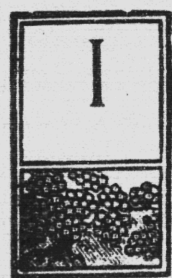


A Northern Negro's Impressions of the South



IN traveling through the South for the first time in search of a little truth on what, with only partial correctness, is called the Negro problem, one born north of the Mason and Dixon line is immediately struck with what seems to him paradoxical conditions.

First of all, he has heard about the "New South," and he fancies many and populous cities of busy industry and splendid homes, cultivated country sides, and well constructed highways. But let him take a passenger coach out of the National Capital for the farther Southland; he will ride wearily along for hours, and even days, and not see these with sufficient frequency to prevent ennui from viewing their opposites. Instead of populous cities, with rare exceptions, he will see lazy country villages of greater or less proportions; instead of attractive country sides, he will see wild and wooded hillsides; instead of the splendid homes, he will pass, for the most part, neglected, unpainted, little houses; and even log cabins, sometimes with the proverbial black mammy of red bandanna handkerchief filling the open doorway; but just as often he will see a lean and sallow housewife of the other race standing there. Instead of good highways or boulevards, he will notice mule wagons or ox carts with their huge spokes half hid in the soggy red clay of the winding, natural roads. If he would

not despair of the New South, except as a beautiful conception of the imaginative Southern mind, he should stop at these exceptions; for instance, Birmingham or Montgomery, Alabama; Atlanta, Georgia, or Charlotte, North Carolina. There he will see all the fancied attributes of the New South, including sky scrapers, one-cent amusement houses, and moving picture theatres. If the intervening space had been annihilated, and he had nothing more to guide him, he might not know that he was not in Hartford, or Springfield, or Pittsburg, instead of a Southern metropolis.

Again he has heard, perhaps from some Southern Congressman or from a writer in the Saturday Evening Post, of the "lazy, loafing Negroes" that infest Southern railway stations; but he sees in almost equal numbers around the idle, little depots, unkempt and scrawny white loiterers. From the same sources, perhaps, he has heard from early childhood, of the forbidding Southern aristocracy and the sharp, unbroken lines of race demarkation. But casting aside as gossip and a rumor or listening with only one ear to the tales told him by colored informers of the untold relations between the races, let him visit some large Negro mass meeting at Montgomery, Tuskegee or Charlotte, North Carolina, and he will see the "flower of Southern chivalry" occupying the preferred and choice places in the audience.

On one night the writer attended a

large Negro mass meeting held in a Negro church in Montgomery, where Booker T. Washington made one of his most inspiring and fearless addresses to his people. There he found the front pews all occupied by the most aristocratic and influential white residents of that city, who, rushing up at the close of the address, greeted the great Negro leader with as much cordiality as ever he met with at the Old South Church in Boston. And on timid inquiry the unbelieving, amazed Northerner will be told that this in fact is the common and usual occurrence at these meetings throughout the South, black belt and all.

Also let the visitor meet at the Tuskegee Workers' Conference such devoted and practical educators as Prof. J. H. Dillard, who just resigned as dean of Tulane University, New Orleans, born and reared in Dixie, and Dr. Charles Meserve, of Shaw University, Raleigh, North Carolina, and he will see these cultured and able gentlemen as frank and democratic with their colored co-workers as people anywhere interested in common objects and pursuits could be. He can then understand the possibility of such Southern white men as Mr. Belton Gilreath, the Birmingham mine owner and large employer of Negro labor, whom Mr. Washington accompanied at the Old South Church meeting last fall and whom the latter introduced as "a white Southern gentleman, who believes in the highest development of the Negro without let or hindrance"; of ex-Gov. Northern, of North Carolina, who recently at a Shaw University commencement defended the Negro against the charge that he was lazy; and of Col. Henry Watter-

