

# Is It Ignorance or Slander

The Answer to Thomas Nelson Page

By James R. L. Diggs

In the January issue of *The North American Review*, Dr. Thomas Nelson Page contributes an article on "The Lynching of Negroes—Its Cause and its Prevention."

A careful reading of the first paragraph leads one to expect a broad and accurate, if not an impartial, treatment of the subject; for the writer admits that the habit of classing all Negroes as of one grade is misleading and unfortunate. If, however, we note the spirit of the article it seems clear that the eminent southerner does the Negro a greater injustice than those persons whose false classification he mildly condemns. He does the "respectable and law-abiding element among the Negroes" a very great wrong when he says in the same article that:

"A close following of the instances of rape and lynching and the public discussion consequent therein; has led the writer (Dr. Page) to the painful realization that even the leaders of the Negro race, at least those who are prominent enough to hold conventions and write papers on the subject—have rarely, by act or word, shown a true appreciation of the crime of ravishing and murdering women. Their discussion and denunciation have been almost invariably and exclusively devoted to the crime of lynching. Underlying most of their protests is the suggestion that the victim is innocent and a martyr. Now and then there is a mild generalization on the evil of law-breaking and the violation of women; but for one stern word of protest against violating women and cutting their throats the records of Negro meetings will show many against the attack of the mob on the criminal. And as to any serious and determined effort to take hold of and stamp out the crime that is blackening the entire Negro race to-day, and arousing against them the fatal, and possibly the

undying hatred of the stronger race, there is, with the exception of the utterances of a few score of individuals, like Booker Washington, who always speaks for the right, Hannibal Thomas and Bishop Turner, hardly a trace of such a thing. A crusade has been preached against lynching, even as far as England; but none has been thought of against the ravishing and tearing to pieces of white women and children."

We quote the above in full so that no injustice may be done Dr. Page. Now let us examine the quotation. In the first place, Dr. Page is utterly wrong in his painful realization(?) that the Negroes who control conventions and write papers have rarely shown, by act or deed, a true appreciation of the enormity of the crime of ravishing and murdering women. It is plain that this educated southerner is ignorant of the utterances, acts and life of the very class of men and women whom he so strangely misrepresents. If he desires to know the sentiment of our intelligent men and women, let him read the minutes of our great religious, philanthropic, economic and literary organizations; let him acquaint himself with the work of the great Baptist conventions, Methodist conferences and other like bodies; let him read "The United Negro: His Problems and His Progress;" let him study the reports of the Atlanta conferences; let him acquaint himself with the literature of the American Negro Academy; let him attend lectures by Negro scholars; let him join us in doing fit honor to men like Bishop Turner and Professor Booker T. Washington, but let him cease to extol such traitors to our race and such vile slanderers of Negro women as William Hannibal Thomas. Indeed it is by no means complimentary to Dr. Page that he should praise the man

who would probably have remained unknown but for his general, illogical and scurrilous diatribe against the womanhood of the Negro race, for this attack is made the basis; by Dr. Page, for classing this "freak of nature" with such illustrious men as the eloquent and learned Bishop Turner and the cool, calculating and conservative Dr. Washington. If Dr. Page really knew some of our Negro thinkers, something of their life and work, of their struggle to raise the unfortunate and untrained of our race above the base and low things of life; if he knew of our mothers' organizations, young women's Christian associations, literary circles and many other like organizations having the highest moral aims, and constantly urging upon the Negro people, the highest ethical principles, he would have long hesitated before attempting to misrepresent from his high vantage ground, the strong, hopeful and worthy womanhood and manhood of nine millions of native-born fellow countrymen. It is never quite safe to discuss publicly questions upon which we are not well informed.

Bishop C. K. Nelson, D. D. (white), of Georgia, in speaking of the Atlanta conference of 1902, says: "High ground was taken at the outset and maintained throughout. As an exhibition of right thinking, the congress was most creditable; as a rally of the best elements of heart and brain in behalf of a people's fundamental needs, the occasion was a phenomenon that cannot escape the attention and support of all right thinking people."

Editor Howell, of the Atlanta Constitution says, on the first page of the above quoted work: "From August 6 to August 11 Atlanta has been filled with representatives of the race who, in themselves are the best illustrations of the possibilities for the future. After seeing them, after hearing the addresses of the leaders and noting not only the earnestness, but intelligence displayed in dealing with the great problems

for the elevation of the race one cannot but be optimistic with regard to the future. Earnest, God-fearing, intelligent men and women are devoting their best efforts to the betterment of their race, and they show in themselves what has been, and what will be accomplished through education and the practical application of the principles of Christianity."

