

The New Negro Slavery in Harlem

By Edgar M. Grey

IN THE year 1865 Chattel Slavery was abolished. Since then the Negro has been strong enough to make himself useful to political parties, so that no attempt has been seriously made to reinstate him in the antebellum fashion. In Harlem, however, cause enough exists, which must move serious-minded Negroes to feel alarmed over the "new slavery," for, though it be slow and non-violent, economic slavery is more disastrous to the progress of a people than any other kind of evil -- social or political. We have in Harlem this situation: Negroes work, pay rents, dress well, worship God, have a good time and save no money. This is bad enough, but might be quite harmless if most of their earnings did not leave the community every week-end, never to return. For each day, while hordes of Negroes are wending their way down into subways, up to elevated lines and on trolleys and buses, hundreds of whites, non-residents of the community, are emerging from subways, alighting from surface, transit and motor cars, to do the peaceful and pleasant task of gathering in the honey which the queen bee -- the Negro -- has brought to the hive.

The fact that these inferior Caucasians bring social diseases with them to Harlem, and contribute freely to our illegitimate child population and to the pauperism of the group by not feeding these new-born children does not seem to frighten us. But what actually sets us to thinking is the fact that all the money which we bring in as salary, and all which we spend for rent and commodities, leaves Harlem on Saturday night, never to be seen again. As a result there is no money in circulation in the community except among gamblers, and even this finally reaches white hands and is lost.

The only portion of the Negroes' salary which goes to Negroes is that which is invested in amusement, paid to the lodges or to the church. Few Negroes are engaged in business, and most of these are not making any money. The landlords see to it that the stores are put out of the reach of Negro finance, either by "family leases" or by advertising vacancies only in Jewish and foreign language newspapers. As a result we of Harlem are now safely landed in the toils of a "new slavery."

The following figures will show to some degree how completely we are enslaved. And what with the politicians fighting, the police clubbing and restraining Negroes from exercising constitutional rights -- by prohibiting street speakers from speaking on the streets, Mississippi will soon be a better place for the Negro to live in than New York.

With this preliminary we proceed to examine the figures: There were found 321 delicatessens, the average daily sales of which were \$60, which amounts to \$115,560 weekly. Negroes were employed as help in four of these, with an average salary of \$18 per week, which aggregates the fine sum of \$72 in the pockets of Negroes. In these there were employed 642 clerks (not Negroes), who received an

(Note. -- This survey of the business enterprises in Harlem was undertaken last January for the Amsterdam News, and has just been completed. The figures given were obtained from the white business men only after the employment of all sorts of artifices and devices on the part of the writer. He found the stores especially unwilling to give any inkling of their receipts, and many were very rude, and at times insulting. There will be found, therefore, that the mean base of figures of some of the stores is an approximation, the base of which was the mean extracted from those stores which were kind enough to give the figures. The writer wishes to thank those store keepers who were good enough to help him with the material upon which this survey is made, and wishes particularly to mention the kindness of The Economy Chain Stores.)

salary a total of \$25,680 per week. These clerks belong to a union, which does not permit Negroes to become members. Of the 189 grocery stores (dairies included), seven employed Negroes, either as drivers or in some capacity, with an average salary of \$17.92. The total weekly income of these was \$51,368.56. Each employing at least one clerk, with a mean salary of \$16 and a maximum of \$34. Of the 310 butcher shops whose average daily sale was \$68.72, nine Negro men, three boys, and two Negro women cleaners were employed, with an average salary of \$19.28. It is notable that one of these men, employed at 439 Lenox avenue, receives \$48.50 per week, when seven years ago he started with the firm at \$18 per week.

Of the 81 dry goods stores, with the average sale of \$21.40 daily, three Negro women and one boy are employed. These dry goods stores deserve special notice here. There is an association of dry goods store operators called the North Harlem Merchants' Association, and its president admitted that the stores charge 2 1/2 to 3 per cent over the general retail prices, for the reason that Negroes have the terrible habit of coming into the stores and permitting some article to follow them out which they don't always pay for. The whole buying Negro public is made to pay through this system for the queer habits of individuals, which might be avoided or detected by proper supervision.

