

## Back to Africa

By W. E. Burghardt DuBois

IT was upon the tenth of August, in High Harlem of Manhattan Island, where a hundred thousand negroes live. There was a long, low, unfinished church basement, roofed over. A little, fat black man, ugly, but with intelligent eyes and big head, was seated on a plant platform beside a "throne," dressed in a military uniform of the gayest mid-Victorian type, heavy with gold lace, epaulets, plume, and sword. Beside him were "potentates," and before him knelt a succession of several colored gentlemen. These in the presence of a thousand or more applauding dark spectators were duly "knighted" and raised to the "peerage" as knight-commanders and dukes of Uganda and the Niger. Among the lucky recipients of titles was the former private secretary of Booker T. Washington!

What did it all mean! A casual observer might have mistaken it for the dress-rehearsal of a new comic opera, and looked instinctively for Bert Williams and Miller and Lyles. But it was not; it was a serious occasion, done on the whole soberly and solemnly. Another might have found it simply silly. All ceremonies are more or less silly. Some negroes would have said that this ceremony had something symbolic, like the coronation, because it was part of a great "back-to-Africa" movement and represented self-determination for the negro race and a relieving of America of her most difficult race problem by a voluntary operation.

On the other hand, many American negroes and some others were scandalized by something which they could but regard as simply child's play. It seemed to them sinister, this enthroning of a demagogue, a blatant boaster, who with monkey-shines was deluding the people and taking their hard-earned dollars; and in High Harlem there rose an insistent cry, "Garvey must go!"

Knowledge of all this seeped through to the greater world because it was sensational and made good copy for the reporters. The great world now and then becomes aware of certain currents within itself, -tragedies and comedies, movements of mind, gossip, personalities, -in some inner whirlpool of which it had been scarcely aware before. Usually these things are of little interest or influence for the main current of events; and yet is not this same main current made up of the impinging of these smaller swirlings of little groups? No matter how segregated and silent the smaller whirlpool is, if it is American, at some time it strikes and influences the American world. What, then, is the latest news from this area of negrodom spiritually so foreign to most of white America?

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The sensation that Garvey created was due not so much to his program as to his processes of reasoning, his proposed methods of work, and the width of the stage upon which he essayed to play his part.

His reasoning was at first new and inexplicable to Americans because he brought to the United States a new negro problem. We think of our problem here as *the* negro problem, but we know more or less clearly that the problem of the American negro is very different from the problem of the South African negro or the problem of the Nigerian negro or the problem of the South American negro. We have not hitherto been so clear as to the way in which the problem of the

negro in the United States differs from the problem of the negro in the West Indies. For a long time we have been told, and we have believed, that the race problem in the West Indies, and particularly in Jamaica, has virtually been settled.

Let us note the facts. Marcus Garvey was born on the northern coast of Jamaica in 1887. He was a poor black boy, his father dying later in the almshouse. He received a little training in the Church of England grammarschool, and then learned the trade of printing, working for years as foreman of a printing plant. Then he went to Europe, and wandered about England and France, working and observing until he finally returned to Jamaica. He found himself facing a stone wall. He was poor, he was black, he had no chance for a university education, he had no likely chance for preferment in any line, but could work as an artisan at small wage for the rest of his life.

Moreover, he knew that the so-called settlement of the race problem in Jamaica was not complete; that as a matter of fact throughout the West Indies the development has been like this: most white masters had cohabited with negro women, and some had actually married them; their children were free by law in most cases, but were not the recognized equals of the whites either socially, politically, or economically. Because of the numbers of the free negroes as compared with the masters, and because of their continued growth in wealth and intelligence, they began to get political power, and they finally either expelled the whites by uniting with the blacks, as in Haiti, or forced the whites to receive the mulattoes, or at least the lighter-hued ones, as equals.

This is the West Indian solution of the negro problem. The mulattoes are virtually regarded and treated as whites, with the assumption that they will, by continued white intermarriage, bleach out their color as soon as possible. There survive, therefore, few white colonials, save new-comers, who are not of negro descent in some more or less remote ancestor. Mulattoes intermarry, then, largely with the whites, and the so-called disappearance of the color-line is the disappearance of the line between the whites and mulattoes, and not between the whites and the blacks or even between the mulattoes and the blacks.

