

Impressions of a Southern Federation

BY JOSEPHINE T. WASHINGTON

MOBILE, city of the sea, true to her name — Mobile — changing, reponsive, susceptible, like the waters of her shimmering gulf; tender, dreamy, beautiful, and smiling, she lies under semi-tropic skies.

About her numerous old fashioned mansions and the rarer structures of



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modern type, alike, the magnolias bloom in royal splendor and rose-vines grow in rivalry of Jack's renowned bean-stalk. Shaded by giant trees and cooled by falling waters, Bienville Square, in

the heart of the town, offers the tired wayfarer ease.

But even in this inviting spot the petty prejudices of our little life obtrude. Yonder swings are not for the dusky children of the sun. Some heart moved to sympathy with childhood's joys, when that childhood is Anglo-Saxon of race, made possible this pleasant pastime. Dark-hued little men and maids look on longingly, but dare not touch the sacred structure. Even in the lovely city of the dead something of the baneful influence follows. Will this ever—present discrimination have effect “when the general roll is called” and we all, according to promise, are “there?”

Down the silvery shell-road we wind our way to the coast, passing what was fairy Frascati, but which, in keeping with the utilitarian spirit of the times, is no longer a park but a railroad yard. Mont Rose, Point Clear, Daphne, Howards, Battle's Wharf, these and other lovely moss-hanging points beck on to us across the bay.

In the opposite direction is Spring Hill with its long row of beautiful rural residences, among them that of Augusta Evans of St. Elmo fame. Here, too, we find the Colored Orphan's and Old Folk's Home, a commodious structure with spacious and well kept grounds.

The people who planned and bought this Home for “sweet charity's sake” knew, too, how to provide handsome

houses of worship and pretty homes of their own. It is not surprising that a pastor who raised, during a stay of several years, an average of eighteen dollars per day, left behind him a church furnished with stained glass windows and pipe organ, and equal to any in the city in beauty and in convenience.

Business houses there are, owned and controlled by men of color—grocery stores, drug stores, livery stables, undertaking establishments, insurance companies, lawyers' and doctors' offices, etc, etc.

Three public schools, with as many colored principals and an able corps of assistants, together with the Emerson Institute, a Congregational school, and one or two exceptionably good private schools, engage in the pleasant task of teaching the young idea to shoot.

Yet, attractive as we found Mobile, (barring the exhibitions of race prejudice, which the denizens of the Sunny South find everywhere), the place was for the nonce eclipsed in interest by the occasion which brought us thither. This was the Sixth Annual Meeting of the State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs.

To the too-familiar individual with whom all days are either working days on which he adds to his hoarded pile or holidays for spending prodigally in personal gratification, it would have seemed an odd way to pass the "glorious Fourth." The quiet and self-contained company of women that steamed into the city's station was most unlike the usual pleasure-seekers of the season. Twenty clubs responded to the call, and thirty-five

representatives of women's organizations came from all sections of the state to this Southern port selected as the place of meeting.

A wholesome-looking set of women they were: sensible, earnest, quiet, cheerful, dignified and courteous. It is true they did not always assemble on time and they failed, in large measure, to adhere to the order of the printed program, but they evidently, came together with a fixed purpose, and when they sewerved from a prearranged course it was plain that they thought by so doing the paramount object would be the better promoted. They even took off their hats in the meeting, and when they put them on no one was heard to ask, "Is my hat on straight?" What stronger proof could there be of feminine absorption and self-abnegation?

They dressed simply, many tastefully and prettily, in womanly style, without any straining after mannish effects. The one woman in the audience who, with short-cut hair, plain straw sailor, and masculine looking collar, tie, shirt-front, and jacket, might when sitting in the pen have been mistaken for a man, was not a delegate or even a club woman.

Now and then under the tension of excited discussion, there was a little manifestation of hurt feeling and a few quick retorts, but there was no bolting of the convention. Nobody declared, "I won't play because you did so and so that I did not like."

It was a truly representative crowd of women—teachers, wives and daughters of ministers, the mothers of households, one active, white-haired delegate proudly declaring herself the mother of six sons,

all grown to vigorous and useful manhood.

Types of the "new woman"—these might be called club women—delegates to a state organization, undertaking the business of establishing a great humanitarian institution, yet, hopeful and reassuring sign, the text of their talk was "home." The mission of motherhood, how to improve the social life, how to help our boys and girls, problems of Negro womanhood, the future Negro woman, character, a single standard of morality, how to help the fallen, mother's meetings, were some of the topics discussed.

"I don't know much, but I do what I know," was the pathetic utterance of one Black Belt delegate. If only all of us would "do what we know!"

