

Chapter 12

Ole Ark A'Moverin'

BY THE mid-century—as a small army of technicians, diplomats, exchange scholars, and journalists left the country to administer its new world responsibilities—Americans abroad found that they were repeatedly asked the question (partly as a result of persistent Communist propaganda): “What about your race relations in the United States?” To the Asiatic, to the African, to the men of color in every land, it made a great deal of sense to judge American promises of a Brave New World against American performance at home.

To this stock question the new missionaries of Fulbright, Point Four, ECA, and the technical assistance programs of the United Nations could find no stock response. They were unable to deny that a degree of discrimination continues to exist in the United States. Yet they were also aware that the impressions in men’s minds abroad were outdated, and to that extent at least were distorted. And they found themselves wanting to tell the world, “But you must understand how much these things have changed in the past few decades.”

In 1900 there were not quite nine million Negroes in the United States (as compared with some fifteen million in 1950) and they were overwhelmingly concentrated in the South. Not only did nearly nine-tenths of them live there, but nearly three-quarters of them were to be found in the *rural* South. For a generation they had enjoyed the nominal status of free men and women; but they were desperately handicapped by poverty, ill health, bad housing, inade-

quate education, scanty opportunity, and—in the South—an inferior position before the law. No less than 44.5 per cent of them were illiterate. By and large they held the most servile, heaviest, dirtiest, and worst-paid jobs; and their most characteristic occupation was as cotton-pickers, victims of an uneconomic and demoralizing system of farm tenantry which a cynic might have imagined to have been deliberately devised in order to inculcate in the tenants the very traits of shiftlessness and irresponsibility which were attributed to the Negroes. Many of them lived in virtual peonage by reason of debt.

The prevailing view of them among the Southern whites was that they were virtually subhuman and incapable of profiting by education; when a Negro manifested exceptional intelligence, this was taken to be a sign that he must have white blood in his veins. The colored people were to be regarded with affection and amusement so long as they kept their place, but must be intimidated the moment they showed any signs of stepping out of it; for underlying the enjoyment which the Southern whites took in their agreeable deportment, their gentle humor, their gift of song, their zest for rhythm, their instinct for courtesy, was a profound fear of them—a fear heightened by long memories of Reconstruction days, and by the realization that in many parts of the region they outnumbered the whites.

This fear had brought about their gradual disfranchisement by such devices as the "grandfather law": in 1900 it was estimated that out of 181,471 Negro males of voting age in Alabama only 3,000 were registered. Lynchings were numerous: in 1900 no less than 115 were recorded, and in 1901 the figure rose to a record 130 (as compared with an average of less than four a year during the nineteen-forties).

The million or so Negroes who lived outside the South fared on the average much better, partly because the wage level tended to be higher in the North and West, the schools better, the sanitary conditions less primitive, but also because there was as yet little fear of them in these regions; in some smaller communities the few resident Negroes were highly regarded and occupied positions of virtual social

equality with their neighbors. But even in the North, Negroes in general were customarily regarded as comic or picturesque minor characters in the drama of American life, and the latest quaint saying of a colored servant played a part in the conversation of the well-bred, somewhat like that of the latest quaint saying of an amusing child.

There had long been a tendency to move northward among those Negroes who could afford the trip, but it was not until about the year 1915 that the northward migration reached flood proportions. What accelerated it was a rising demand for unskilled workers in northern industry by reason of the war boom. Year by year it continued, as word spread through county after county in the South that colored friends and relatives in Harlem or Philadelphia or Chicago were eating regularly and appreciating the absence of Jim Crow restrictions. But as the Negro population in the North swelled—especially in the big cities which absorbed an overwhelming majority of the migrants—the same sort of fear that had previously been acute only in the South began to possess many Northerners. Efforts to keep Negroes out of jobs which whites might want, and to pen them within their own slum districts, lest their presence elsewhere lower real-estate values, became more deliberate, more organized; during the mid-twenties the vicious Ku Klux Klan flourished not only in the South but in many parts of the North too. The colored people were learning to their cost that the amount of organized discrimination against any group considered alien is likely to be proportionate to the relative size of that group in the community, and that as they moved north they brought their problems with them.

