

JOHNSON, JAMES WELDON, 1871-1938 . CHAPTER 12 . New York, NY :
Alfred A. Knopf , 1930 .

Chapter 12XII

The year 1900 marked another epoch for the Negro in New York. On the night of August 12, a coloured man named Arthur Harris left his wife on the corner of Eighth Avenue and Forty-first Street for a moment to buy a cigar. When he returned he found her struggling in the grasp of a white man. Harris engaged with the man and was struck by him over the head with a club. He retaliated with a pocket-knife and inflicted a wound which proved fatal. He thereupon ran away. The white man was Robert J' Thorpe, a police officer in plain clothes, who claimed that he had arrested the woman for "soliciting." Thorpe was very popular with his brother officers, and his funeral was attended by a large contingent of the police force, in addition to a great throng of friends, sympathizers, and those drawn by morbid curiosity. Harris had disappeared; and during the day of the funeral the temper of the crowd to wreak vengeance upon some vicarious victim grew strong. As the day closed, rumours that there was going to be trouble flew faster and faster.-

-127--

Early in the evening of August 15 the fourth great New York race riot burst in full fury. A mob of several thousands raged up and down Eighth Avenue and through the side streets from Twenty-seventh to Forty-second. Negroes were seized wherever they were found, and brutally beaten. Men and women were dragged from street-cars and assaulted. When Negroes ran to policemen for protection, even begging to be locked up for safety, they were thrown back to the mob. The police themselves beat many Negroes as cruelly as did the mob. An intimate friend of mine was one of those who ran to the police for protection; he received such a clubbing at their hands that he had to be taken to the hospital to have his scalp stitched in several places. It was a beating from which he never fully recovered.

During the height of the riot the cry went out to "get Ernest Hogan and Williams and Walker and Cole and Johnson." These seemed to be the only individual names the crowd was familiar with. Ernest Hogan was at the time playing at the New York Winter Garden, in Times Square; for safety he was kept in the theatre all night. George Walker had a narrow escape. The riot of 1900 was a brutish orgy, which, if it was not incited by the police, was, to say the least, abetted by them.

But this fourth of the great New York riots involving the Negro was really symptomatic of a national condition. The status of the Negro as a citizen had been steadily declining for twenty-five years; and at the opening of the twentieth century his civil state--128--was, in some respects, worse than at the close of the Civil War. At the opening of the twentieth century the War Amendments passed in the Negro's behalf had been completely nullified or evaded in the Southern states; and he was disfranchised, "Jim Crowed," outraged, and denied the equal protection of the laws. In the decade ending in 1899, according to the records printed in the daily press, 1,665 Negroes were lynched, many of them with sadistic savagery, even by mutilation and by burning alive at the stake in the presence of great crowds. And these debauches in bestiality aroused no action on the part of the country nor any general protest. The outlook was dark and discouraging. The Negro himself had in a large measure lost heart. The movement that Frederick

Douglass had so valiantly carried forward had all but subsided. The general spirit of the race was one of hopelessness or acquiescence. The only way to survival seemed along the road of sheer opportunism and of conformity to the triumphant materialism of the age. Idealism linked with courage was scarcely discernible. Nor did these conditions pertain solely to the South. The South lost the Civil War in 1865, but by 1900, in the fight waged on the Negro battle front, it had conquered the North; and all through the old free states there was a tendency to concede that the grand experiment was a failure.

Nowhere in the country was this decline in the spirit of self-assertion of rights more marked than in New York. A comparison between the times of Douglass, Garnett, and Crummell and the opening of the--129--new century was like a comparison between the light of a tropic noon and a winter twilight. But the riot of 1900 woke Negro New York and stirred the old fighting spirit. The answer to demands for an investigation of the riot was a series of excuses and delays on the part of the municipality and the police authorities; then the coloured citizens took steps to force action. A meeting was called at St' Mark's Church in West Fifty-third Street, and the Citizens Protective League was organized. The Rev' William H' Brooks, the pastor of the church, was made president; James E' Garner, a successful business man, was made treasurer; and T' Thomas Fortune was elected chairman of the executive committee. Mr' Fortune was editor of the *New York Age*, the oldest Negro newspaper in New York, and a writer of marked ability. For many years he was the acknowledged leader in the Negro newspaper world; and for a while he contributed a regular column to the *New York Sun*. In ability and courage he was a direct descendant of the leaders of twenty-five years before. The Citizens Protective League held a mass meeting in Carnegie Hall on September 12, and funds were raised. The organization retained a lawyer to prosecute police officers; and its membership grew to about five thousand. The league in a letter to Mayor Van Wyck demanded the conviction and removal from the force of those officers it was able to prove guilty of malfeasance or nonfeasance. The Mayor replied that the whole matter was in the hands of the Police Board. Finally an investigation was held--130--in which coloured citizens who testified to having been beaten by the police were themselves treated as persons accused of crime, and the testimony of each was simply rebutted by policemen who were called to testify. The investigation turned out to be a sham and a whitewash; nevertheless, the Negroes of New York, moved by this sudden realization of their danger, had taken a step towards making that city anew the chief radiating centre of the forces contending for equal rights.