Thus the privileged and exploiting group in the West Indies is composed of whites and mulattoes, while the poorly paid and ignorant proletariats are the blacks, forming a peasantry vastly in the majority, but socially, politically, and economically helpless and nearly voiceless. This peasantry, moreover, has been systematically deprived of its natural leadership because the black boy who showed initiative or who accidentally gained wealth and education soon gained the recognition

of the white-mulatto group and might be incorporated with them, particularly if he married one of them. Thus his interests and efforts were identified with the mulatto-white group.

There must naturally arise a more or less insistent demand among the black peasants for self-expression and for an exposition of their grievances by one of their own group. Such leaders have indeed arisen from time to time, and Marcus Garvey was one. His notoriety comes not from his ability and accomplishment, but from the Great War. Not that he was without ability. He was a facile speaker, able to express himself in grammatical and forceful English; he had spent enough time in world cities like London to get an idea of world movements, and he honestly believed that the backwardness of the blacks was simply the result of oppression and lack of opportunity.

On the other hand, Garvey had no thorough education and a very hazy idea of the technic of civilization. He fell easily into the common error of assuming that because oppression has retarded a group, the mere removal of the injustice will at a bound restore the group to full power. Then, too, he personally had his drawbacks: he was inordinately vain and egotistic, jealous of his power, impatient of details, a poor judge of human nature, and he had the common weakness of untrained devotees that no dependence could be put upon his statements of fact. Not that he was a conscious liar, but dream, fact, fancy, wish, were all so blurred in his thinking that neither he himself nor his hearers could clearly or easily extricate them.

Then came the new economic demand for negro peasant labor on the Panama Canal, and finally the Great War. Black West-Indians began to make something like decent wages, they began to travel, and they began to talk and think. Garvey talked and thought with them. In conjunction with white and colored sympathizers he planned a small Jamaican Tuskegee. This failed, and he conceived the idea of a purely negro organization to establish independent negro states and link them with commerce and industry. His "Universal Negro Improvement Association," launched August 1, 1914, in Jamaica, was soon in financial difficulties. The war was beginning to change the world, and as white American laborers began to be drawn into war work there was an opening in many lines not only for Southern American negroes as laborers and mechanics, but also for West-Indians as servants and laborers. They began to migrate in larger numbers. With this new migration came Marcus Garvey.

He established a little group of his own Jamaica countrymen in Harlem and launched his program. He took no account of the American negro problem; he knew nothing about it. What he was trying to do was to settle the Jamaican problem in the United States. On the other hand, American negroes knew nothing about the Jamaican problem, and they were excited and indignant at being brought face to face with a man who was full of wild talk about Africa and the West Indies and steamship lines and "race pride," but who said nothing and apparently knew nothing about the right to vote, the horrors of lynching and mob law, and the problem of racial equality.

Moreover, they were especially incensed at the new West-Indian conception of the color-line. Color-lines

had naturally often appeared in colored America, but the development had early taken a far different direction from that in the West Indies. Migration by whites had numerically overwhelmed both masters and mulattoes, and compelled most American masters to sell their own children into slavery. Freedom, therefore, rather than color, became the first line of social distinction in the American negro world despite the near-white aristocracies of cities like Charleston and New Orleans, and despite the fact that the proportion of mulattoes who were free and who gained some wealth and education was greater than that of blacks because of the favor of their white parents.

After emancipation, color caste tended to arise again, but the darker group was quickly welded into one despite color by caste legislation, which applied to a white man with one negro great-grandfather as well as to a full-blooded Bantu. There were still obvious advantages to the negro American of lighter hue in passing for white or posing as Spanish or Portuguese, but the pressing demand for ability and efficiency and honesty within this fighting, advancing group continually drove the color-line back before reason and necessity, and it came to be generally

regarded as the poorest possible taste for a negro even to refer to differences of color. Colored folk as white as the whitest came to describe themselves as negroes. Imagine, then, the surprise and disgust of these Americans when Garvey launched his Jamaican color scheme.