Bishop W. A. Candler, of the Southern Methodist church, who attended the congress, says it seemed to him that uncommon wisdom and grace characterized the body.

Professor Walter B. Hill, LL. D., chancellor of the University of Georgia, and one of the most learned men of our country, attended the conference. In the annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science for September, 1903, p. 84, he says: "The most vivid concrete illustration of the progress of the Negro in higher education was the Negro Young People's Christian and Educational Conference at Atlanta, Ga., August 6 to 11. . . . A pessimist who doubted the progress of the Negro race would have been convinced against his will by witnessing the convention and reflecting that only thirty-seven years had elapsed since these people were unlettered slaves."

We respectfully submit that these are opinions of prominent and representative southern men whose word ought to have weight. They differ from Dr. Page in that they visited this great gathering of more than eight thousand representative Negroes, saw and were convinced. Perhaps we will be pardoned for commending Professor Hill's wise words to Dr. Page's special study.

In The Saturday Evening Post of February 27, 1904, another eminent and loyal southern scholar is at variance with our critic. Joel Chandler Harris does justice to both races and denounces the cry of "social equality" as a bugaboo. Mr. Harris is right, it seems. We shall notice further only a

few errors in Dr. Page's article. He says:

"It further appears that though lynching began as a punishment for assault on white women, it has extended until less than one fourth of the instances are for this crime, while over three-fourths of them are for murder, attempts at murder or some less heinous offense. Time was when the crime of assault was unknown throughout the south. During the whole period of slavery it did not exist, nor did it exist for some years after emancipation."

The import of this quotation is to make the Negro responsible for lynching, and to make it appear that it originated after emancipation, but was like its vicious cause, due to the false teachings of equality. In reply to this we refer to Niles' Register for October, 1835, vol. XLIX, p. 65, from which we quote the following: "In the south we almost daily hear of Judge Lynch, and of persons who are flogged and driven away or 'executed' under sentence rendered by him." (See also the "North American Review" for September and October, 1835, No. 89). These references show that Dr. Page does not know, perhaps, that an epidemic of lynching swept over the south prior to October, 1835. Niles' Register was a Baltimore periodical of wide circulation, and had no desire to do its own section of the country an injustice. Dr. Page owes the American public an apology for his inaccurate and misleading statements found in the North American Review. The editor of The Review has been apprised of this error, but has never done anything to correct it. It seems strange that the great North American Review, crowned with so many years of honored service, should in any way countenance such a serious misrepresentation of a race, notwithstanding its high motto borrowed from Queen Dido's address to the exiled heroes of Troy: *Tros Tyriusque mihi nullo discrimine agetur*. Thus it appears that, in spite of the article in The North

American Review, lynching was common in the south, even in the days of slavery when the black men were not the victims of the mob.

Dr. Page also complains because educated Negroes do not look upon the relations between the races and the questions growing out of the same just as he does. By his ingenious and insidious interweaving of the pet hobby of his class of writers—social equality—with questions of great public interest, he appeals to the worst prejudices of the white south in particular and of white men in general. Our acquaintance with educated white people, however, leads us to fear but little from such appeals. We do not believe they will long be willing to follow such dangerous leadership. In fact, the hackneyed term, social equality, has no logical content, and we were surprised that a man like Dr. Page would use this meaningless, senseless stock phrase. Educated Negroes have no interest in this friction which causes cold chills to run down the backs of such men as Dr. Page, John Temple Graves and Senator Tillman. To thoughtful Negroes it is the "rousing-word" of the enemy, the "coward's weapon," the "demagogue's slogan"—not the weapon of a hero. They have treated this scarecrow with indifference, and it would be forgotten if the perennial alarmists would show it enough reverence to allow it a decent burial.

Some southern white men think that they do not have the support of southern black men in their efforts to maintain law and order. This is the palable suggestion of the article of Dr. Page. The error lies in the logical fallacy of assuming that only visible or concrete co-operation between the leaders of the races can be considered. We assure our friends and foes that wherever an honest effort is made by Caucasians to inaugurate reforms to uphold the majesty of the law, to improve the condition of the people, per se, to cultivate the best of feel-



ing among men of every class, these efforts have the moral support of the Negro leaders. If the Caucasians think it strange that they do not generally have the visible support of educated Negroes in their efforts to suppress and punish crime, perhaps we may serve them by pointing out two reasons for this anomalous condition of affairs: (1) The domineering attitude of the average southern white man toward the black man of every class. (2) The failure of the average southern white man to pay due respect to black women. If they will remove these causes their consequence will necessarily pass away. If these fellow citizens will apply the principles of the golden rule the trouble will be ended. Manhood of the educated Negro makes it impossible for him to work with men who make an admission of race and individual inferiority a condition, *sine qua non*, for all co-operative effort. Both the Negro and the golden rule are opposed, unalterably to such a procedure.

