

New Negroes for Old

BY HARRISON RHODES

Author of "How to Be Ill," "How to Deal with the Doctor," etc.

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New Negro

AN American Negro, of a blackness which of late years seems to be fading from the race, was recently taken to Italy in service, and there was known by a Venetian girl who cooked for one of his employer's friends. To this gentleman she came one day with a rather startling plan for his servant's future. She knew, so she said, an admirable and easy way for the dark man to become light. All he had to do was to wash, night and morning, in milk which had been boiled and allowed afterward to cool. He would soon become white. There could be no doubt, she asserted, of the efficacy of the plan; she had herself known Sicilians who had employed the method, and had become much lighter in color. She admitted that in a place like Venice, where milk was not very good, and was very expensive, the "patient" might be well advised to begin by making only the face and hands white, and only upon his return to America to bleach the whole body. Then she added, with pious and reverent enthusiasm, he might become a Catholic, and so, she rather prettily and touchingly concluded, he would be white not only without but within.

It was a project of which so much might be said that it cannot all be said here. The immediate question in Venice became whether this particular Negro wanted to become white. Do Negroes want to become white? Are they not in America already becoming so?

It is not meant in actual color of the skin. There is no intention of discussing miscegenation or any such matters. But is the Negro really becoming white within and without? Some people seem to fear that he is. This, if a compliment, is at least double-edged. One might stop to ask, just how well do we think of to-day's whites?

It is quite true that if Abraham Lincoln could for a brief period revisit this land, he would in many ways scarcely recognize the Union he preserved or the race he freed. Of the Negroes, he would find even some of the physical and outward characteristics changed, especially of the females of that race. No one can say what hair-straightening may yet mean to the colored people. Topsy is already out of fashion—soon she may be non-existent, and with her may have passed a great deal that the whites liked. The Topsy of to-day has bobbed and waved hair instead of crinkly wool. Her cheeks are often flushed with rouge, her lips carmined. She is freely covered with powder. Her clothes are, nowadays, of the smartest fashion. Her skirts are as short as the next one's; she does not hesitate to dispense with sleeves, and in the morning to wear any kind of openwork, which in happier, earlier, and more primitive days would idiomatically have been said to "let the meat show." If you should meet her out walking, even in some desolate backwoods, you would find that she has the most modish high heels and silk stock-

ings of the universal "sunkist" color. The old handkerchief worn like a turban is as rare as a broad-brimmed hat—it is all just like any white young girl.

The change is more than external. With the vastly improved financial condition of the Negro (if it be essentially so great an improvement), his life too is changing. Black people's houses are now being built with quite enough bathrooms to wash them white within and without. They have their radios, their phonographs, their theatres, both moving-picture and the old-fashioned or real kind; their restaurants, both the day and the night kind. Their music has conquered the world, and to it they dance everywhere publicly the Charleston and the Black-Bottom.

It is very common, in rich centres like Harlem, that a colored person will say, in answer to any questions about vacation plans, that he or she is going abroad for the summer. It is nothing, so it is freely said, for Negroes to go to Europe. Blacks travelling in Europe are not yet as usual as whites, though only last winter in a smart, rather distinguished hotel in one of the European capitals, there were a couple of Negroes, man and wife, staying in excellent rooms on their return from a trip around the world. Paris, always in advance, already finds it necessary to advertise an all-white cabaret, though this guaranty may possibly refer to the stage rather than to the audience.

In America itself Negro luxury is not unknown: there are occasional colored people who go to our great resorts, and such a thing as a yacht at, say, Palm Beach is not unknown. Years ago, at a banquet of Negroes in a private room of a French restaurant in New York, a leading guest turned down his wine-

glass, a fact which amused me very much when I heard of it. The glass was an idea of the proprietor, who hoped it would be needed. Yet if there had been wine, this colored gentleman had shown his views.

It may as well be realized that there is no possibility of stopping the spread of knowledge in America. Years ago a famous Southern senator said bitterly that "If a nigger knows anything, he can always go behind a scrub-palmetto and tell another nigger." You can't educate one person and leave all the others in ignorance. You can't have America growing in wealth every year and one race alone in the community staying where it was. Delightful and wise as it might be, you cannot have it both ways. There is no possible necessity of discussing the value and beauty of progress. The fact is that the world, in every part of it, *does move*. There may be all kinds of astonishing things in store for us.

