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# "REMINISCENCES"

By MARY WHITE OVINGTON

## CHAPTER FIVE

Living on San Juan Hill  
A Lone White Woman Living in a City Block  
with 5,000 Colored Folk.

Not living on San Juan Hill in Cuba up which the colored soldiers charged, but on San Juan Hill in New York, a poor neighborhood running from West 60th Street, to West 64th Street, between 10th and 11th Avenues. Whites dwelt on the avenues, colored on the streets, and fights between the two gave the hill its name. A rough neighborhood, but, at least among the Negroes, a place where all classes lived.

There were people who itched for a fight, and people who hated roughness. Lewd women leaned out of windows, and neat, hard-working mothers early each morning made their way to their mistresses' homes. Men lounged on street corners in as dandified dress as their women at the wash tubs could get for them; while hard working porters and longshoremen, night watchmen and government clerks went regularly to their jobs. Race prejudice and economic necessity threw all sorts and conditions of colored people together. I speak of the San Juan Hill of the past. I know little about it now, but when in January, 1908, I moved into the Tuskegee Apartments, built by Henry Phipps, its reputation was little better than Hell's Kitchen, the picturesque Irish gangster neighborhood a few blocks south.

John E. Milholland, whose name should be revered by all of us, was instrumental in having the Tuskegee Apartments built. He knew that Henry Phipps was building model tenements, to return four per cent on the investment. Milholland, learning through me of the frightful housing conditions among the Negro working class, persuaded Phipps to put his second venture in a Negro neighborhood. So the Hill saw a fireproof, new-law tenement, with steam heat and unlimited hot water, in the midst of its double-decker and dumbell apartments that covered ninety per cent of each building lot. The management was in the hands of the City and Suburban Homes Company.

I had begun my settlement work in a model tenement erected by Charles Pratt. My next venture was in a tenement erected by Henry Phipps, and while Mr. Phipps had as yet shown no interest in settlement work, caring only for the housing end, I hoped, by quietly renting on my own account, to persuade him to add social service work.

The house had a playroom for its children which the Walton Free Kindergarten was allowed to occupy in the morning. I could develop more work that later might be supported. So I took a little furniture, a great many books, and moved into my flat. It had three rooms and a bath.

Life among working class people was familiar to me, but I found that San Juan Hill was very different from Greenpoint. There was, of course, the difference of race, or color, but I soon forgot that. The noticeable difference was in the lower economic status of the Negro.

Greenpoint had been a factory neighborhood, and though the work had been hard it had been fairly constant. Girls worked in factories and shops, men worked regularly at skilled and unskilled labor. All got a decent wage, so that the housewife stayed at home giving her full time to her family's wants. On San Juan Hill, this was the exception, not the rule.

There were families where the

husband and older children supported the household, but usually, the mother had to help support the family. She did this by taking in laundry, or she went out to service. As a domestic, she would be away for twelve or fourteen hours. If she went out to clean, she put in eight hours of work. When she got home she must at once attend to her husband and children. Her babies were boarded with some old and inefficient woman unless she was lucky enough to get them in the Nursery. When they grew older, they lived in the street. That was safer than leaving them locked in at home.

The men were unskilled laborers, some longshoremen, a decently paid group, some porters in factory or store. Some were general utility men in boarding-houses, with hours as long as the women's. Many a boarding-house employs such a man who works early and late about the place, receiving a scant wage. Men worked at night as watchmen, and must sleep through the day's noise. And lastly, far more than at Greenpoint, men did not work at all, either because they could not get jobs, or because the jobs they might secure were hateful, and they could find some woman—wife, mother, or sweetheart—to support them. These men lounged on street corners during the day, or played pool in one of the many pool rooms.

The absence of the mother from the home led to juvenile delinquency. More than white children, colored boys and girls came before the juvenile court for improper guardianship. That was the only offense where the Negro percentage was higher than the white. I know, for I spent many late afternoons going over the juvenile court records in the stuffy court house. Ruth Draper, then a young girl, a member of the Junior League and working at Greenwich House, used to help me. I wish she might have seen the cases instead of the records only. We went patiently over the pages and learned that environment was the determining factor in juvenile arrests. Where, as in a Jewish neighborhood, the push-cart stood temptingly by the side walk,



"Yes, we knows deys women walkin' de streets right now. But who's walkin' wid 'em?"

there petty larceny abounded. And where, as on San Juan Hill, mothers had to go out to work, arrests were numerous for improper guardianship. Our researches exploded the loose accusation that Negroes are born with a propensity to steal. The colored child stole no more and no less than the average white child.

My best friend on San Juan Hill was the Rev. George Simms of the Union Baptist Church. Since San Juan Hill has become a West Indian neighborhood, his church has moved to Harlem, but when I knew it, it was frequented chiefly by newly-arrived Southerners. They went to the Union Baptist Church and found themselves at home, got "happy" and were not frowned upon, though they never got beyond their ministers' control.

His sermons were madly picturesque and yet full of common sense. He could preach as vivid a sermon as any in "God's Trombones." His picture of Jesus in his blue smock leaving his carpenter's bench to be baptized by John the Baptist belongs in "The Green Pastures."