There were 126 drug stores with a daily average sale of \$82.41. In these 17 Negroes were employed, 14 as full-time clerks, and three as part-time junior clerks.

There were 269 tailor stores, and not one would give report on his daily or weekly income. In these 34 Negroes were employed as pressers, with an average salary of \$18 per week. There were 217 shoemakers, with an average income of \$11 per day without considering the best-cleaning incomes, which in most cases are rented out to another. In these there were employed 29 Negroes, with average salary of \$18.29 per week. There were 107 stationery stores with a daily average income of \$12.85 per day, of these not any employed Negroes. The hardware stores amounted to \$1, in which three employed Negroes as clerks and five as mechanics. No figures were available of the average income of these stores. The average salary paid to the Negroes employed in these stores was \$19.46.

There were 186 laundries, of which 185 employed Negro women as ironers and one employed a man. The average weekly incomes of these laundries were \$99.27, and the average salaries paid to the Negro employees was \$14 per week.

The bakeries amounted to 84 and were combined in most part with restaurants. No figures were available as to the income, and only 19 employed Negroes. The Hillware Bakery at 125th street and Lenox avenue and that at 148th and 8th avenues deserves special mention. These two employ a total number of 14 in help, none Negro. The main store at 125th and 190th streets and Lenox avenue employs a Negro dishwasher day and night. If one enters and wishes to buy any merchandise to take out he is served promptly, but if one sits at a table he is made to wait an hour or so, and then the dishwasher is sent out from the kitchen to serve him. If one objects, he is told that the regular waiters and waitresses are busy, and that he need not wait, for they will be busy continually.

The ice cream parlors were 22, of which seven employed Negro boys of school age, and three employed Negro adults. No fair statement of the figures could be made by the owners, although they were willing, for the reason that this survey was made in the winter season. The fish stores

numbered nine, of which two employed Negroes.

The real estate operators, which are operated solely by whites (I found some operated jointly by white and Negro men), were seven, in which only two employed Negro girls. One said that white girls understood the business; when asked whether he had ever employed Negro girls, he replied that he had not. One of these real estate operators supplied the information that while he would not employ a Negro girl, his dentist was a Negro.

No figures were available from the 241 green grocers (vegetable markets), seven of which employed Negroes. There were 82 jewelry stores, of which 13 employed Negroes, three on whole time, five as jobbers and six as regular full-time workers.

Of the pawnshops, 16, not one employed Negroes. One gave as an excuse that Negroes did not understand his business, and that most of his clerks are related to him by blood or marriage.

There are nine dentists, but only three employ Negroes. One, Dr. Polk, said that he would employ a Negro assistant if he could find an efficient one.

There are three white owners of barber shops, two operated solely for white people.

An amusing incident occurred while the writer was interviewing the owner of one of these shops. An Italian vendor of barber supplies came to interview the owner. After the business was talked over, the vendor, speaking in Italian, asked the boss why he remained in a Negro neighborhood. To which the boss replied: "White people are hard to please, they find too much fault; the Negro is easy to please, he does not know anything about how his hair should be done, pat him on the back and call him 'Sir' with a smile he will always come to be served."

The writer was informed that even in the matter of "Numbers" white men had entered into fierce competition with the Negroes, real and Cuban, and were driving many of them out.

There are any number of hat stores, hosiery and glove and notion stores, which the writer did not survey for the reason that he was primarily interested in those businesses which compete against Negroes. A survey of Negro business will be made later, but we must realize that unless we are able to break the bonds of this slavery, the community will be pawned for the next 100 years. Negroes must pool their resources in large quantities, for a small business, however well managed, will always find difficulty in competing with great combinations. So long as we are at the mercy of great money combinations we cannot hope to be free.

The churches, which encourage the building of great monuments for the worship of God, must follow the lead of Rev. W. W. Brown of Metropolitan and help to pool money in order to compete with other races. The lodges, which spend the thousands of dollars in amusement, litigation and for building temples, must come to the rescue. The Garveyites, who spend fortunes in ships and useless uniforms and futile litigations and appeals, must come to rescue of this enslaved community and practice some of the uplift and freedom which their speakers and preachers so glibly prate about.