son, of the Louisville Courier-Journal, who said at the recent New York meeting that the same privileges that he "asked for himself and his children, he asked for the Negro and his children." But the most incredible contradiction in this connection that the visitor met with was ex-Gov. Vardaman as described by the cultured and stalwart young Negro president of Alcorn College, Mississippi, and a personal friend of the Mississippi politician. The Governor, he said, whose reputation among the Negroes everywhere is that of their most violent enemy and the most implacable foe of their progress, is, in his personal and actual relations, the very antithesis of his reputation. The colored educator did not excuse him "from responsibility for his reputation," but told of his many kindly acts and policies as Governor, saying that the school received a larger appropriation under his administration than ever before, the Governor himself getting \$14,000 for a new lighting plant for the institution. When the Northern student hears about Vardaman, like Governor Hoke Smith, of Georgia, although his heart may throb and quail as he recalls the dire results, Negro homes and villages depopulated and respectable Negroes mobbed by the white rabble, who were encouraged by their inflammatory political preachments and pre-election promises, he nevertheless concludes that the Southern politician's platform, just like the platform of the Northern politician, is like the platform of a street car, something to get in on but not to stand on.

But the crowning inconsistencies, to my mind, in the entire category of South-

ern paradoxes, are the mental attitudes of the white South and the black South. And these must account in large measure for the confusing and erroneous ideas which even Northerners get on Southern conditions. For example, two white citizens of this State, one a publisher of a New-Thought magazine, the other a faculty member of a great university, both educated and sincere men, visiting the South in the last year, have reported on the Negro. The impression from their reports has been, generally speaking, pessimistic. That is the attitude of the white South, and these gentlemen confess that they received their information concerning the Negro from white men, and were shown about by white men.

The average white Southerner in answer to a query as to the nature of the Negro will reply almost automatically, "the Negro is incapable, un-moral, criminal, indolent, saucy," and so on *ad infinitum*. He will admit, however, that he knows "just one good nigger." He will then lead you to one ante-bellum, servile, old Negro, who when called, approaches, grinning bashfully and head bowed, wringing his hands with professions of humility and deference, and who when questioned by the Northerner will say, "Huh! young niggahs dey ain't no good, no sah," and will then try to substantiate his contention much to the known gratification of his white patron. But if the visitor will then seek out an intelligent and independent Negro, for example the colored insurance agent, J. H. Phillips of Montgomery, he will be shown the other side of the picture, disproving each and every allegation in the case against the race. He would, amidst his other over-

whelming, rebutting evidence, show him to scores of surprisingly creditable and well-conducted Negro businesses and homes. The intelligent Negro tells the visitor that if he doubts the capability of his race he should go to Tuskegee or to a dozen of the educational and business institutions, conducted wholly or in part by Negroes. At these institutions the guide would point out, on all sides able, good looking, respectable, thrifty, and propertied Negroes until the visitor completely changed his mind about the wholesale, untruthful characterizations of the Negro race. This Montgomery citizen, proud of his race, will then take the student perhaps to the Old Ship Church where Booker T. Washington is making an address. As he enters a handsome, large, new edifice he sees the church jammed to suffocation with unusually well-mannered and good-looking Negroes; he is told that the Annie M. Duncan Club of the Alabama Federation of Colored Women's Clubs is holding a meeting in behalf of their reform school, for colored youth, situated at Mt. Meiggs, Alabama. Being introduced into this beautiful circle of well-gowned women, he immediately finds them both cultured and reserved right here in the black belt, strange and contradictory as it seems according to his previous information. Then he will listen to the "great man of the South" telling her of her inconsistencies, as the Montgomery *Advertiser* (white) for February 25 reports. He will tell her, as his great soul swells with anguish, that just as she maintains reformatories for white boys she should maintain them for wayward Negro youth. The South is incon-

sistent in bewailing her Negro criminality when she makes Negro criminals by putting first and petty offenders into prisons and chain gangs with hardened criminals. Even then, unchangeable optimist that he is, he expresses the hopeless hope that the "great State of Alabama will take this matter in hand," which is now left to the colored club women.