A promising move in this same direction had been made in 1889, when T' Thomas Fortune issued a call for the formation of the thinking and progressive coloured people of the country into a national organization to protest against the increasing disabilities and injustices to which the race was being subjected. The call was answered by one hundred and forty-one delegates from twenty-one states, who met in Chicago, January 15, 1890, and organized the Afro-American Council. J' C' Price, the head of Livingstone College in North Carolina, a man who had achieved considerable prestige as a leader, was chosen president, and T' Thomas Fortune, secretary. The following year the council met at Knoxville, Tennessee, and Mr' Fortune succeeded Mr' Price as president. The organization then lay dormant until 1898, when Bishop Alexander Walters, of New York, stirred by fresh outrages against Negroes, issued a call to Mr' Fortune to reassemble the

council. The result was a meeting on September 15 of the same year at Rochester, New York, with one hundred and fifty delegates present, at--131--the time when the monument to Frederick Douglass was being unveiled in that city. Another meeting was held at Washington in December to finish the business of the Rochester meeting. But the Afro-American Council did not realize its aim; it found it impossible to arouse the sort of spirit and response on the part of the coloured people of the country necessary for the real growth of the organization; nor was it able to raise sufficient funds to create a permanent and efficient machine; so after a somewhat languishing existence of several years longer, it died. But it had accomplished something; it had pointed the way -- not a new one but the old one -- and it was to be followed by a similar effort made in what was more nearly the fullness of time.

In 1895 Booker T' Washington made his epochal Atlanta speech. He had for ten years prior to that occasion been a rising figure, but after it his increase in power and prestige was so rapid that almost immediately he found himself the recognized leader of the Negro race. By his Atlanta speech he had at a stroke gained the sanction and support of both the South and the North -- the South, in general, construing the speech to imply the Negro's abdication of his claim to full and equal citizenship rights, and his acceptance of the status of a contented and industrious peasantry; the North feeling that the opportunity had arisen to rid its conscience of a disturbing question and shift it over to the South. The great body of the Negroes, discouraged, bewildered, and leaderless, hailed Mr' Washington as a Moses. This was, indeed,--132--a remarkable feat -- his holding the South in one hand, the North in the other, and at the same time carrying the major portion of his race along with him. The feat of uniting these three factions in the attempt to benefit the third had been tried before, but never achieved; and the founder of Tuskegee was the first to approach an accomplishment of it. The fact that he succeeded so far as he did, notwithstanding the popular conception of him as only an earnest educator and an energetic builder, stamps him as one of the world's ablest diplomats. At the height of his career Booker T' Washington was by long odds the most distinguished man the South had produced after the era following that of the Civil War heroes. There can hardly be an intelligent American who would not be thrilled by the sheer romance of his life's story. Born a slave amidst a squalor and poverty difficult to describe; as a child sleeping "in and on a bundle of filthy rags laid upon the dirt floor"; *knowing nothing of his father, and set free at emancipation a ragged, illiterate, penniless bit of humanity, not possessing even a name beyond Booker; he rose to make the name of his own taking known throughout the world and to acquire a degree of power and influence second to that of no private individual in the country. Born in a log cabin where there was no such thing as a table, but where the children were handed a piece of bread here and a scrap of meat there, he lived to sit at table with the President of the United--133--States, and to sip tea with the Queen of England. There is no more magical page in the *Arabian Nights*.

Dr' Washington encountered criticism from men of his own race. His critics felt that he was yielding more than what would be the ultimate worth of what he gained. The criticism grew louder, but it was not formulated, and the dissenters were without an authoritative voice. There was criticism of the fact that the doctrine of industrial education had been interpreted as meaning that it was the only education the Negro race would need to fit it for the place it was to occupy. There was also criticism of the minifying of political and civil rights. Over against these

criticisms stood the great, concrete demonstration, Tuskegee; endorsed by the South, supported by the North, and not only doing a tremendous work for the Negroes of the South, but wielding an increasing influence on educational ideas with regard to the white youth of the country. In the face of these solid achievements the criticisms took on a doctrinaire aspect, an aspect of bickering and faultfinding.

