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The Problem of James Crow: "Jim" Grown Up

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Author of "Nigger."

The Problem.

ONE-TENTH of the population of the United States consists of negroes. In eleven Southern States the whites outnumber the colored race by less than 2 to 1; in nine New England and Middle Atlantic States the negroes are outnumbered more than 27 to 1. In Mississippi and South Carolina, by the 1910 census, the population with African blood is a distinct majority; in Nevada and Idaho the whites lead by more than 370 to 1. In the eleven counties of the Black Belt of Alabama 75 per cent. are negroes; in ten mountain counties in the same State the colored proportion is almost negligible. And all the time one man out of every ten the length and breadth of the country is a negro.

Or is he a man? There are Southern blatherskite politicians who are elevated to office on the one plank that he is not. Yet after all this may not be a real question, for Orientals are discriminated against, without implication that they are not human. Orientals are, of course, aliens whose foothold in the States is not desired by the majority, and is prohibited; while the negroes were brought here by the whites, the first ones as long ago as 1619. They were brought here as things, not as men; as property, not human beings. Legally, by virtue of the three civil war amendments, they are citizens, with all the rights of citizens; legally, they are men. In practice—that is perhaps a different story.

What shall we do with them? For we cannot accept as final solution an unending succession of intensifying race conflicts, riots, lynchings, klannings and retaliatory murders. What are the possible methods of solving the problem?

Some have suggested that we cut them out of the body social, as a cancer, either by extermination or by ferrying them back to the dark land they came from. Experience has proved the impracticability of banishing them. We are hardly so callously unchristian or inhuman as to favor extermination.

It is a queer cancer, too—the race that can claim the Russian national poet Pushkin, the English musician Coleridge-Taylor, the French novelists Dumas and Rene Maran, and, in our own land, the authors of the negro spirituals, of the Uncle Remus folklore, the ragtime music and dancing; such leaders in the art world as Burleigh Cook, Europe, among musicians; the Johnsons, Braithwaite, Paul Laurence Dunbar, among poets; Henry O. Tanner and others among artists, and, in wider public fields, Booker T. Washington, Moton and Dr. Du Bois.

If we are not to get rid of them we must deal with them as human beings, granting either full social justice or limited social justice. Seedings of limited social justice have usually produced only unending discord. If amity and mutual progress have resulted, the sowing has usually been of full social justice. Let us see what we have sown and what so far we have reaped.

The Skin Game.

For a quarter of a century my home was in or near Birmingham, Ala.; one of the results of that sojourn in medievalism is the novel "Nigger." During this time contact was inevitable with Southern whites and blacks whose memory reached earlier than the admission of the State in 1819; this gave a vista of the whole dark history. During slavery, when negroes—in white minds and white laws—were not human beings but property, there was some kind treatment and much that was not. The whole institution was saturated with

that grossest of all unkindnesses: the failure to acknowledge the right of individual growth and expansion among the negroes. The turnover of the 1865-70 amendments was as abrupt as an act of special creation; thousands of illiterate cornfield hands were made legal masters and their cultured white overlords were denied the ballot. The 1868 Legislature of Louisiana was half negro; South Carolina had 88 colored lawmakers out of 155. The slow reaction of the white South crystallized in the Ku Klux Klan and the new constitutions. From that day to this, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments have been studiously violated by Southern law, in word and enforcement; the negro as a race does not vote, and is often kept in a state of peonage, at times approximately slavery.

The illiterate country negro to-day—the farm worker, the lumber worker—is usually bound out by a contract that impoverishes him increasingly as the years pass. Often he cannot leave the plantation where he works; he and his burden of debt must be sold together to some new overlord. If by any chance he pays off the swelling hill of indebtedness to the white owner and his ally the white storekeeper—and the whites do all the bookkeeping, with a customary 20 per cent. added "for carrying"—an arrest for some trumped up charge, such as vagrancy or "fragrancy," puts him deep in debt to the State, from which the white owner "buys him out" and sets him to work again, this time without wages. Such a negro is the victim of plantation owner, of storekeeper, of traveling salesman, of court, of sheriff; in a word, of the white race.

In the city his lot is slightly easier. But he is still arrested, and after being fined bought and sold like a cow or a pig; he is the victim of the vicious fee system; he is subject to constant extortion from merchants, especially under the clever instalment system—a dollar down and a dollar a week for life. . . . This is what often meets him in the South.

And in the North? Where negroes live in large numbers, if their salary is the same as a white worker's, they at times pay a rent twice as high; merchants in the negro sections charge a color tax that is sometimes as high as 50 per cent. of the price charged to whites. The white hawk does not become a dove as he flies toward the snow.

"Without Representation."

Birmingham has a population of some 200,000; nearly half of these are negroes.