In regard to the second reason it need only be said that the educated Negro regards the women of his race as generally the peers of any women on the globe. Any scheme, then, for the protection of south-women must include the black women, if the support of Negro men is to be secured. It is a fact that most southern men do not pay due respect to Negro women, however refined and cultured. Dr. Page's article is an appeal not for the protection of womanhood, *per se*, but for the protection of white womanhood. Perhaps he overlooks the fact that for nearly three hundred years black women have been the victims of a like fate; he may not know that in his own Virginia the black women, like her white sister, suffers from this same vicious element, not at the hands of vicious Negroes alone, but of vicious white men (Caucasians) as well.

We append a list of recent cases of criminal assaults committed by white men in

order that the honest seeker after the truth may know some pertinent facts:

1. G. P. Holeman, Richmond, Va., convicted of attempted criminal assault. (News-Leader.) Pardoned by governor because of mother's health.

2. Ernest Brooks, assault on 11-year-old girl, 20 years in penitentiary. (Times Dispatch of October 31, 1903.)

3. Assault on Mrs. Banks (colored, aged 65), by young white man, Richmond, Va., 1902. (Planet).

4. Robert Murray, Harrisonburg, Va., criminal assault on 9-year-old colored girl. (Baltimore, December 26, 1902).

5. G. W. Barton (Buckingham Co. Va.), criminal assault on his own daughter; given 13 years in state prison. (Baltimore American, October 24, 1902).

6. W. Garrison, criminal assault on two White girls at Roanoke, Va. (Baltimore American, September 29, 1902).

7. M. A. Palmer, criminal assault on a Miss Cobbs, Richmond, Va. (Baltimore American, November 20, 1903.)

8. James Woodward, Luray, Va., criminal assault on Mrs. McLaughlin. (Baltimore American, November 12, 1902).

9. James Jenkins, criminal assault on Mrs. McLaughlin, Luray, Va. (Baltimore American, November 12, 1902).

10. J. C. Phillips, betrayal of 13-year-old child of respectable family. (Baltimore American, October 19, 1902).

11. J. W. Mullins, criminal assault, Roanoke, Va. (Baltimore American, Oct. 29, 1902). Eight years in prison.

12. J. E. Mullins, co-criminal in the last mentioned crime.

13. George Potter, co-criminal in last mentioned crime. Killed before captured.

This is the record of white criminals in Virginia during the last two years. The files of the Baltimore American show that these are not fictitious cases. According to the laws of Virginia any man found guilty of the above mentioned crimes may be executed if the court so directs, but not one of these men were executed. This extreme penalty is uniformly meted out to Negroes. Hence that vicious Negro who committed robbery and nearly killed Mrs. Shields and her daughter at Roanoke, in the winter of the present year, was rightfully hanged, but the white men above men-



tioned who committed the vile and more repulsive crime of rape, were given terms in the state prison. Can Dr. Page show as large a number of Virginia Negroes even charged with this terrible crime? Now, just so long as the courts make such discrimination in favor of white criminals who never suffer the extreme penalty of the law, but punish with death all Negroes who are fortunate enough to escape the mob and to fall into the hands of the law, just so long will the Negro doubt the justice of courts and those who control them in Virginia.

The Negro would gladly assist in the capture of criminals if proper respect would be given him for the service. This is the only basis upon which Dr. Page's "New Negro" will work with anybody. In our churches, young men's and young women's Christian associations, in our literary societies, clubs, lyceums, schools, through the journals and the like, our leaders are constantly urging the masses whom they can reach to do all they can to put down lawlessness and crime; but as our critics never meet us here they are largely ignorant of our attitude on moral, economic and civic questions.