Then came the Great Depression, and its impact upon the Negro population was appalling. In those days when apprehension over the loss of one's job became an obsession with millions of Americans, inevitably the worst sufferers were those who traditionally had been the last to be hired, the first to be demoted, the first to be fired. If the northward migration continued—as it did—this was largely because the chances of getting on relief were on the whole better

in the North than in the South. In the year 1935 the median incomes of colored families were computed in a number of cities; in the northern ones, they averaged about half, or a little less, of the median incomes of white families (which themselves were nothing to brag of in that Depression year); in southern cities they averaged even less. In Mobile, Alabama, for example, the median Negro family took in only \$481 during the year, as against \$1,419 for the median white one. And in that same year *something like half of all the Negro families in the North were on relief!*

The Communists made terrific efforts to capitalize upon this situation, and no wonder: was there not here a proletariat made to their order? They signally failed to make more than a small number of Negro converts, however; partly, perhaps, because the Negroes constituted something closer to a caste than to a class, and had stratifications in their own communities which made such an appeal unpalatable to many, including most of their natural leaders; partly because communism was unpopular and, as one Negro put it, it was "bad enough to be black without being red too"; and partly because they were by nature allergic to the alienness of Communist theory and action.

The approach of World War II brought a sharp economic improvement. As the general level of wages rose, Negroes could hardly escape getting some of the benefits. These reached them laggingly, however, for the desire of white workers to keep the best of the new jobs for themselves had hardened into an attitude much more conscious and deliberate than during the industrial boom of World War I.

By this time another factor was at work. Innumerable white citizens were becoming uncomfortably aware that the existence of an underprivileged caste in the United States was a blot upon the record of a nation enlisted in a fight for democracy. Negro leaders took every opportunity to add to their moral discomfort by reminding them that Negroes, drafted into the armed forces like whites, were segregated there and assigned to menial duties. The agitation against this segregation, and for a code of "fair employment practices" in war

manufacturing plants, won strong backing among whites in the North; and even in the South, though there remained Rankins and Talmadges to shout the old battle cries of "white supremacy," there was manifest among great numbers of decent people the same sort of stirring of the conscience. They were becoming aware of how heavy an economic load weighs upon any community which deliberately condemns a part of its consuming public to poverty; and they were making a conscientious effort to find, by quiet accommodation, sympathetic solutions for the ancient problems of Negro poverty and misery in the Southern States.

For a time the upshot was uncertain. Wrote Gunnar Myrdal, completing during the war his massive, dispassionate study of the condition of the colored people, *An American Dilemma*: "Reading the Negro press and hearing all the reports from observers who have been out among common Negroes in the South and the North convinces me that there is much sullen skepticism, and even cynicism, and vague, tired, angry dissatisfaction among American Negroes today." And expecting—as most people did during 1943, 1944, and 1945—that the war would be followed by another depression, Myrdal wondered whether the friction that would result might set back Negro progress. For a time it looked as if the mutual antipathy of Negroes and whites might not remain within peaceful bounds, especially when, shortly after the war, some colored leaders advised their fellow Negroes to resist the draft so long as the armed forces of the United States did not put the two races on a footing of equality.

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But there was no postwar depression. And all this time the uneasy American conscience was steadily at work. The result was that the postwar years saw a change that would have seemed unbelievable only a decade earlier.

