

## THE EMPEROR OF AFRICA

### *The Psychology of Garveyism*

By WILLIAM PICKENS

**A WELL-KNOWN** American negro writer deals with the picturesque rise and dramatic fall of Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican negro who took Harlem by storm with his plans for a Pan African Kingdom-Republic where negroes of every hue should gather together under the auspices of a black God and black angels. The real menace of Garveyism he also makes clear.

ON June 18th, 1923, Marcus Garvey, "Provisional President of Africa," after five weeks of serious trial interspersed with little comedies, was found guilty by a federal court in New York City of using the mails to defraud investors in the "Black Star Line" of dilapidated and mythical ships. This man Garvey was a fast worker: when he arrived from Jamaica just six years ago his friends in New York had to supply him with clothes and food, but when Judge Mack pronounced sentence against him he was paying one hundred and fifty dollars a month for a New York apartment furnished in the bizarre south-sea fashion, was drawing ten thousand dollars a year as "President General of the Universal Negro Improvement Association," an additional eleven thousand dollars as "Provisional President of Africa," and boasted a longer string of magniloquent titles than the King of England.

When Marcus Garvey was sentenced to the penitentiary, we wonder if the judge realized how many different personages were to be locked up in that one cell: "The Provisional President of Africa," "The President General of the Universal Negro Improvement Association," "The President of the Black Star Line" of ships, "The Commander in Chief of the African Legion," head of the "Distinguished Service Order of Ethiopia," "The President of the Negro Factories Corporation" and of the "African Communities League," the head of the "Booker Washington University," and the managing editor of "The Negro World" (a weekly), "The Black Man" (a monthly of odd months), and "The Negro Times" (an occasional "daily").

In a brief six years he had not only made a place, and perhaps laid away a fortune, for himself, but he had also wasted at the very lowest figure one million dollars for Negro washerwomen and workingmen. When the business of his "Black Star Line," for example, wound up, it owed about three-quarters of a million and had on hand just thirty-one dollars and seventy-five cents!

He probably received, managed, and disbursed, or rather disposed of, a greater variety of unaccounted-for "funds" than any other man of his decade. At frequent intervals "The Negro World" announced the opening of some new "fund" drive, without accounting adequately for the closing of the preceding one. There were "The African Redemption Fund," but Africa is still unredeemed; "The Liberian Loan Fund," and Liberia is still in need of the loan; the perennial "Convention Fund"; funds for factories, stores, and laundries, all of brief duration; "Black Star" funds; "Marcus Garvey Defense" funds, whenever somebody sued him for back salary or other debts; "Negro World" funds, daily paper funds, monthly magazine funds; funds to send emissaries to Liberia, who were allowed to become stranded there, to be a burden on Liberian charity, and to get back however they could; funds for "delegates to the League of Nations," to sit in the galleries and look on, when possible; and each time he married a new wife, his devoted people were inspired to raise an "appreciation" fund which however did not keep him from raiding the "Black Star" funds to the tune of nine hundred dollars for one of his honeymoons to Canada. He claimed Napoleon Bonaparte as his "ideal hero," and he even had his Josephine.

He is himself a Jamaican Negro and his organization began among West Indians in Harlem. Among his American Negro followers the "dues-paying" portion are below the average of intelligence for blacks of the continent, while most of the intelligent United States Negroes who joined the movement were in it for the sake of salaries, titles, and honors.

In the western hemisphere Negroes may be divided into three divisions, according to their relationships to the whites among whom they live: the Latin-American group, where amalgamation is the rule; the British-American group, where subjection with benevolent paternalism is customary; and United States Negroes, where constitutional equality with "racial integrity," supported by varying degrees of segregation, is at present essayed. These differences account for the differing attitudes of these respective groups toward world problems and such schemes as Garvey's Black Republic of Africa.

A comparison of British-American Negroes with those of the United States shows that the phenomena of Garveyism are rather British. British West Indian Negroes are free from spectacular horrors, such as lynchings and mob massacres, yet a settled and fixed policy of caste makes their future outlook more hopeless than that of the Negroes in the Southern United States. The United States Negro, on the other hand, is constitutionally a part of the general citizenship, and although sentiment, maladministration, and unconstitutional procedure may deprive him temporarily of the full exercise of his rights, the *basis* of his claim is broader and better.