Dr. Page seems to pride himself on his knowledge of the Negro and, as is the wont of his class of writers, remind's the northern people of their ignorance of the black man. Our northern friends need not be unduly alarmed. We assure them that we have reason to believe they know much more about the educated Negro type than do such men as Dr. Page. Many northern college professors know the Negro as a student, many alumni of our best universities know him as a fellow student and northern scholars know him by his contributions to American literature. The names of eminent Americans like Bannaker, the celebrated Negro astronomer; Miller, the mathematician; Durham, the physician; Williams, the surgeon; Williams, the historian; Turner, the scientist; Chestnut, the novelist; Wheatley and Dunbar and Davis, the poets; Brown, the business prince; Dubois, the sociologist and statistician; Scarborough and Simpson, Moore and Pegues, Brawly and Bowen, are not unknown to educated men in the north. Our southern cities have neglected the means of knowing their next door neighbor, and yet they write about him and gently chide our not too numerous north-

ern friends for discussing this wrongly called Negro problem.

Conditions in the south are such that all advances must be made by the whites. This is equally true of northern men visiting or resident here; for the black man does not know how his northern visitor feels on the questions of the day, and when so many of them are going over to the extreme southern view a little caution on the Negro's part saves many a cool rebuff, if not a brutal and deliberate insult. The young Negro may be ever so learned and cultured, yet an unreasonable pride keeps the educated white southerner from seeking even a helpful acquaintance with him. In some quarters it is a proud distinction to be able to boast that one does not know personally a single educated Negro. The black man is indifferent in this matter, but he does strongly object to this class of critics priding themselves on their superior knowledge of the Negro whenever they attempt to discuss the race problem through northern periodicals. There are many white men in the south who do not belong to the class of men we have in mind, but who are noble-hearted, honest men. Upon these men rests the future of the southern states. With these men the Negro can and will work. Each may cherish his peculiar social customs, select his own society and be none the less respected by the other.

In any plan for united work, in any concert of action, in any system of co-operative effort, the educated Negro (the new Negro), will insist upon the following:

1. His essential manhood and equality before the law must be admitted.
2. His right to an opinion must be respected.
3. Respect for womanhood must be granted without regard to race.
4. Equal protection for like interests.
5. Neither Caucassian nor Negro domination, but the domination of intelligent and righteously exercised power.

When these elementary and basic principles are adopted, Dr. Page will no longer have reason to complain of the lack of support from colored leaders. Whenever the white men of the south shall meet the black men of that section on the above basis, crime will be met by united and intelligent action.

Dr. Page attributes the crime of rape

largely to what he calls the teaching of social equality during the period of reconstruction. It is strange to meet such puerility in the writings of a leading American litterateur. The import of this statement by our caustic critic is that the crime of rape is confined to the Negroes. This is surely not so in his beloved Virginia, nor in my own state—Maryland—whose record for the last two years is quite as discreditable to white men as is that of Virginia.

In the second place every Negro capable of understanding what some persons desire to read into the meaningless term—social equality—knows that it has no logical content, and hence he is not moved by it. In fact he looks at it as a scarecrow. If Negro mothers would teach their children social inferiority as the proper relation of the Negro to the Caucasian, perhaps Dr. Page would have no objection. Though this would be the antithesis of what he regards as the teaching which led Negroes to commit assaults, it would not wipe out the crime which is as commonly committed by the whites as by blacks. Intelligent Negro women spend no time in teaching such nonsense. They teach their children to base worth on character as expressed in conduct, and not on wealth, learning, race or color. Dr. Page says: "Should the Negroes sturdily and faithfully set themselves to prevent the crime of rape by members of that race it could be stamped out." Three fallacies are involved here.

1. That the Negro alone commits the crime of rape.
2. That the race is not averse to this vile crime.
3. That white men and Indians, etc., do not commit the crime, but it is peculiar to the blacks.

In the statement in The North American Review about the teaching of social equality and in the above quotation, Dr. Page is guilty of the fallacy of presumption; moreover, he seems an adept at the argumentum ad populum.

Let us conclude:

1. We deny that Negro leaders are indifferent as to the crime of rape.
2. We deny that Negro leaders condemn this crime only in glittering generalizations.
3. We deny that lynching was practically unknown in the south prior to the days of reconstruction.
4. We deny that Negro leaders lack appreciation of the enormity of the crime of rape.
5. We deny that black men are more given to this crime than are white men of the same grade and habitat.
6. We maintain that southern white men, as a rule, do not show due respect to Negro women.
7. We maintain that we have a right to be heard on all questions of general public policy.
8. We maintain our right to approach the president of the republic on terms common to all American citizens.
9. We maintain that it is our right to be heard by the governors of our respective states.

In short, we claim all the rights of American citizens and all the respect from others which they may in reason claim from us.

These are the contentions of the Negro of the day, and with this view of his relation to the greater body politic of which he forms a part, he will ever struggle onward and hope, remembering that "Justice is the eternal purpose to give every man his right."