Then again the visitor, to see for himself, has gone into the Jim Crow cars on the Southern railroad from Washington, and on the Louisville & Nashville Railroad from Montgomery to Cincinnati. He has found an antedated coach without separate toilet arrangements for the sexes, without basin or towels, without smoking compartments, but with an abundance of baskets and boxes holding the fruit and literature of the train boy and with the porters' trash box, dusters and brooms in conspicuous confusion. On the latter road, in addition to these humiliating and primitive arrangements and a profane and vulgar train crew, he will find the colored coach is only the end nearer the engine of the white smoking-car. In these cars he will find the Negroes of class and position riding, unable they say, to gain Pullman sleeping-car accommodations. He will see venerable and respected Negro bishops, colored ladies of modest and reserved deportment, quiet and unassuming officers of the army of Uncle Sam, were seen by the writer traveling shorter or longer distances on the "Jim Crow cars" of the two roads.

The South's inconsistency in expecting the Negro to be a law-abiding and progressive citizen would be still further

revealed if just a glimpse at his school accommodations and his political disfranchisement might be had. At the conference of "Workers" from all parts of the South held at Tuskegee last month, but one delegate, Dr. W. H. Steward from Louisville, Kentucky, could be found who would say that for his district there was a just and fair distribution of the school fund between the races. For the most part the delegates would report no schools in many needy parts of their district; three months' school terms, and with teachers' salaries ranging from \$10 to \$25 per month. But in many cases the Negro farmers were "supplementing" the State provisions for school terms and salaries.

As for disfranchisement a Negro federal official in one of these cities, efficient, influential and qualified in every way, said that he had been evasively denied registration about a dozen times one election. That disfranchisement exists all over the Southland with varying degrees of rigor is only too well known and true. One can say with the Tuskegee orator if, "Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth" then He loves the Negro a great deal.

This anomalous spirit of consciousness of their wrongs perpetrated on them yet hopefulness for better things and better days that are gradually coming pervades the Negroes of the South.

Talk to Negroes in any part of the South and you will find a striving, optimistic spirit of unembittered patience among them that is as marvelous as it is gratifying and admirable. Or talk to any white Southern gentleman of the Watterson of Gilreath type and he will

tell you not only of this, but he will tell you also that the average white Southerner does not know the Negro and the different classes of Negroes.

There are several well-defined classes of Southern blacks and those Negroes of professions and independent business, of property, wealth, and high ideals, the virtue of whose women folk to them, like Ceasar's wife, are "above suspicion," the white man rarely ever learns to know, because with them he rarely or never comes in contact. Then there is a large middle class of Negro farmers and artisans illiterate for the most part, but hard-working and respectable, deferential to the whites, yet their home life and inner strivings are but little better known to or appreciated by the whites. Then there are the servant, and the lower, loafing, crude, uncouth, sensuous strata. These last two classes the Southern judge and magazine writer knows and sees and from these he forms his estimate of Negro character. Hampered thus within and opposed from without, the Negro nevertheless preserves his balance of spirit and ceaselessly struggles. Almost unconsciously you try to recall a parallel state of mind to that of the optimistic, progressive Negro, and too you can hardly account for it. And you may approximate it when you remember the football situation at Harvard last fall, just before the Yale game. In the face of a fit and victorious foe and in the midst of disheartening internal conditions the hosts of Harvard men went marching about the historic old yard headed by a brass man and took up the

slogan. "Are we disheartened?" and then the thundering response would come rolling back a deafening, "No!"

And then you remember how the fighting inspired football eleven played their rivals almost off their feet and became the real heroes of the contest.

Some time ago it seems some Negroes headed by the tireless, toiling optimist of Tuskegee began "whistling to keep their courage up," but for that purpose they whistle no longer. Now all the Negroes of the South have caught the spirit. They believe in themselves, they believe in the ability of their race and the opportunity of the South, they believe in the ultimate justice and fair play of the American people. Such a pride of their race and such a confidence in their future is enough to rejoice the soul of any man. Coming away you feel with some writer that the Negro "is embalmed in a state of nature" and that all he needs is a square deal and an opportunity.

You conclude further that there is not only a Negro problem but that the whole South is a problem—a Southern problem—a National problem. There is a new South, and an ante-bellum South; there is a new white South, and an ante-bellum white South; there is a new Negro, and an ante-bellum Negro. In the confusing maze of Southern contradiction you leave the remedy for further consideration. You are confronted by a "condition and not a theory."

GEO. W. HARRIS,

Harvard College, 1907. Born and reared, Topeka, Kansas.