A series of Supreme Court decisions set aside many of the laws and practices which had kept Negroes from the polls and from educational opportunity. One decision weakened the force of racially

restrictive real-estate covenants. A number of Southern states repealed the poll-tax laws which had prevented great numbers of poor people, white and black, from voting; in the election of 1948 over a million Southern Negroes went to the polls. The Air Force and Navy officially ended segregation and the Army modified its former segregation practices. The pressure of "fair employment" laws in several Northern states, combined with the eagerness of many employers to set an example of enlightened employment policy, brought about the entry of colored workers in many fields of employment new to them. In New York, for example, anybody returning to the city after a long absence would have been struck by the large numbers of colored men and women in the midtown busses and on the midtown streets, traveling to jobs that had previously been for whites only, or to shop in stores where colored customers had previously been few and far between. In Northern and Western cities generally there was a noticeable breakdown of Jim Crow restrictions in hotels, restaurants, and theaters.

Ever since the nineteen-twenties there had been a rising appreciation, among intellectuals, of the Negro contributions to the arts, and especially to jazz music; and as time went on there developed among the more ardent students of jazz such a reverence for the pioneering contributions of the original jazz musicians of New Orleans and Memphis, and for the inheritors of the traditions of Basin Street and Beale Street, that men like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong found themselves the objects of a deep and deferential respect among thousands of music lovers. Meanwhile, in quite another area, the statesmanship and dignity of Ralph Bunche, as mediator in the Near East, was winning for him the admiration of innumerable whites. But still more important for Negro prestige, because it involved such an enormous public, was the prowess of Joe Louis, the great heavyweight champion, of whom Jimmy Cannon said that he was a credit to his race—the human race; and also the performance of a number of colored baseball players after the Jim Crow restrictions in professional baseball were broken down in the late nineteen-forties. Not only did the remarkable playing and exemplary behavior of men like

Jackie Robinson make the earlier color line in baseball seem preposterous to the fans, but by 1950 most of the enthusiasts for baseball seemed to choose their favorite players with almost no regard for the color line; and so carefully did radio reporters of baseball games refrain from mentioning the color of the players that there were actually stay-at-home fans who could tell you Roy Campanella's approximate batting average but were not aware that he was a Negro.

"Probably the most important thing that has happened in the United States in the field of race relations," wrote Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, "is that so many things are now taken for granted where the integration of the two races is concerned. This was brought home to me at the Inauguration of 1945 in the White House when a group of newspaper women who had been watching the receiving line came to me at the end of the day and said: 'Do you realize what twelve years have done? If at the 1933 reception a number of colored people had gone down the line and mixed with everyone else in the way they did today, every paper in the country would have reported it. We do not even think it is news and none of us will mention it.'"

No longer did magazines, newspapers, and moving pictures show Negroes almost exclusively as comic or menial characters. Those ancient stereotypes had been largely eliminated.

Most striking of all the changes, perhaps, was a new attitude on the part of younger white Americans, both North and South—a very widespread resolve to accept Negroes as people without regard to their color. This attitude was manifest when, following Supreme Court decisions, a number of universities in the southern and border states admitted Negroes to unsegregated standing. University administrators were uneasy: would some hothead whites among the students raise a ruckus? Up to the end of 1951 there had been no ruckus anywhere. Uniformly, the students took the innovation in their stride.

Meanwhile a profound change in the economic pattern of the Old South was having a further effect upon Negro fortunes. The invention of the cotton-picker and cotton-stripper was bringing an end to the reign of King Cotton in the Southeast and was slowly under-

mining the ancient institution of farm tenantry. Little by little the former cotton plantations of Georgia, Alabama, and the Carolinas were being abandoned as cotton planters in the Mississippi Delta, Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Arizona proved themselves able to harvest cotton economically on large tracts of land fully adapted to mechanized operations. Little by little the southeastern states were shifting from cotton to dairy farming, livestock raising, vegetable raising, and the growing of pine trees for cellulose. And the result was a further drift of the former tenant farmers, black along with white, to the industrial cities and towns the country over.

The census figures of 1950 showed the extent of the shift. In 1900, as we have seen, nearly three-quarters of the Negroes in America had lived in the rural South; by 1950, *less than one-fifth of them did*. (And less than half of these were tenants.) In several Southern states—Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, and Mississippi—the total colored population showed an actual decline since 1940; and although South Carolina registered an increase, it was exceedingly small. Meanwhile the figures for various Northern states illustrated how widely the Negro population was becoming distributed. In Connecticut, for example, the number of colored residents had leaped in ten years from 33,835 to 54,953; in Wisconsin, from 24,835 to 41,884. The northward tide was not simply flooding into the biggest and most congested centers; it was seeping out into other parts of the land.