He did this, of course, ignorantly and with no idea of his mistake and no wit to read the signs. He meant well. He saw what seemed to him the same color-lines which he hated in Jamaica, and he sought here as there to oppose white supremacy and the white ideal by a crude and equally brutal black supremacy and black ideal. His mistake did not lie in the utter impossibility of this program, -greater upheavals in ideal have shaken the world before, -but rather in its spiritual bankruptcy and futility; for what shall this poor world gain if it exchange one race supremacy for another?

Garvey soon sensed that somewhere he was making a mistake, and he began to protest that he was not excluding mulattoes from his organization. Indeed, he has men of all colors and bloods in his organization, but his propaganda still remains "all-black," because this brings cash from the Jamaica peasants. Once he was actually haled to court and made to apologize for calling a disgruntled former colleague "white"! His tirades and twistings have landed him in strange contradictions. Thus with one voice he denounced Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass as bastards, and with the next named his boarding-house and first steamship after these same men!

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Aside from his color-lines, Garvey soon developed in America a definite and in many respects original and alluring program. He proposed to establish the "Black Star Line" of steamships, under negro ownership and with negro money, to trade between the United States, the West Indies, and Africa. He proposed to establish a factories corporation which was going to build factories and manufacture goods both for local consumption of negroes and for export. He was going eventually to take possession of Africa and establish independent negro governments there.

The statement of this program, with tremendous head-lines, wild eloquence, and great insistence and repetition, caught the attention of all America, white and black. When Mr. Garvey brought his cohorts to Madison Square Garden, clad in fancy costumes and with new songs and ceremonies, and when, ducking his dark head at the audience, he yelled, "We are going to Africa to tell England, France, and Belgium to get out of there," America sat up, listened, laughed, and said here at least is something new.

Negroes, especially West-Indians, flocked to his movement and poured money into it. About three years ago he had some 80,000 members in his organization, and perhaps 20,000 or 30,000 were paying regularly thirty-five cents a month into his chest. These numbers grew in his imagination until he was claiming 4,500,000 followers, and speaking for "Four hundred million negroes"! He did not, however, stop with dreams and promises. If he had been simply a calculating scoundrel, he would carefully have skirted the narrow line between promise and performance and avoided as long as possible the inevitable catastrophe. But he believed in his program and he had a childish ignorance of the stern facts of the world into whose face he was flying. Being an islander, and born in a little realm where half a day's journey takes one from ocean to ocean, the world always seemed small to him, and it was perhaps excusable for this black peasant of Jamaica to think of Africa as a similar, but slightly larger, island which could easily be taken possession of.

His first practical step toward this was to establish the Black Star Line, and here he literally left his critics and opponents breathless by suddenly announcing in 1919 that the *Frederick Douglass*, a steamship, had been bought by his line, was on exhibition at a wharf in New York, and was about to sail to the West Indies with freight and passengers. The announcement was electrical even for those who did not believe in Garvey. With a splendid, audacious faith, this poor black leader, with his storming tongue, compelled a word of admiration from all. But the seeds of failure were in his very first efforts. This first boat, the *Yarmouth* (never renamed the *Frederick Douglass* probably because of financial difficulties), was built in the year Garvey was born, and was an old sea-scarred hulk. He was cheated in buying it, and paid \$140,000 for it - at least twice as much as the boat was worth. She made three trips to the West Indies in three years, and then was docked for repairs, attached for debt, and finally, in December, 1921, sold at auction for \$1625!

The second boat that Garvey bought was a steam yacht originally built for a Standard Oil magnate. It, too, was old and of doubtful value, but Garvey paid \$60,000 for it, and sent it down to do a small carrying trade between the West Indies Islands. The boat broke down, and it cost \$70,000 or \$80,000 more to repair it than Garvey paid for it. Finally it was wrecked or seized in Cuba, and the crew was transported to the United States at government expense.

The third boat was a Hudson River ferry-boat that Garvey bought for \$35,000. With this he carried excursionists up and down the Hudson during

one summer and used it as a vivid advertisement to collect more money. The boat, however, ran only that summer, and then had to be abandoned as beyond repair.

Finally, Garvey tried to buy of the United States Shipping Board the steamship *Orion* for \$250,000. This boat was to be renamed the *Phyllis Wheatley*, and its sailings were advertised in Garvey's weekly paper for several months, and some passages were sold; but the boat never was delivered because sufficient payments were not made.