Upon the promised land of a realized hope their gaze was fixed. To all else their eyes were closed. Courteously they listened to admonitions from a few cool and cautious ones as to the magnitude and gravity of the task, they were warned to "take care" in deciding to shoulder so great a responsibility. And when it was over they broke the silence with the old enthusiasm and the persistent cry, "This one thing we do."

Back they came to all three sessions of the two days, braving the heat of a mid-summer sun, except the provident half-dozen or more who brought their lunch and ate it in the cool recesses of the big church.

The derelict few who went for drives or graced some social function while the meetings were in progress, were not only soundly scored by the faithful majority but had their remissness nipped

in the bud by the passage of a resolution providing that in future delegates so absenting themselves should be reported to their respective clubs.

Most of the women showed a fine spirit of self-denial, staying over an extra day when it was found that the time allotted to the work of the convention was too short, and bravely spending all of that day in session without so much as going out to get a drink of water. Only one woman is on record as pleading with an earnest advocate of an unpopular measure, "O, do stop talking and let it go any way. I am so tired. Let's get through and go home." Others were willing to stay not only all day but all night if necessary, in order to have such measures adopted as they thought for the best interest of the movement.

The reports showed a club constituency hardly less earnest than these representatives; else, how would such work have been accomplished? "Service" was the watch-word, "forward" the cry. If self-culture was a prominent feature in some of the organizations, it was self-culture associated with benevolent action, self-culture not alone for the sake of the individual, but also for the sake of the many. If some of the clubs had social evenings or served refreshments at the close of a strenuous session, such diversions were never confounded with the purpose of the body, the thing for which it stood, the reason for its being, and money raised for charity was not touched for such uses. Garments were made for the poor, other articles begged from overstocked wardrobes and bestowed where needed, food and fuel and medicine furnished the sick, tuition paid

in private institutions for children crowded out of the public schools. A room had been furnished in the charity ward of a hospital. One club had secured a gift of land and a cottage and was working to establish a hospital. One had bought land and had as its object the building of a High School in a town where no such provision was made for colored youth. One is furnishing the rooms of a local Young Men's Christian Association. Where fire or flood caused loss of life and property these clubs respond to appeal for aid.

Nor do they make the giving of alms the limit of their service. They seek to elevate the tone of life in their communities; they stand for "purity, for progress, for philanthropy, for peace."

Mothers' meetings are held in which topics relating to the care of home and children are informally discussed, popular lectures are provided, schools are visited, and a helpful interest shown in educational matters.

One club celebrates yearly the birthday of Douglass, and otherwise fosters race pride by giving an annual prize for the best essay on a race subject.

And so the reports go on, telling the tale of varied activity, all helpful and inspiring, but all subordinate to the larger object for which the clubs unite in the State Federation.

And what is this aim, this united undertaking? A great aim, a stupendous undertaking it is; yet not too great for courageous hearts and untiring hands—the establishment of a reformatory for wayward boys.

More than five years ago, in the city of Montgomery, a little group of earnest

women, moved with compassion for youthful lawbreakers of the race, arrested for minor offenses, convicted and sentenced to penitentiary and to mines, there to consort with hardened criminals, consecrated themselves to [the task] of awakening the public conscience and arousing interest looking to the establishment of a reformatory.

A club was formed for this purpose, but the magnitude of the work caused its promoters, upon the organization of the State Federation, to bring the work before that body as a fitting [object] for the united efforts of the women of the state. Three years ago the state organization adopted this work. The clubs were few and young, and weak; laboring, too, under the obligation of local charities already undertaken. Progress was slow, contributions coming in uncertainly and irregularly, many clubs being too poor to do more than send their delegates to the meetings with the requisite ten cents per capita.

Refusing to abandon hope, the purpose was held to tenaciously. Last year the clubs were asked to try to bring fifty dollars each. Several responded this year at the meeting in Mobile, the Mobile Century Club leading the van with seventy-five dollars.

Banded together by this common purpose, a degree of unanimity prevails well nigh incomprehensible to the average attendant on men's conventions. Differing in tastes, pursuits, attainment, and station, a common hope levels all distinctions.

Not varying greatly from similar gatherings among their sisters in other sections is this assemblage of Afro-

American women of the "South. Perhaps the most marked feature is the gravity of their mein, their seriousness of aspect.

That was the comment, perhaps the criticism, on the educated Afro-American woman of the South by a distinguished Northern woman of the race: "Your women are so solemn." The

fault is not in ourselves, but in our stars -- that we are weighted with care.

There is a blur on the sunshine of the fair South, there is a jar in the tones of her tender lute; the atmosphere is surcharged with elements that threaten. The sensitive soul of the discerning black woman thrills to the situation, and merriment dies out of her heart.