It is, for example, the firm conviction of the writer that domestic service is a thing doomed soon enough wholly to disappear from the world. Some people say that then, of course, we must all employ Negro servants. Yes, surely, if we can get them. But by that time it is possible that the Negro may feel as strong an antipathy to the profession as the Caucasian does now and, unless slavery can be reintroduced, not much can be done about it. And this is not likely!

Any one who knows anything about Negro education of course recognizes the old point of view of the patron who seemed to feel that colored schools, especially industrial ones, were really running to provide servants for distressed white housewives. Some of the Negroes, either the most outrageous or

the wisest, said that they didn't especially object to white women's learning to cook, but that their great object was to elevate their own race, and nothing else.

All these matters are, however, controversial, and so may be left aside. The point to be made and admitted is that a certain feeling of disappointment is being felt by that part of the public which has been, often for so long, interested in the welfare of Negroes, and in the many institutions designed to improve them. And this feeling must be well examined and faced by all those of either race who have the interests of the colored race at heart. Some of those who have striven to elevate the black man probably may now fear (although they are not always quite frank about saying so) that they have succeeded too well; have, in fact, elevated him too high.

They find he is now too civilized, too prosperous, and so disinclined to work; too self-assured, too rich, and as they would possibly put it, too much inclined to feel himself a citizen and an American.

On this last point something may be said. It used to be said of Negroes that it was not their fault that they were slaves; it might now, with equal justice, be said that it is not their fault that they are free. If emancipation had not come when it did, it might probably have come now or a little before, at least so many philosophers think, and the wish to be American is violently contagious. And, indeed, we can scarcely complain of that. We are, most of us, inclined to feel that this is a great country; really it is as much America's fault as the Negro's if he wants to be American. If it is our doing that he is free, we, not he, ought to be blamed for the

evil consequences, if there be any. People say he does not "know his place." But events and the change of the world have done much to confuse him as to exactly where his "place" is. To-day almost no one does know that about himself.

The truth really is that the Negro has lost his special character, that is, the peculiar individual quality that marked him and unquestionably pleased many of us who liked him and wished to be his benefactors. Gradually he is coming to speak almost like the whites, unless, as sometimes happens with the better-educated Negroes, he speaks a little better. His voice was always pleasant enough. When the words were ignorant and comic, that was all right, but when they are at least as correct as our own, the soft voice becomes almost a reproach. And the well-beloved true Negro words, where are they? Where, indeed, would be Mrs. Malaprop without her mistakes? Her chances would be pretty "puny," to employ the word that still may be occasionally heard. The fact is that, modernized, the Negro is no longer "quaint." He has unhappily almost lost his charm.

But is not charm a thing which is everywhere disappearing from the world? Is that not why people try to revive folk-singing and dancing, and in some European country districts put all the hotel servants in what, of old, used to be the peasant costumes, under the assumption that charm can so easily be called back? Is there, in fact, from certain points of view, any one part of the world, or any one man in the world, any more spoiled than any other? Charm indeed has now become a matter of theatrical production. If we whites want charming blacks, we may be able to get them on the stage, though

probably they will be masquerading whites—black-faced artists.

This must be thought of in any attempt to do justice to the present state of the so-called Negro problem. And one must remember solemnly how many years' tears and blood have been shed over it, and how many martyrs, black and white, have suffered in the cause of freedom. Now that freedom has, at least partly, come, is it to either white or black less sweet? But there is no doubt that again the Negro race is on trial.

Of course, perhaps so also is the white. It was a great pleasure to try to help a race so greatly in need of being helped, to uplift one so definitely down. It was constantly flattering to the self-esteem of the helper. Now things are ever so little changed. But perhaps more wisdom and more real goodness than ever are needed to help the Negro now that his case seems less pitiable, less spectacular, less moving emotionally. The process of a race growing accustomed to being no longer wholly inferior and without rights, but now with admittedly some rights, a race which

has so long drunk of our fountains in America that it is constantly being tempted to feel itself wholly American—such a process is sure to be full of difficulties. If it is hard to be an inferior race, it is as hard to be a superior race—it is, perhaps for both, even harder to be just Americans in the truest and best sense of the word.

If for the time being the whites are less interested in helping the Negro, it is time for him to help himself. Perhaps then the God he so thoroughly believes in will help him. For many years there will be many whites who will want to help what seems to them the "under-dog." But the time has probably come for the black to bear some of the burden which the white is inclined to cast down; some of the new prosperity, some of the new education, some of the new pride of race, if it really exists, must be turned to the service of race. There must be new sacrifices, new sufferings. But a new hallelujah will go up from all who have watched the Negro tread the long road that led from slavery toward the future. And Abraham Lincoln could come back.