Thus the Black Star Line arose and disappeared, and with it went some \$800,000 of the savings of West-Indians and a few American negroes. With this enterprise the initial step and greatest test of Mr. Garvey's movement failed utterly. His factories corporation never really got started. In its place he has established a number of local grocery stores in Harlem and one or two shops, including a laundry and a printing-press, which may or may not survive.

His African program was made impossible by his own pig-headedness. He proposed to make a start in Liberia with industrial enterprises. From this center he would penetrate all Africa and gradually subdue it. Instead of keeping this plan hidden and working cautiously and intelligently toward it, he yelled and shouted and telegraphed it all over the world. Without consulting the Liberians, he apparently was ready to assume partial charge of their state. He appointed officials with high-sounding titles, and announced that the headquarters of his organization was to be removed to Liberia in January, 1922. Such announcements, together with his talk about conquest and "driving Europe out," aroused European governments to inquire about Garvey and his backing. Diplomatic representations were made to Liberia, asking it how far it intended to cooperate in this program. Liberia was naturally compelled to repudiate Garveyism, root and branch. The officials told Garvey that he or any one else was welcome to migrate to Liberia and develop industry within legal lines, but that they could recognize only one authority in Liberia and that was the authority of the Liberian Government,

and that Liberia could not be the seat of any intrigue against her peaceful neighbors. They made it impossible for Garvey to establish any headquarters in Africa unless it was done by the consent of the very nations whom he was threatening to drive out of Africa!

This ended his African program and reduced him to the curious alternative of sending a delegate to the third assembly of the League of Nations to ask them to hand over as a gift to his organization a German colony in order that he might begin his work.

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Thus the bubble of Garveyism burst; but its significance, its meaning, remains. After all, one has to get within Garvey to know him, to understand him. He is not simply a liar and blatant fool. Something of both, to be sure, is there; but that is not all. He is the type of dark man whom the white world is making daily, molding, marring, tossing to the air. All his life whites have laughed and sneered at him and torn his soul. All his life he has hated the half-whites who, rejecting their darker blood, have gloried in their pale shame. He has stormed

and fought within, and then at last it all burst out. He had to guard himself before the powers and be careful of law and libel and hunger, but where he could be free, he snarled and cursed at the whites, insulted the mulattoes with unpardonable epithets, and bitterly reviled the blacks for their cowardice.

Suppose, now, for a moment that Garvey had been a man of first-rate ability, canny, shrewd, patient, dogged? He might have brought a world war of races a generation nearer, he might have deprived civilization of that precious generation of respite where we have yet time to sit and consider if difference of human color must necessarily mean blows and blood. As a matter of fact, Garvey did not know how to approach his self-appointed task; he had not the genius to wait and laboriously learn, yet he pompously seized the pose; he kept extremely busy, rushed hither and thither. He collected and squandered thousands, almost millions. He would, he must, succeed. He appeared in the uniforms of his dream triumphs, in 1921 with an academic cap and gown, weird in colors; in 1922 with cocked hat, gold lace, and sword -the commander-in-chief of the African Legion! He did not quite dare call himself King Marcus I, but he sunned himself awhile in the address of "your Majesty." He held court and made knights, lords, and dukes; and yet, as he feverishly worked, he knew he had failed; he knew he had missed the key to some dark arcanum. He grew suspicious, morose, complaining, furious at the "fools" and "scoundrels" who were "plotting" his ruin and the overthrow of his cause. With all the provincial backwoods love of courts and judges, he rushed into and reveled in litigation, figuring in at least fifty suits, suing for libel, breach of contract, slander, divorce, assault - everything and anything; while in turn his personal enemies sued him, rioted against him, and one shot him, so that to-day he dares not stir without a sturdy body-guard.

Beaten and overwhelmed with loss and disappointment, he will not yet surrender, and seeks by surrounding himself with new officials and by announcing new enterprises -a daily paper, a new line of steamships, and the like -to re-form his lines. So he sits to-day. He is a world figure in minute microcosm. On a larger field, with fairer opportunity, he might have been great, certainly notorious. He is to-day a little puppet, serio-comic, funny, yet swept with a great veil of tragedy; meaning in himself little more than a passing agitation, moving darkly and uncertainly from a little island of the sea to the panting, half-submerged millions of the first world state. And yet he means something to the world. He is type of a mighty coming thing. He voices a vague, formless, but growing, integrating, human mind which some day will arrest the world.

