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"REMINISCENCES"

By MARY WHITE OVINGTON
CHAPTER III

I Begin My Investigation

The summer after I left Greenpoint I had my one serious illness, typhoid. It took nearly a year for recovery. A trip to Italy came in the spring, and it was not until the following autumn, 1904, that I was at work again.

The desire to have a settlement among the Negroes had been mulling in my mind for these months. I felt that a settlement in a Negro section would not only help the poor but would be an excellent meeting-place for the well-to-do of each race.

Here, on the equality that I knew could exist in a settlement, white and colored could live together, and race questions would not be the only matters under discussion. But I had never had to raise money and I was at a loss how to begin to interest people. So I went to one of my wisest settlement friends, Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, head of Greenwich House, and asked her advice. She in her turn asked me what I knew of Negro conditions.

I confessed that I knew nothing. Whereupon she advised that I study the Negro in New York and made this practical by securing a fellowship for me from Greenwich House. This resulted in the publication of my book, in 1911, by Longmans, Greene, "Half a Man: the Status of the Negro in New York."

I wanted first to meet the educated Negro. But I had not a single acquaintance. Once, on revisiting Radcliffe, I was disappointed at seeing a colored girl in the library and realizing that I had lost this natural way of meeting the colored world. However, I didn't know even one college girl, so I had to use letters of introduction from Washington and DuBois. I mailed ten to prominent business men, asking for interviews.

I learned the meaning of C. P. T.! Fred Moore, editor of the New York Age, answered by return mail. The others took their time. One took two weeks, another six weeks. Four never answered at all. All were cordial when later I met them one by one. But as business men, according to the standard of the white world around them, they failed on the first count. They did not promptly attend to their morning mail.

Mr. Moore was helpful and I was glad to get the viewpoint of an enthusiastic Washingtonian. I was already a Du Bois enthusiast, having read his articles in the Atlantic Monthly that were later incorporated in "The Souls of Black Folk." Business proved one of the least interesting phases to study.

The Negro had been steadily losing out since the days when he constituted ten per cent of the city's population.—a few men in real estate, a few caterers, some small shops, seemed all. One man did impress me, Wallace of Virginia, labor leader and head of the Asphalt Workers' Union. I saw him at the Sunday afternoon labor gathering, a dark man, speaking to the point, business-like. He handled more Italians than Negroes. His trade, however, was soon to be doomed.

My efforts to meet the professional class were more successful. As a social worker I at once studied the social service work for the Negroes. There was the Friends' Mission, under white guidance, down in the West Thirties. Mrs. Kimber, calm, benignant, was at the head, and with her a young girl, Kate Sherman, as enthusiastic as ever I could hope to be. I remember her saying once, "My heart is black even though my face may be white." She showed me some shocking conditions, but she knew few Negroes of her own calibre.

Soon I became acquainted with the colored nurses connected with

He Wrote for the Atlantic Monthly



DR. W. E. B. DuBOIS, and his contributions gathered into book form became "The Souls of Black Folk." (From a photograph made nearly 25 years ago.)

the professional people. They were a pleasant, friendly group with nothing to distinguish them from their neighbors but their color. Most of them lived in houses in Brooklyn which they owned and which were a little more ugly in a solid, mid-Victorian way than the whites. Whether Northerners or Southerners, they were usually descendants of free men and had been well educated by their parents.

What most impressed me was their conservatism—not on the race question but on everything else. They saw the white man given opportunities denied them and they wanted the status of the white man, to be able to go where their money would take them. Engrossed by their own problem, they did not take up the problems of others. In politics they were Republican.

Maritcha Lyons, since deceased, was one of the most attractive of this group. She had won the right of colored graduates from the normal college to teach in the public schools. Few outside of New York know that there is no discrimination in the placing of colored normal graduates and that they frequently teach in schools where there are no Negroes. I went to Superintendent Maxwell when I began my investigations and asked him for a list of colored teachers. He gave me to understand from his manner that my question was an impertinence. Teachers were put into schools without regard to their color. He did not know how many colored teachers he had nor where they were teaching.

While superintendent, Maxwell held rigidly to this rule. But before his time, the colored women had gained the point he emphasized. The Negro has worked and suffered to gain what he has in New York City.

As I look through the mass of letters that I have kept I see how unendingly kind my new acquaintances were to me. Busy ministers gave me interviews and helped me to meet people who could tell me more. I have had the privilege of the Reverend Hutchins Bishop's friendship for over thirty years. I went from one denomination to another in my quest for knowledge.

The late William T. Brooks of St. Mark's told me that his study door was always open. We had a disagreement on the Roosevelt-Washington dinner, I believing Washington was right in accepting the hospitality.

Dr. Brooks wrote me his idea on the matter: "Mr. Roosevelt had a right to invite Mr. Washington, Mr. Washington had the right to accept. But is it the best and highest wisdom or the finest taste to make our friends suffer because it is in our power to do so?"

Reading these lines after twenty-seven years, I appreciate how many times my friends have shown the finest taste in not letting me suffer. I had a sense of adventure in going where my race did not go, where I was warned not to go. But I was not allowed to be indiscreet. I was quietly taken care of, then and always.

