The Southern Workman

VOL. LVII FEBRUARY, 1928 No. 2

WHAT DOES NEGRO YOUTH THINK OF PRESENT-DAY NEGRO LEADERS?

BY ALLISON DAVIS

IN evaluating our leaders, we shall not quibble as to their relative merits or fame; we shall ask only that they work constantly to qualify themselves in their chosen fields, and that they find in the needs and faith of a whole people a greater thing than their own ambitions. They can gain inspiration and unselfish purpose in no way so surely as through a proper understanding of our past. That past is mute, but chastening. There is a great suffering, two hundred and fifty years of our people's life and beauty crushed and frustrated,—no recompense to them, forever. In an old account of the slave-ships, I read "how men and women were flogged to death; how they died smiling under the blows, saying, 'Soon we shall be free'; how they leaped overboard and exultingly bade farewell to friends who rejoiced in their escape." The memory of that tragedy should be enough to insure men of genuine vision and sympathetic imagination against a mean selfishness.

There were thousands of high-souled men, whose hopes burnt themselves out, whose agony of spirit was as keenly felt as yours would be now, under the same inevitable fate. They were sustained by an ecstatic faith in the coming of this day; they died without seeing it, and their longings and aspirations are turned under the earth, enriched by their toil. But they have not passed without leaving us a tradition of fortitude, and faith, and sorrow, which we shall want to preserve in the evolving of a new Negro. From these ancestors

our own fathers inherited a stern, religious discipline, the determination to survive, and to wrest a home and education for their children from a hostile environment. The world marvels at their achievement in these sixty years; we know that the real miracle is their life-long fortitude, and self-sacrifice, an unselfishness all the more remarkable in men just emerging from the brutalizing forces of slavery.

We of the present generation honor this self-renunciation of our fathers, this purpose unwavering through years of physical labor and spiritual insult. It is beyond us; but its influence upon our youth has made us more serious and purposeful. Our task, however, is different from that of our fathers. They laid the foundations of home and education; we have the more complex and trying work of making the Negro a force in the civilization of America and of the world.

This is an age of gestation and of transition for us. Thrown in the midst of a developed and relentlessly competitive civilization which intends to keep its doors shut even to genuine ability, we are making an appreciable challenge even in one generation. A large cultured, professional, and business class is developing. Negro life is rapidly growing out of its parochial limits, and making a determined effort to touch the civilization of America at all points.

Our problems, then, are in a world our fathers scarcely touched or suspected. With us, men deprived of the advantages of leisure and means must put forth a heartbreaking struggle to become scientists, publicists, scholars, writers, poets, and composers. And it is precisely in this struggle that we are likely to lose the understanding, the sympathy, and perhaps the virtues of our fathers. The intellectual and imaginative life is experimental, questing; its followers are seekers and learners. And in this freedom of the intellect lies the danger to the new Negro and his leaders, as the passing generation sees it.

The religious strain in our leaders of the older generation will fear this intellectual breaking away from moorings. No doubt there is a real danger in intellectual broadening. The early Church went so far as to say that "Ignorance is the mother of devotion." "The intellect is fatal to seriousness," says Emerson. And Goethe goes to the heart of the dilemma: "Everything which emancipates the intellect without a corresponding growth in character is pernicious." It is this universal human struggle to enrich life without softening it which is the precise difficulty of the new Negro.

Now, with this past and the necessities of the present in mind, what does the Negro today demand of his leaders? He

looks first for ability, for genuine talent and training. A generation of college men and women will not give their respect and loyalty to leaders who cannot stand on their merits without patronage, cannot measure up to the general standard of American culture and achievement in their fields. This is a high and exacting standard of Negro youth. It may be an evidence of impatience and a spirit undisciplined to the actual situation, but it is a standard which leads to the end we must gain, to make the Negro an indispensable part in the civilization of America.

We demand something more. We demand that our leaders honestly respect the Negro, as a race, in the masses; and that they have the courage and unselfishness to work for the best interests of those masses. We must have doctors, lawyers, and preachers who will not exploit the poor and ignorant. We must have leaders who understand and value the soul of the Negro as he is now, in the South,—leaders who are therefore qualified to refashion and direct these masses in a new age.

The work of our leaders will be mere grandiloquent oratory and empty posturizing unless it is inspired by their honest faith in a great people. If in the back of their minds they have a contempt and distaste for the people whose hopes and faith are placed in them, if they are ashamed of these masses in the South, if they have no real confidence in their abilities, if they see no visions for them, they had all best follow the example of those professional men among us who, after making a competence off these people, move as far away from them as they can go.

I know that the sons and daughters of these common people of the South have fortitude, and courage, and a burning faith in their race. They talk about their honor; they talk about setting principles above expediency; they talk about sacrificing themselves for future generations. And they *do* it. It is a noble and touching thing that this younger generation, reared to the daily shame and oppression upon which the South has fed their youth, have by some God-given strength come out of the fire, purged of both bitterness and meanness of spirit. We see little enough true courage and true self-sacrifice in life. Let us cherish and do justice to these qualities in our young people, even if they may at times be frustrated by hasty and ill-judged action. It is a miracle to give us good heart that the tragedy of slavery, far from breaking our spirits, has been transmuted into surer purpose, and, please God, into unselfishness.

We have leaders who stir our hopes and imaginations

by speaking for truth and justice. Too often we know that tomorrow, in action, they will betray us. Among the finely imaginative stories of the Old Testament there is none more suggestive than this of David: The Israelites were immured in the cave of Adullam, and Bethlehem was in the hands of the Philistines. David remembered the cool, sweet waters of the well at the gates of Bethlehem, and in a moment of selfishness expressed a longing to drink of those waters. Immediately three brave warriors of the people sprang up, broke through the lines of the Philistines, drew the water, and brought it to David. "But he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto Jehovah: And he said, 'Shall I drink the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives?' Therefore he would not drink."

THE HOME BEAUTIFUL ON CREDIT

BY ALBON L. HOLSEY

I UNDERSTAND a movement has been started to give such words as "efficiency," "intriguing," "smart," and a few others we hear in the parlors of the newly-rich a little rest from overwork and hard usage. While considering the advisability of relegating "Negro psychology" to membership in the same obsolete club, I met Malcolm Vineberg, and then changed my mind.

First, I had better tell you who Mr. Vineberg is. He is the general manager for the L. Fish Furniture Company of Chicago, Illinois, a concern selling three million dollars worth of furniture to Chicago Negroes every year. We were discussing Negro trade in general, and I rather prided myself that I knew Negro psychology particularly in relation to business—but listen to this from Mr. Vineberg.

"The average working-class Negro in Chicago earns $22 a week. His wife sends her children to the Day Nursery or leaves them with relatives or friends, and she supplements the family income by from $10 to $15 more per week. The average white man of the same class earns $33 per week and keeps his wife at home. This colored man will rent a $65 per month apartment and buy a $50 suit of clothes while the white man will occupy a $30 per month apartment and buy a $25 suit of clothes.

This average white man will come into our store to buy furniture and about $300 will be the limit of his estimated purchase, while the colored man will undertake a thousand