And what of the economic fortunes of the colored people? During World War II Gunnar Myrdal had written:

The economic situation of the Negroes is pathological. Except for a small minority enjoying upper or middle class status, the masses of American Negroes, in the rural South and in the segregated slum quarters in Southern and Northern cities, are destitute. They own little property; even their household goods are mostly inadequate and dilapidated. Their incomes are not only low but irregular. They thus live from day to day and have scant security for the future. Their entire culture and their individual interests and strivings are narrow.

By the mid-century there was still a degree of truth in this generalization. Yet there were signs that during the nineteen-forties the rising

tide of prosperity had to a very considerable extent carried the Negro population with it.

True, it was estimated in 1948 that the median Negro family income was 47 per cent lower than the comparable white family income. But in the *National Economic Review* for the year 1950, published by the President's Council of Economic Advisers in January, 1951, there was an estimate of the proportion of Negroes in various income groups which put the situation in somewhat different terms. Among those "spending units"—which means families and individuals—whose money income before taxes was less than \$1,000 for the year, 83 per cent were found to be white; 15 per cent, Negro (leaving two per cent classified as "unascertainable"). Among the next higher group, with annual incomes between \$1,000 and \$2,000, 89 per cent were white, 10 per cent Negro. In the \$2,000-\$3,000 class, 92 per cent were white, 7 per cent Negro. And in the large group with incomes of \$3,000 or over, 97 per cent were white, 3 per cent were Negro. When you examine those figures, remember that the Negroes of the country constitute just about one-tenth of the population. Therefore par for each of these classifications would be 10 per cent. The figures reveal a marked shortage of colored people in the more well-to-do groups, and an excess of colored people in the lowest group. But I wonder if many readers will not feel, as I did when I first saw those figures, some surprise that the overloading in the lowest brackets was not more extreme. The movement of Negroes away from tenant farming and into industry, and out of the Old South into other parts of the country, was combining with the general change in public attitudes to mitigate the deplorable situation described by Myrdal.

There were other favorable signs. Negro illiteracy had been cut in fifty years from 44.5 per cent to 11 per cent, and Negro expectancy of life had been increased by nearly 26 years. Lynchings—the endless topic of Communist propaganda the world over—had virtually ceased: in the entire United States only one lynching was recorded in 1945; six in 1946; one in 1947; two in 1948 (of which one of the victims was white); three in 1949; and two in 1950 (of which one victim

was white). One would find it hard to find a disease so rare, or a type of accident so unusual, that in a land of a hundred and fifty million people they would not produce death rates larger than those.

By the mid-century there were 94,000 Negro students in American colleges and universities. And a colored woman who had been serving as an exchange professor in France told me that she was constantly having to explain to French audiences that there were a great many people like herself who were able to lead their professional lives with a minimum sense of belonging to a special caste. "Are you allowed to walk on the sidewalk in Washington?" she would be asked; and would have to explain that of course she was. One noted an increasing number of Negro policemen in Southern cities—often arresting white lawbreakers; and such symbolic events took place as the election of a Negro to the city council in Richmond, Virginia. All in all, the evidence was strong, not only that the status of the Negro had risen far above what most Europeans—influenced despite themselves by Communist rantings and also by the writings of earlier rebels against the American color line—imagined it to be, but above what most Americans still imagined it to be.

There was little prospect that this major American problem would move toward a solution without further friction and mutual antagonism. No era of amiable harmony was in sight. Yet at least the battleground of opinion was moving slowly toward a location less disadvantageous to the Negro. As Walter White wrote in the summer of 1951, America was making progress toward rubbing out the darkest blot on its democratic record—"often painfully slow, but it is still progress."