In 1903 a book came out of Atlanta, written by a professor at Atlanta University. The book was *The Souls of Black Folk*, and the author was W' E' Burghardt Du Bois. The author of *The Souls of Black Folk*, like the author of *Up from Slavery*, was a Negro, but, aside from that, their antecedents were quite different. Du Bois was born two years after the close of the Civil War in a beautiful, cultured New England town, Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He was educated in-- 134--the grammar and high schools of his native town; then at Fisk University; then at Harvard; and then at the University of Berlin. He experienced the pride of knowing his ancestry; three generations of his forebears lay in the Great Barrington cemetery. When he began active life, it was with greater intellectual preparation than any American Negro had yet acquired. This book of his was at once hailed as a great book. It was a collection of essays, one of which was headed "Of Mr' Washington and Others" and contained an estimate of Booker T' Washington and a statement of the points on which the author differed with him. Because of the criticism it voiced, this chapter in the book immediately became the subject of a nation-wide controversy, especially sharp in the South; and the guns of criticism were turned upon Du Bois. But the chief significance of this essay lies in the effect wrought by it within the race. It brought about a coalescence of the more radical elements and made them articulate, thereby creating a split of the race into two contending camps, between which there has been a *rapprochement* only within the past ten years -- a *rapprochement* achieved mostly through the moving over of the conservative group. And so, with the issuance of a book from Atlanta, a new leader stepped forth; and Du Bois found himself at the head of the scattered and almost silent remnants of the old militant Negro element.

Dr' Du Bois planned to bring the Negro militants together, and in answer to a call sent out by him, a conference was held, July 11-13, 1905, at Buffalo,--NA--

--135--New York. Twenty-nine coloured men were present from thirteen states and the District of Columbia. Three states of the old South -- Georgia, Tennessee, and Virginia -- were represented. A national organization was formed and called "the Niagara Movement." In the constitution that was adopted the following objects were stated: (a) freedom of speech and criticism; (b) an unfettered and unsubsidized press; (c) manhood suffrage; (d) the abolition of all caste distinctions based simply on race and colour; (e) the recognition of the principles of human brotherhood as a practical present creed; (f) the recognition of the highest and best human training as the monopoly of no class or race; (g) a belief in the dignity of labour; (h) united effort to realize these ideals under wise and courageous leadership.

The following year, in August, the Niagara Movement met at Harpers Ferry, the scene of John Brown's martyrdom, and adopted and sent out *An Address to the Country*, which, in part, read:

The men of the Niagara Movement coming from the toil of the year's hard work and pausing for a moment from the earning of their daily bread turn toward the nation and again ask in the name of ten million the privilege of a hearing. In the past year the work of the Negro hater has

flourished in the land. Step by step the defenders of the rights of American citizens have retreated. The work of stealing the black man's ballot has progressed and the fifty and more representatives of stolen votes still sit in the nation's capital. Discrimination in travel and public accommodation has so spread that some of our weaker brethren are actually afraid to thunder against--136--color discrimination as such and are simply whispering for ordinary decencies. Against this the Niagara Movement eternally protests. We will not be satisfied to take one jot or tittle less than our full manhood rights. We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a freeborn American, political, civil and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America. The battle we wage is not for ourselves alone but for all true Americans. It is a fight for ideals, lest this, our common fatherland, false to its founding, become in truth the land of the thief and the home of the Slave -- a by-word and a hissing among the nations for its sounding pretensions and pitiful accomplishment.

Never before in the modern age has a great and civilized folk threatened to adopt so cowardly a creed in the treatment of its fellow-citizens born and bred on its soil. Stripped of verbiage and subterfuge and in its naked nastiness the new American creed says: Fear to let black men even try to rise lest they become the equals of the white. And this is the land that professes to follow Jesus Christ. The blasphemy of such a course is only matched by its cowardice.

In detail our demands are clear and unequivocal. First, we would vote; with the right to vote goes everything: Freedom, manhood, the honor of your wives, the chastity of your daughters, the right to work, and the chance to rise, and let no man listen to those who deny this.

We want full manhood suffrage, and we want it now, henceforth and forever.

Second. We want discrimination in public accommodation to cease. Separation in railway and street cars, based simply on race and color, is un-American, undemocratic, and silly. We protest against all such discrimination.