At the end of a Negro meeting, I went home alone or with a colored woman. Once this did not happen. I was walking in the evening with a college student. We went by a hack stand in charge of an elderly Negro. "You stop this," he said sternly to the young man. "Stop it." I had too little knowledge then to see the lynching back in his imagination, but I saw the place in which he put me.

While the professional class was on the whole conservative, there were some with a wide outlook on conditions, and before long we had a group, meeting for the most part in Brooklyn, of colored and white, called the Cosmopolitan Club. Andre Tridon, Frenchman, psychiatrist, was the president. Dr. Owen M. Waller, an able physician, an ardent admirer of Dr. DuBois, was vice-president. Dr. Verina Morton-Jones was in the club, and one of its best members was the Reverend Frazier Miller, soon to join the Socialist cause. Among the whites were single taxers and, of course, Socialists. We expected to discuss many topics, but before the evening was over we always got around to the problem of race.

I recall one evening when we examined photographs of families that lived, some in the white, some in the colored world. I had heard of these things but it was a different matter to see pictures of Negroes who had gone white, especially when a brother, still in the colored world, exhibited them.

Southern legislatures were at that time passing laws to make a person with a drop of Negro blood a member of the Negro race. Tragic conditions were resulting.

South Carolina had refused to pass this law, a member of the legislature (I give this story as it was told me) rising and saying that they could not possibly have such legislation in that state. "We are all of us niggers, more or less," was printed from his speech in the next morning's paper.

The club was small and congenial. Later it achieved sudden fame and as suddenly oblivion.

While I was making social contacts I was reading continually on the Negro question. Such reading as it was! The newspapers and magazines, with a few exceptions, had no use for any educated Negro except Booker T. Washington. He knew that the Negro should receive an industrial education and his remarks were always welcome. As the South had formerly been sensitive to Northern criticism, so now the North was ready to atone for its reconstruction policy. The South knew all about the Negro and the North nothing.

Tourgee's "Fool's Errand" was superseded by Dixon's "The Leopard's Spots." The best publishers seemed eager to print rabid criticism of the American Negro.

Thomas, a renegade Negro, published as nasty a book as can be found about his race, and Macmillan published it. Back in the minds of the white critics was the fear of Negro domination, and the old slav-

"Helped Unstintingly" "Gave Correct Report"



OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD, Garrison's grandson—(From an old photograph of 20 years ago.)

ery arguments were continually used. Biologically, the Negro was inferior.

Smith of Tulane University wrote a book to show the horrible danger of amalgamation, or rather of intermarriage. He assured his readers that craniologically and by six thousand years of planet-wide experimentation (a good fundamentalist, Professor Smith) the Negro is proved to be markedly inferior to the Caucasian. He added that if the best Negro was shown to be equal to the best Caucasian, then it would be hard to prove that the lowest white was higher than the lowest black.

A doctor Bean of Baltimore showed to his own satisfaction that the Negro brain was smaller than the white brain, and gave minute particulars regarding the different classes of American Negroes and where they came from in Africa. I sent him two pages of eager but ironic questions that asked the number of years he had spent in Africa, how long a period he had given to detailed study of the American Negro, etc., etc. He had not sallied far from Baltimore. His researches on the brain were in a few years proved incorrect. But the publication of derogatory articles went steadily on. The public wanted them.

I jumped into this world of writing and tried to get my favorable material published. The popular magazines turned it down, but Charities (now the Survey), the Independent, then under Ward, and the Evening Post published it. A number of religious journals also occasionally put in a kind word for the educated Negro. I remember, too, when the Century gave me a page in which I explained that the colored "mammy" existed now as always, but that today she was mothering her own race.

I dropped into an exciting, busy world. The race question afforded me interesting contacts among whites as well as colored. Oswald Garrison Villard, Garrison's grandson, helped me unstintingly. The first time I went to him, I was horrified at the way an evening meeting I had just attended had been reported. It had been a quiet, dignified affair, but the reporter described cruel vituperation against Washington, loud cries of wrath from his supporters, and a riot.

I didn't know meetings could be reported like that, but Mr. Villard

Answered by Return Mail



FRED MOORE, editor, New York Age. A recent photograph.

the Henry Street Settlement and the Bureau of Charities, and also with the members of the mixed Boards of the Walton Free Kindergarten and the Hope Day Nursery. The colored churches gave me welcome. I became familiar with the all too small group of philanthropic workers. To mention names would take too long and would be interesting only to old New Yorkers. But I want my readers to understand that I earnestly tried to look at New York's Negro problem from the various angles that the Negroes themselves looked at it. I have met many white people, North as well as South, who, knowing one Negro whom they like, base their philanthropy upon his advice.

I met a New York man not so long ago who had raised nearly a hundred thousand dollars for a Negro without inquiring how he stood with his own group. I was blamed for not endorsing him and not using my influence to get the Negroes to endorse him. I was to take the Negro on this white man's evaluation. All very pleasant for the white man, but there are Mussolinis enough of the Negro's making without the white man's manufacturing more. Through the social workers I met