Just what it has cost the negro race in money to support Garvey it is hard to say, but certainly not less than a million dollars. And yet with all this there are certain peculiar satisfactions. Here has come a test to the American negro which he has not had before. A demagogue has appeared, not the worst kind of demagogue, but, on the contrary, a man who had much which was attractive and understandable in his personality and his program; nevertheless, a man whose program anybody

with common sense knew was impossible. With all the arts of the demagogue, Garvey appealed to crowds of people with persuasive eloquence, with the ringing of all possible charges of face loyalty and the bastardy of the mulatto and the persons ashamed of their race, and the implacable enmity of the whites. It was the sort of appeal that easily throws ignorant and inexperienced people into orgies of response and generosity. Yet with all this, coming at a critical time, when the negro was hurt at his war experience and his post-war treatment, when lynching was still a national institution and mob-law a ready resort; when the rank and file of ignorant West-Indian negroes were going wild over Garvey, the American negroes sat cool and calm, and were neither betrayed into wild and unjust attacks upon Garvey nor into uncritical acceptance.

His following has ebbed and flowed. Its main and moving nucleus has been a knot of black Jamaica peasants resident in America as laborers and servants, mostly unlettered, poor, and ignorant, who worship Garvey as their ideal incarnate. Garvey is bold. Garvey lashes the white folk. Garvey downs the mulattoes. Garvey forever! no matter what he does. Does he steal? Better let him steal than let white folk. Does he squander? It's our money; let him waste. Does he fail? Others have failed.

It is this blind and dangerous nucleus that explains Garvey's success in holding his power. Around these are a mass of West-Indians, resident in the islands and in the United States, who have honestly supported Garvey in the hope that this new leader would direct them out of the West-Indian *impasse* of low wages, little educational opportunity, no industrial openings, and caste. Especially they seized upon the Black Star Line, as isolated islanders would, as a plan of real practical hope. This group reached sixty or seventy thousand in number during Garvey's heyday, but with the failure of his enterprises it is rapidly falling away.

With these groups have always been a number of American negroes: the ignorant, drawn by eloquence and sound; the grafters who saw a chance of sharing spoils; and with these some honest, thinking folk who paused and inquired, "Who is Garvey, and what is his program?" This American following, though always small, grew here and there, and in centers like Norfolk, Chicago, and Pittsburgh reached for a time into the thousands. But, on the whole, American negroes stood the test well.

Garvey's proposal of such a new, autonomous, and hostile black world in league with the brown and yellow peoples brought from American negroes a simple Missouri "Show us." They asked: "What are you doing, and how? What are your concrete and practical proposals?" They did not follow the more impatient counsels of "Garvey must go." They did not slander or silence or ignore him. The two hundred negro weeklies treated him fairly, and audiences listened to his words and read his literature. And right here lay his undoing, for the more his flamboyant promises were carefully compared with his results, the sooner the utter futility of his program was revealed.

Here is a world that for a thousand years, from the First Crusade to the Great War, had been breaking down

the barriers between nations and races in order to build a world-wide economic unity and cultural solidarity. The process has involved slavery, peonage, rape, theft, and extermination, but it is slowly uniting humanity. It is now proposed to turn back and cut out of this world its black eighth or its colored two thirds. Not only is this virtually impossible, but its attempt to-day would certainly involve the white and colored worlds in a death-struggle whose issue none can surely foretell. The power of the yellow, black, and brown worlds to-day is the economic dependence of the white world on them, and the power of the white world is its economic technic and organization. The super-diplomacy of race politics to-morrow is to transmute this interdependence into cultural sympathy, spiritual tolerance, and human freedom. Not in segregation, but in closer, larger unity lies interracial peace.

Not with entire clearness and yet with a certain fundamental and tremendously significant clarity the American negro realizes this, and as yet no demagoguery or pipe dreams have been able to divorce him from the facts. The present generation of negroes has survived two grave temptations, the greater one, fathered by Booker T. Washington, which said, "Let politics alone, keep in your place, work hard, and do not complain," and which meant perpetual color caste for colored folk by their own coöperation and consent, and the consequent inevitable debauchery of the white world; and the lesser, fathered by Marcus Garvey, which said: "Give up! Surrender! The struggle is useless; back to Africa and fight the white world."