Third. We claim the right of freemen to walk, talk, and be with them that wish to be with us. No man has a--137--right to choose another man's friends, and to attempt to do so is an impudent interference with the most fundamental human privilege.

Fourth. We want the laws enforced against rich as well as poor; against Capitalist as well as Laborer; against white as well as black. We are not more lawless than the white race, we are more often arrested, convicted, and mobbed. We want justice even for criminals and outlaws. We want the Constitution of the country enforced. We want Congress to take charge of Congressional elections. We want the Fourteenth amendment carried out to the letter and every State disfranchised in Congress which attempts to disfranchise its rightful voters. We want the Fifteenth amendment enforced and no State allowed to base its franchise simply on color.

The failure of the Republican Party in Congress at the session just closed to redeem its pledge of 1904 with reference to suffrage conditions at the South seems a plain, deliberate, and premeditated breach of promise, and stamps that party as guilty of obtaining votes under false pretenses.

Fifth. We want our children educated. The school system in the country districts of the South is a disgrace and in few towns and cities are the Negro schools what they ought to be. We want the national government to step in and wipe out illiteracy in the South. Either the United States will destroy ignorance or ignorance will destroy the United States.

And when we call for education we mean real education. We believe in work. We ourselves are workers, but work is not necessarily education. Education is the development of power and ideal. We want our children trained as intelligent human beings should be, and we will fight for all time against any proposal to educate black boys and girls simply as servants and underlings, or simply for the use of other people. They have a right to know, to think, to aspire.

These are some of the chief things which we want.--138--How shall we get them? By voting where we may vote, by persistent, unceasing agitation; by hammering at the truth, by sacrifice and work.

Reading today the chapter from *The Souls of Black Folk*, "Of Mr' Washington and Others," it is, perhaps, impossible for those unfamiliar with the period to understand the extent of the reaction it caused and the bitterness of the animosities it aroused. The latter, at any rate, was due to causes not specifically contained in what Dr' Du Bois had written, but outside of it. The essay was not an attack. It contained no word of denunciation. Neither was there in it invective or irony, two of the author's favourite and most effective weapons. It was, in fact, a temperate analysis of Dr' Washington's position and policy and a rationally stated difference on certain points. The spirit of the whole essay can be fairly illustrated by two quotations, one near the beginning and the other near the end:

To gain the sympathy and cooperation of the various elements comprising the white South was Mr' Washington's first task; and this, at the time Tuskegee was founded, seemed, for a black man impossible. And yet ten years later it was done in the word spoken at Atlanta: "In all things purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, and yet one as the hand in all things essential to material progress." This "Atlanta Compromise" is by all odds the most notable thing in Mr' Washington's career. The South interpreted it in different ways: the radicals received it as a complete surrender of the demand for civil and political equality; the conservatives as a generously conceived working basis for mutual understanding. So both approved it,--139--and today its author is certainly the most distinguished Southerner since Jefferson Davis, and the one with the greatest personal following. . . .

The black men of America have a duty to perform, a duty stern and delicate, -- a forward movement to oppose a part of the work of their greatest leader. So far as Mr' Washington preaches Thrift, Patience and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and strive with him, rejoicing in his honours and glorying in the strength of this Joshua called of God and of man to lead the headless host. But so far as Mr' Washington apologizes for injustice, North or South, does not rightly value the privilege and duty of voting, belittles the emasculating effects of caste distinctions, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our brightest minds, -- so far as he, the South, or the nation, does this, -- we must increasingly and firmly oppose them.

Much has happened and many changes have occurred in the North and in the South since those words were written. Last year the present head of Tuskegee, Dr. R. R. Moton, wrote a book, *What the Negro Thinks*, * which was in substance a restatement of the objects set forth by the Niagara Movement; and in answer he received words of approbation from the Southern press. The two groups once so sharply divided are today practically one, with regard to the fundamental aims of the American Negro. Dr. Moton says in his book: "In truth, they are working for the same thing in different spheres and by a different approach." In truth they have learned that a co-ordinated plan of battle calls for the militants to act as shock--140--troops and for the conservatives to advance rapidly and hold the ground.

