT FROM LOUISIANA

BY JAMES HARDY DILLARD

THE most important and encouraging education documents that I have seen in a long while have recently come from the State Department of Education at Baton Rouge. In a letter, which I am permitted to use, Mr. A. C. Lewis writes as follows:

I am sending you under separate cover copies of two tests, one to be given to members of the graduating classes in Training Schools and High Schools, and the other to be given to the seventh grade in Training Schools and High Schools.

The test for graduates is applied by either Mr. Barrow or myself. We grade the papers and make a study of the results with the principal and members of the faculty the same day the test is given. We feel that this test or a similar test which we have been using this way for the last ten years is making some contribution to a higher type of instruction throughout the year. It is the opinion of members of the Training School faculties that the knowledge that this test will be given by us at the close of their last year in school serves as a stimulus to both teachers and pupils.