It is no ordinary tribute to American negro poise and common sense, and ability to choose and reject leadership, that neither of these programs has been able to hold them. One of the most singular proofs of this is that the latest support of Garveyism is from the notorious Ku Klux Klan. When Garvey saw his Black Star Line disappear, his West-Indian membership fall off, and his American listeners grow increasingly critical, he flew South to consult the Grand Cyclops of the Invisible Empire. Whether the initiative came from him or from the Klan is not known, but probably the Klan invited him. They were indeed birds of a feather, believing in titles, flummery, and mumbo-jumbo, and handling much gullible money.

Garvey's motives were clear. The triumph of the Klan would drive negroes to his program in despair, while the Klan's sympathy would enable him to enter the South, where he has not dared to work and exploit the ignorant black millions. The Klan's object was to encourage anything that would induce negroes to believe that their fight for freedom in America was vain. Garvey's secretary said that the Klan would probably finance the Black Star Line, and Garvey invited the Grand Cyclops to speak at his convention. But Garvey reckoned without his host. A storm of criticism rose among negroes and kept Garvey explaining, contradicting, and repudiating the unholy alliance, and finally drove it under cover, although Garvey openly advertised the Klan's program as showing the impossibility of the negro's remaining in America, and the Klan sent out circulars defending Garvey and declaring that the opposition to him was from the Catholic Church!

Again it is High Harlem, with its music and laughter, its conversations shouted aloft, its teeming, bantering, pushing crowds, its brown and black and cream-like faces, its crisp and curling hair. As the setting sun sends its last crimson light from the heights that hold the Hudson from the Harlem, it floods 138th Street and lights three blocks. One is a block of homes built by the Equitable Life Assurance Society, but now sold to negroes, some crowded, some carelessly kept, but most of them beautiful, even luxurious, perhaps as handsome a block as middle-class America, white or black, affords. Next the sun softens the newness of a brick block on Seventh Avenue, stretching low and beautiful from the Y. W. C. A., with a moving-picture house of the better class and a colored five-and-ten cent store built and owned by black

folk. Down beyond, on 138th Street, the sun burns the raising spire of Abyssinian Church, a vast and striking structure built by negroes who for a hundred years have supported one organization and are now moving to their newest and luxurious home of soft carpets, stained windows, and swelling organ. Finally, the dying rays hit a low, rambling basement of brick and rough stone. It was designed as the beginning of a church long ago, but abandoned. Marcus Garvey roofed it over, and out of this squat and dirty old "Liberty Hall" he screams his propaganda. As compared with the homes, the business, the church, Garvey's basement represents nothing in accomplishment and only waste in attempt.

Yet it has a right to be. It represents something spiritual, however poor and futile to-day. Deep in the black man's heart he knows that he needs more than homes and stores and churches. He needs manhood -liberty, brotherhood, equality. The call of the spirit urges him restlessly to and fro with all men of the despised and forgotten, seeking, seeking. Misled they often are, and again and again they play in microcosm the same tragic drama that other worlds and other groups have played. Here is Garvey yelling to life, from the black side, a race consciousness which leaps to meet Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard and other worshipers of the great white race. It is symptomatic and portentous. If with a greater and more gifted and efficient Garvey it sometime blazes to real flame, it means world war and eternal hate and blood. It means the setting of the world clock back a thousand years. And yet the world's Garveys are not solely to blame, but rather every worshiper of race superiority and human inequality. On the other hand, back of all this lurks the quieter, more successful, more insistent, and hopeful fact. Races are living together. They are buying and selling, marrying and rearing children, laughing and crying. They are fighting mobs and lynchers and those that enslave and despise, and they have not yet failed in that fight. Their faith in their ultimate and complete triumph are these homes, this business block, this church, duplicated a hundred thousand times in a nation of twelve million. Here, then, are the two future paths, outlined with a certain sullen dimness in the world's blood-crimson twilight, and yet to be descried easily by those with the seeing hearts. Which path will America choose?