He co-operated with all of us on the Hill, the kindergartners, the day nursery workers, the superintendent of the Tuskegee. The suffragists came to his church, and he made the best speech of any. He had a rival in one of his deacons, known as Brother Baptist.

Once, when an anti-suffragist complained that if women were given the vote, the women who walked the streets would be enfranchised, Brother Baptist said in answer: "Yes, we knows deys women walkin' de streets. Deys walkin' de streets right now. But who's walkin' wid 'em?"

Eight months was not a long time to study a neighborhood, and I had my book to write as well as committees to attend, but I managed to see a good deal. With a tenement house inspector, for ten days I climbed thousands of stairs. The white homes we looked into, homes bordering on the Negro neighborhood, were more dirty than the colored. They seemed to contain a great many mangy dogs. But the Negro, however poor, did not surrender the attempt to make her home attractive. A white spread or a calico quilt would be on the bed, the china on the shelf would be gay and neatly arranged, the room usually fairly clean. The standard may have come from intimate acquaintance with the homes of well-to-do mistresses, but it was there. The streets, too, though they knew fighting and heard guffaws of laughter and screams of terror, preserved a certain decency. I can illustrate this in no better way than by the fact that I never saw the obscene writing that had been common in Greenpoint.

I thought of this one day when I was poking about in an inner court to find the home of an impoverish-

ed child. The walls offered space for the gross offers I had grown familiar with years before. But instead, on one of these walls, in a neat handwriting, I read: "Unless above himself he can erect himself, how poor a thing is man." And below: "No conflict is so severe as his who labors to subdue himself. But in this we must continually be engaged if we would strengthen the inner man."

I would not imply that it was usual to find Shakespeare and Thomas a Kempis written upon the walls. I never saw them again. But the imagination and religious fervor that they expressed were familiar to these sordid city blocks.

Negro children, when taught good manners, enjoyed practicing them. Some of the children on my street were a delight to entertain. I loved to have them come to my flat, their hair standing out in two little braids, their eyes bright, their hands slender and pretty. If one handed me a flower it was done with grace.

I remember walking down my block with an old Greenpoint friend and seeing a boy of eight run up to his mother, kiss her, and then take a parcel from her arms. "That's not unusual," I said to my friend. Quick as a flash, her Irish wit responded: "Then you needn't be explaining to me the reason for the high death rate among children."

The darkest part of life on the Hill was the realization that so little was ahead for these same children. Poverty was their lot. I remember Annabel—who came running to me one evening to say that her mother would the next day be turned out into the street. She had supported the family by laundry work until sickness came and now the threatened dispossession. I went to her apartment.

"It is the end," she said, offering me the one chair left. That morning she had sold the furniture and on the way home lost the money. "It is the end." Organized charity came the next day and paid the rent, but there followed a long period of want and suffering. Annabel told me one day what she expected to do when she grew up. "I shall dance," she declared. "Dancers make money. I shall not work the way my mother does. She works and works and never has anything."

At the end of eight months I saw that my settlement dream would never be realized. Mr. Phipps was interested in housing, but his interest stopped there. In the one inter-



Some of my friends thought I was running a risk.

view I had with him, I could not convince him of the value of all that I hoped to do. The City and Suburban Homes Company also took no interest in supporting my plans.

I suspect they thought a settlement in a model tenement would be a nuisance. I saw my savings rapidly disappearing and no chance of a salary. So when the summer was over, very reluctantly I gave up my apartment and for a second time left busy, warm-hearted working-class neighbors for middle class respectability. It would have been harder to do this, had I not been greatly needed at home.

In all the months that I lived, a white woman alone in a block with five thousand Negroes, I never had a disagreeable experience. I was never accosted rudely. The race riots of which I had heard had ceased to occur. Some of my friends thought I was running a risk. One called me up after dining with me, and in forceful language in which the word "Nigger" was present, told me I should leave. I told him I was as safe there as anywhere. Danger is never absent, but I did not taste it.

The colored people, more than the whites in Greenpoint, took me for exactly what I was. Had they been better educated, more sophisticated, they might have been suspicious of my sincerity. But I was among big-hearted, friendly, hard-working human beings. They thought me a teacher and put me down at that.

It spoke well for the work that had gone before mine, public school, mission, kindergarten, health department, charity organization society—that I was understood. They saw that I wanted to help. They believed that I respected them in their terrific struggle to make life easier for their children.

It was many months before I mastered my disappointment, and before I ceased to think of that street and my home on it. I had met the Negro race and felt its charm, that charm that New York has not yet wholly destroyed.

In the evening at my open window on the crowded street I hear the children calling to one another in their play. They have a street song, "Sound dem weddin' bells," that I have not heard before. . . . An evangelist moves past me saying, "Salvation is so convenient, don't forget that. Friends, it's convenient. It's for this world." . . . An old woman, in a high, shaking voice sings, "Give me Jesus, give me Jesus. You may have all this world but give me Jesus." . . . It is afternoon. A knock comes at my door. I open it, and three little girls, in freshly laundered white dresses, slip shyly in. The oldest, she has

## He Was for Women's Voting 20 Years Ago



The REV. GEORGE H. SIMMS, pastor Union Baptist Church; president New York Baptist State Convention.

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