A few years ago—there has been no material change since—less than 200 of these voted, these being chiefly Federal office holders, postmen and the like. There were more than 30,000 adult negro males of voting age. Mississippi has a quarter of a million male negroes of voting age. "Though I asked many Mississippians about it," writes Beulah A. Ratliff in *The Nation*, "I never heard of a negro voting or attempting to vote in Mississippi. A prominent man, from the north of the State told me, 'They don't come to the polls in our part of the State. None of our niggers are crazy to commit suicide.'"

How are they excluded? First, the "grandfather clause," so dear to the Southern States, which provides that all men who voted in 1860, or their descendants, may vote still. This enfranchises at once all the offspring of white Southerners in perpetuity. Second, the literacy test. Backroads farmers who can scarcely make an "X" in place of a signature, are adjudged by white polling clerks to be illiterate; negro graduates of the Harvard and Yale law schools are excluded by the operation of the same law.

In the episode in "Nigger," in which the educated negroes try unsuccessfully to register for suffrage, the concluding remark is typical of the good humored toleration that so far has minimized the shedding of blood. "Well," observed the negro Jim Ricks, "us didn' get th'owed out, anyhow."

The world war came—the negroes were called on to do their bitter bit to make the world safe for democracy. It was made safe; and then, negroes were forbidden to march in the victory parades; negro officers were stripped of their uniforms and cruelly beaten, for daring to wear the insignia of their country; at the Maryland State convention of the American Legion, to take a type case, the colored delegates were offered seats at luncheon in a separate room. To a man they walked out and purchased their lunches elsewhere. The Government's draft lottery did not spare the negro; the German bullet did not turn aside, because of the hue of his face. It was only the patriots at home who used him, and then twisted the crown of thorns deep into his brow.

The Three R's.

There are those who look to education as the solution, or one of the chief aids toward it.

The colored population of Alabama is almost as great as the white. The value of public schoolhouses, 1913-1914, was:

White, \$7,008,536; negro, \$666,859. The white school year is 135 days; the negro, 104. Salaries of white teachers, \$3,682,314; of negro teachers, \$474,749. Pupils enrolled per teacher: White, 41; negro, 70. One county, Dallas, in the Black Belt, spends per white child, \$17.35; per colored child, ninety cents. Result: Throughout Alabama, white illiterates, 10 per cent.; negro illiterates, 40 per cent. This is the statistical result; the result in crimes caused by poverty and ignorance and the result in stunted lives and minds and souls is beyond computation.

The three R's taught the negroes are not Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic; they are Rope, Riot and Race-war.

Lawbreaking.

In spite of everything the negro remains, as long as we let him, an easy going, happy souled optimist. He walks in music; his words have not been dried by the sirocco of business efficiency out of their golden, haunting rhythm. His religious life is deep and primitive. But what of the day when he learns that the white man's God is on the side of the red souled lyncher? Will he always remain the same, or will he discover his own black god climbing within him?

Let us begin to study the harvest of this sowing.

The negro is, statistically, both North and South, less lawabiding than the white. Compulsory illiteracy is a large cause; the fact that he is arrested by white officers and tried before a white jury and judge, helps swell the figures. "All coons look alike to me" is a popular joke among Southern prosecutors and jurymen; "you can't tell one nigger from another; they're all gully of something, anyway. . . ." In addition to the "due" process of law, there is Judge Lynch's court, constantly invoked by Southern whites against the negroes for offenses real or imaginary.

Of course, it is only for rape, you may object, that lynching takes place. . . .

During the recent war four white patriots in Vicksburg went to the home of a negro woman who was not working, after the order had gone forth that every one must work. The woman was pregnant. They whipped, tarred and feathered her. She lost her child and almost lost her life as a result. The four patriots, two years later, were sentenced to six months each in jail; not a day of this was served.

Recently in Mississippi, Miss Ratliff states, negroes were illegally killed for such offenses as trying to enter a movie theater on the white side; trying to enter a white restaurant; helping a negro murderer to escape; drawing a gun on a white man. There is, of course, a law on the statute books to cover these offenses, but there is pleasure in Judge Lynch's trials that the written law lacks. From equally reliable sources we learn that a pregnant colored wife in Georgia, named Mary Turner, was hanged, burned and disembowelled because she said that if she knew the names of the lynchers of her husband she would turn them over to the police. In Arkansas, a negro grandfather of seventy-two was lynched for endeavoring to protect his two granddaughters from two white ravishers.

In Texas white men started a race riot, shooting up a negro quarter, because a local negro school teacher had published in a Chicago paper the true story of a Texas lynching. The Chicago race riot started when white hoodlums were stoned to death for drowning a negro boy in bathing. An Arkansas race riot was caused by orderly negro protest against wholesale cheating on the part of white plantation owners. Out of 264 lynchings between 1914 and 1918 in only twenty-eight was rape assigned as the cause. Among the other alleged offenses were stealing hogs;

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