One of the visitors at the Harpers Ferry meeting of the Niagara Movement was Miss Mary White Ovington of New York, one of the few remaining inheritors of the abolition spirit, who had for several years been studying the condition of the Negro in the North and in the South. She went to report the conference for the New York *Evening Post*. In the fall of 1908, William English Walling had an article in the *Independent* on the race riots which had recently taken place in Springfield, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln's old home, in which Negroes had been beaten and killed in the streets of that city. After describing the brutalities committed upon coloured people in that outbreak, Mr. Walling declared: "Either the spirit of the abolitionists, of Lincoln and of Lovejoy, must be revived and we must come to treat the Negro on a plane of absolute political and social equality or Vardaman and Tillman will soon have transferred the Race War to the North." Miss Ovington wrote to Mr. Walling and later talked with him over the matter, together with Dr. Henry Moskowitz, early in January 1909. Plans were discussed for making a demonstration on February 12, the one hundredth anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth. Oswald Garrison Villard joined with the movement, and on Lincoln's birthday a call for a conference, drafted by Mr. Villard, was issued. Among the liberal whites who signed the call were Charles Edward Russell, Jane Addams, Samuel Bowles, John Dewey, Mary E. McDowell, John--141--Haynes Holmes, Florence Kelley, Lillian D. Wald, John E. Milholland, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, and William Dean Howells. Among the Negro liberals who joined in were Dr. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, Bishop Alexander Walters, Ida Wells Barnett, and the Rev. Francis J. Grimké. Charles Edward Russell, who had also talked with Mr. Walling following the appearance of the *Independent* article, was the presiding genius at the more or less stormy closing sessions of this first conference, when a temporary organization was formed. In May 1910 a second conference was held, in New York, at which there was consummated a merger of the forces of the Negro liberals of the Niagara Movement, and the white liberals of abolition traditions, thus forming the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The platform adopted was practically the same as that of the Niagara Movement. It was commented upon at the time as being extremely radical. In this same year the association called Dr. Du Bois to come as its Director of Publicity and Research. He resigned his professorship at Atlanta University and came to New York; and the publication of the *Crisis*, a monthly magazine, the organ of the association, with Dr. Du Bois as editor, was begun. The *Crisis* has now been doing pioneer work for twenty years; and Dr. Du Bois, more than any other one man, paved the way for the "New Negro." At about this time two other strong friends became allied with the movement, J. E. Spingarn and Arthur B. Spingarn.--142--

The association has grown to be a powerful and effective organization. It has national headquarters in New York City and more than three hundred branches in forty-four states. Its record of accomplishment in the past twenty years is extraordinary. Besides its work in legal defence and its fight against lynching and against discriminations in the administration of the law, in facilities for education, and in the use of common carriers and places of public accommodation, it has carried to the United States Supreme Court and won four important and far-reaching decisions affecting the constitutional and citizenship rights of the American Negro. These were decisions in: the Louisville segregation case, the Arkansas peonage cases, the Texas white primary case, and the New Orleans segregation case. In addition it had a hand in winning the "grandfather clause" case. * One of the reasons for this degree of success in prosecuting the Negro's cause through the courts has been the fact that the association had the voluntary services of such lawyers as Moorfield Storey, Louis Marshall, Clarence Darrow, James A. Cobb, Charles H. Studin, and Arthur B. Spingarn as members of its legal committee.--143--

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was the first and is still the only organization since the Anti-Slavery Society providing a common medium for the co-operation of blacks and whites in the work of securing and safeguarding the common citizenship rights of the Negro. With the founding of this association New York became again the centre of the organized forces of self-assertion of equal rights and of insistence upon the impartial application of the fundamental principles of the Republic, without regard to race, creed, or colour.

Shortly following the formation of the Advancement Association steps were taken which led to the establishment of another important national organization to work for the Negro, with headquarters in New York, the National League on Urban Conditions among Negroes. Among those who took part in the founding of the organization were: Mrs. Ruth Standish Baldwin, Edwin R. A. Seligman, Fred R. Moore, Miss Elizabeth Walton, L. Hollingsworth Wood, George E. Haynes, and Eugene Kinckle Jones. The main purpose for which this organization was formed was to work for the industrial, social, and health betterment of the coloured people, especially those living in urban centres. In addition to working for these ends, the Urban League has carried on research work and collected a great deal of valuable data and statistics on industrial, social, and health conditions among Negroes. It has grown rapidly and now has affiliated branches in the principal cities in all sections of the country. Each of these branch offices is manned--144--by a trained secretary and social workers. The Urban League, like the Advancement Association, is an organization in which both races co-operate.

Ten years after the forming of these two bodies another organization destined to make Negro history in New York was in full swing -- the Garvey movement.

The Negro population in 1910 of all the boroughs of the city was 91,709; and of Manhattan alone, 60,534.