

Coming Stories by
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THE OMAHA GUIDE

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"REMINISCENCES"

By MARY WHITE OVINGTON

CHAPTER II

Settlement Work

In my youth, and it is partly true today, no place was more remote than that section of the city in which persons of a different caste lived. I was born and reared on Brooklyn Heights. When Frederick B. Pratt of Pratt Institute (where after leaving college I spent a year in a secretarial position) asked me to look at a model tenement his family had built in northern Brooklyn to see if it offered possibilities for settlement work, he sent me to an unknown land.

The Astral, as it was called, was one of the first model tenements erected in Greater New York. It was in Greenpoint, the northernmost ward of Brooklyn. To get there I took a car that I had seen all my life but never entered, went for a couple of miles through familiar streets, and then explored the unknown.

Sugar refineries gave out their sickish smell, factories loomed large, and at length Greenpoint was reached, ugly but within view of the river. I climbed four flights of tenement stairs and knocked at the door of an apartment where a girl from Minneapolis had been living while working in the Pratt library.

In an hour she told me of conditions in my own city of which I was utterly ignorant. I felt humiliated and decided to take up the settlement job. Since then I have played the role of the Minneapolis girl in southern towns, talking with my southern white friends and telling them of the well-to-do Negro. They are never humiliated. They always know all they want to know.

There was a fervor for settlement work in the nineties, for learning working-class conditions by living among the workers and sharing to a small extent in their lives. Toynbee Hall, London, Hull House, Greenwich House, the Henry Street Settlement, these were a few familiar names. My little plant grew from five rooms to forty, occupying a section in the model tenement, but it never achieved fame. Pratt Institute largely furnished the teachers, making it a practice station for students in domestic science. The Institute and the Pratt family generously raised the money.

I had no serious financial care and was happy in a growing family of residents and in the many contacts such work gave. I knew Jane Addams and have never forgotten her first piece of advice to me: "If you want to be surrounded by second rate ability you will dominate your settlement. If you want the best ability you must allow great liberty of action among your residents."

Jane Addams's name today is among the most famous in the world. But perhaps few people realize the incalculable good she has done in helping others to enlarge and glorify their own work. Many people can build their fortune by using others. Few can encourage ability without dominating it.

We worked hard at the Greenpoint settlement and we tried to understand working-class conditions. The desire for such knowledge was in the air.

New York had then the Social Reform Club, an organization comprising a membership of intellectuals and workers. I entered it and was soon put upon its board. I was lucky to begin my work at a time when hope was in the air, not when, as today, the atmosphere reeks with the philosophy of economic and psychological collapse.

We believed in political reform and elected Seth Low mayor. We had a tenement house department that abolished the building of dark, almost windowless tenements. We talked socialism and single tax and when we read William Morris, or sang his hymn of the worker, at the Intercollegiate Social Society,

we believed that by sacrifice and hard work his dream might come true.

With this background, I worked in the Greenpoint Settlement for seven years.

How much I helped the neighborhood I do not know, not a great deal, but I learned much myself. Numbers of factory girls came to our classes and when I heard the whistle blow at seven in the morning, as I lay in bed, it was not an indefinite person but Mary or Amanda or Celia, who was going to do rough work for ten and a half hours.

A few children were then in the mills, and I saw one with mangled hand who had no excuse for what she had done except that she was so much a child she wanted to play with machinery. I saw the struggle for jobs, the boycott and the tragedy of the unemployed. And I saw happy children.

For the children, with whom we did much of our work, on the whole we were happy. They loved the street and its excitement. Usually they had enough to eat and a place to sleep. They came from families of industrious people, chiefly Irish and German Americans, went to public school, learned a little and were up to mischief in their leisure hours.

The boys stole lead pipes, climbed everywhere, walking along the outside coping of our seven story tenement, brought the cooking teacher to me in tears because they had begun by eating up all the raw material for the lesson except the salt, in short were very genuine American toughs, bad but lovable. When they got their working papers and began to earn something they settled down to respectable life. Some have done well. One went to Congress. Perhaps I should add, one went to jail.

The girls were not so restless, and soon learned to wheel baby carriages or hold a toddler by the arm.

It seemed to me the old suffered most. So little could be done for them! A grandmother needs an armchair and a pleasant window. Our grandmothers huddled in corners, the horror of the poorhouse hanging over them. The mothers, too, were often sad and tired. Some of the men drank, and there was nothing attractive about their drunkenness, but many were hard working and I used to wonder what

they could get out of life, their homes were so crowded and noisy. Neither the movie nor the radio had been invented.

That I should later work for the Negro never entered my mind, but I doubt if I could have had a better preparation than the settlement gave. For in those seven years I learned that many problems attributed to race are really labor problems.

Employers of labor, whether men or women, employing white or black, have a good deal the same psychology, talk in much the same way. The domestic service problem takes on local color, but the mistresses always think the same thing—that a good servant neglects her own people for her mistress.

I did, however, have two direct contacts with Negro life while at Greenpoint, and one of them, more than any other single thing, led me to take up colored work.

The first was the attitude of the boys in our clubs toward the colored population. I encountered it when I took a club to Prospect Park. Our route lay through a small Negro section, Gwinnett Street, a block or two of old frame houses occupied by the poorer class. (Once, one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen in my life got on the car at Gwinnett Street. She was tall and slender and dressed in golden brown corduroy that made her brown skin glow with lovely color.)

The families were sitting on their stoops, and as we passed them, as

An Old Booker T. in a New Pose



From the cover of "Selected Speeches of Booker T. Washington," a copyright photo by C. M. Battey.

Didn't Shine That Night



BOOKER T. WASHINGTON
"William H. Baldwin, at speakers' table, leaning forward, looking at Washington and saying, 'I worship that man.'"

"Maggie"



"RS." BOOKER T. WASHINGTON
"They were disappointed when the wife proved to be No. 3, not No. 2 about whom they were reading."

though at a signal, all the boys jumped on their seats and at the tops of their voices shouted: "Nigger, nigger, nigger!" Then, the car turned into a white neighborhood, they sat down. The game was over.

They never played it again with me, but I carried my will by threat rather than persuasion. They saw no harm in what they did.

As time went on, I realized there was no personal animosity in their act. It was a custom. When a colored janitor, oddly enough named George, came to take charge of our model tenement, he became the most popular man among the boys on the block. There was always a group about him, listening to his stories. He was an individual to them.

The Booker Washingtons

My second direct Negro contact was through the Social Reform Club. "Up from Slavery" was appearing in the Outlook and our club wanted to honor the author of it and his wife. (They were disappointed when the wife proved to be number three, not number two about whom they were reading.) I was made chairman of the committee to arrange for the dinner.

"Do not have all the talk about conditions in the South. Have conditions in the North discussed." These were my instructions and

I followed them. To my amazement I learned that there was a Negro problem in my city. I had honestly never thought of it. I accepted the Negro as I accepted any

Continued on Page Four

COMING SOON

"PRETTY BOY" HE LOOKED AT LEGS!

Another
Adele Hamlin
Story

There were only four things Alvin Proscott loved; his garden, his dog, himself, his clothes, and collecting beautiful women—not the women but the collecting.

Into his life and flower garden walked Midge "Half Pint," with her flat nose and freckles and, believe it or skippy, it looks like a plain girl has him by the nose for the first time.