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# "REMINISCENCES"

CHAPTER SIX.

## THAT COSMOPOLITAN CLUB DINNER. I MEET THE REPORTERS.

By MARY WHITE OVINGTON

I have spoken of the Cosmopolitan Club, an organization made up of white and colored men and women for the discussion of present day problems. While it was small, numbering about thirty members, for a moment it achieved fame. Its doings were reported North and South and East and West. Especially did it reverberate in the South. It gave a dinner.

In 1908, New York was becoming a restaurant city. The boarding-house was giving way to the lodging-house, and countless people were going out to their meals. A restaurant would rent one of its rooms to an organization for the evening, thus giving the diner a free hall in which he could hold a meeting and talk of anything he chose. One of the favorite New York places at that time for groups with more ideas than money was Peck's restaurant on lower Fulton Street. This the Cosmopolitan Club secured for a given night and proceeded to sell tickets.

The tickets went well, for the speakers advertised were prominent men. Among the whites were, Oswald Garrison Villard, of the Evening Post, Hamilton Holt of the Independent, John Spargo, brilliant speaker for the Socialist party. Among the Negro speakers were, William H. Ferris, later one of Garvey's foremost workers, and the Rev. George Frazier Miller. Dr. Owen M. Waller presided.

The colored people who went to the dinner for the most part were the old-fashioned group, living in Brooklyn, that I have attempted to describe. A few were Socialists, but the majority believed that the best thing that had ever been said regarding the rights of individuals was said by Jefferson in the opening to the Declaration of Independence. They would be satisfied if they could get as good a chance in America as the white man. The whites were of various ideas, people like Villard of old-time abolition heritage, Socialists, radicals, social workers, friends of members of the club. I doubt if there was more than one person there under thirty. It was a sober gathering.

We had singularly good speeches. Kennedy's "Servant in the House" was being acted, and more than one referred to the Christ who figured as the servant. With the exception of Spargo's and Miller's Socialist appeals, no panacea was offered. Holt was the only person to mention miscegenation and then to dismiss it. The beauty of human brotherhood, the thought that all men can work together for good, was the dominant word. I have never heard Oswald Garrison Villard make a more moving spiritual appeal. As we went out, we said to one another, that it had been good to be there.

Now while this was the spirit of the meeting and of the club, a few members were up to mischief. The president of the Cosmopolitan Club was Andre Tridon, a Frenchman, and delightful pagan. He and one or two others had invited reporters. When they appeared and wanted to take a flashlight picture, Mr. Villard told me that trouble was ahead. I refused to allow the picture to be taken and then forgot about the reporters. They were recalled to me the next morning!

The story went over the country.



The Cosmopolitan Club dinner as it actually was

Brooklyn on Sundays. She could have had a hundred thousand Negroes at the Bacchanal feast had she waved the bread tray. But the horror of it is she could take young white girls into that den. This is the feature that should alarm and arouse Northern society.

"But our horror over the decadent women is only equalled by our amazement to see editors of papers that hitherto have been considered decent, and a reputable writer for magazines, in that witches' cauldron on that black night."

Thus spoke our enemies. We who were present said little. I saw more reporters the week after the event than I had seen before in my whole life, but I could only give my mild version of the affair. The Evening Post carried a letter or two and the Independent a short editorial. There were a few days of hubbub and the dinner's news value was over.

My name and address were in the paper, I had been one of the speakers, and I came in for the most publicity. My mail was very heavy.

My address had been given at the Hotel St. George, Brooklyn, where I went from the Phipps tenement for my week-end. As I entered the foyer, I felt conspicuous. I remember the mail clerk, Taylor, a colored man, and how considerate he was when I approached the desk. He had my mail in his hand that I might not be obliged to stay in the lobby an extra moment. He said nothing but I felt his sympathy. The mail was of all sorts. A few friendly letters, congratulating me, letters from Negroes regretting what I was going through, and the rest showing contempt or scorn. Some were threatening. That was rather jolly. One is complimented to feel that one may have endangered one's life for a cause. Some were very severe, but dignified. The bulk were illiterate and nauseatingly obscene. I was smothered in mud. Like so many of the women of my class I had led a sheltered life. That mail, entirely from the South, taught me much. It did not endear me to that section! When I read of a lynching today I think of those letters and know the men who engineered it.

I had one letter from the South that I loved. It came from a man in a little town of Maryland. It was written in a scraggly hand and was only a few lines. "I am a white man," it said, "but I glory in your spunk in standing up for what you



When I read about a lynching today

believe to be right."

Among all the newspaper editorials, I am inclined to think the Louisville Courier-Journal made the sanest remark. The reporter for the New York Times had written that he had not seen any "story." The Courier-Journal said of the dinner:

"It is not altogether improbable that the reporter for the 'yellow' journal was guilty of more or less exaggeration, but according to the canon of journalism there was material for a story. The definition of news that obtains in every city room includes the unusual. It is unusual for white and colored people to dine together in North America. It is futile for the defenders of the mixing-of-the-races-dinner to quarrel with a reporter for taking notice of the unusualness of the event."

Looking back on it now this comment seems to me correct. It was unusual for white and colored to dine together in public in New York and since the reporters were invited to see this, they made the most of the occurrence.

But the dinner accomplished one important thing. The dining of white and colored together in New York ceased to be news.

The next year a smaller but simi-

lar dinner took place and the papers did not notice it. Of recent years dinners have been given by so many organizations, to so many distinguished colored people, at which the races have been about equal in number that no reporter would bother to mention that black and white sat down together.

We at the Cosmopolitan Club were pioneers. We suffered the notoriety of pioneers, but we did a good piece of work. In 1931, a committee of prominent New Yorkers gave a dinner to James Weldon Johnson at the Hotel Pennsylvania. I sat next to Carl Van Doren, and as he looked at the list of the dinner committee he said, "This is the most distinguished list of names I have ever seen on a dinner invitation." I studied the people at the tables, white and colored side by side, and felt as though I were turning the pages of "Who's Who," finding not only writers and artists but men of affairs.

Mr. Villard came over to speak to me between two courses.

"You and I can't be discouraged on this race question," he said. "The world does move. Think of the Cosmopolitan Club dinner."

(To Be Continued)



ROYAL ROMANCE CULMINATES IN FRANCE.—His Royal Highness Prince Kojo Touvalou-Houenou of Dahomey, Africa, with his new bride, the former Mrs. Roberta Dodd Crawford, singer, from Chicago, Ill. They are shown in Paris after the wedding. At the left is J. A. Rogers, AFRO correspondent.