The Negro of the States is physically a part of his nation, while the West Indian Negro is a colonial, separated by an ocean from the power which rules over him. And like British colonials of many races he has an idea, tinged with hope, that some time he may become entirely independent. The West Indian blacks whom Garvey found in New York were therefore the first to be moved by the idea of entire racial separateness, even to the absurd extent of having a continent assigned to a color,—a condition which commercial interdependence and scientific intercommunication make impossible.

There are other differences in these group complexes that help to explain Garveyism: the American Negro is used to the theory, and more or less to the actuality, of

democracy and equality. If American Negroes had planned the "Republic of Africa," we should have heard nothing of "Knights and Ladies of Ethiopia," "Knights Commander of the Nile," and "Dukes of Uganda." Those are reactions of the British substratum. When Garvey was traveling through the States, advertising "Black Star" stock and "Back to Africa" schemes, he required the men and women of his retinue to address him as "Your Highness," and what was the amused astonishment of a colored American housewife in Ohio, who had rented rooms to Garvey and his followers, when one of Garvey's female attendants descended the stairway and announced: "His Highness would like ham and eggs, or pork chops and gravy, for his supper."

Other British earmarks can be seen in Garvey's "court receptions" and ceremonies, and in the self-awarded title, "Provisional President of Africa," following the example of De Valera, another British subject, who called himself "Provisional President of Ireland." And as soon as the President of Africa was ordered to jail he threatened the United States with a "hunger strike,"—which his healthy appetite has so far successfully opposed.

Another insular complex led Garvey astray when he appealed to the color-prejudice of "black" colored Americans. Being a black man himself, Garvey tried to draw the black Negroes of America away from those of lighter skin. But the color line of the whites against the whole Negro group in this country gives that many-colored group a consciousness of common interests. The British in the islands have three castes: white, colored, and black (or dark brown),—because that makes the matter easier for the whites. A united colored group in the West Indies would be an overwhelming majority, while in the States all the colored blood of every shade and degree added together constitutes only a one-tenth minority.

The American white, therefore, did not feel it necessary to make the triple distinction. Individual Negroes may have color sentiment, like any other "taste," and it

is a vanishing tradition in a few localities where it originated in the pre-Civil War status of free mulattoes, as in Charleston, S. C., and New Orleans, La. But the color question has never made a group division of the colored people of the United States. With the consciousness of a black West Indian, Garvey had a chip on his shoulder for the lighter skins of the continent, and even after he was put in jail, he voiced the opinion that the whites and light skins were his worst enemies, although these colors had not been distinguished in the trial against him, and in spite of a fact which he knew well: that the four men who during the previous twelve months had done most to expose his frauds and destroy his influence in America, were dark Negroes of the average American type, one of them very dark, none of them a mulatto, and all of them Southern in origin: Chandler Owen and A. P. Randolph, editors, Robert W. Bagnall, and the present writer, citizens of Harlem.

He seemed not to realize that he would have to rule over every race and color under the sun, if he was to be Emperor of Africa,—from yellow Hottentots in the south to white Frenchmen and brunette Spaniards in the north; from the western Liberians, descended from American Negroes to the eastern Abyssinians, claiming descent from ancient Jews; stalwart Zulus and pigmy Bushmen; black Bantus, brown Moors, copper Egyptians; white South Africans, white settlers everywhere, and even Asiatics on the south and east. Nor did he realize how varied his subjects would be in national traditions; he ignored all problems of religious conflict, such as the inroads of Mohammedanism in unexpected corners of Africa; he was not aware that the Liberians are as different from the people of Abyssinia, as Mexicans are different from Russians; that there is no more in common between South Africa and North Africa than between Texas and Turkey. He did not know that the worst enemy a foreign usurper would find in Africa would be the Africans themselves. He had not a grammar grade understanding of Africa.

His government was to be a cross between an empire and a republic; it was to have "dukes" and he was to be the "president." The democratic end of the hybrid may have been the contribution of his salaried American Negroes, and may be due to the "psychology of opposition," which the oppressed exhibit. If England, for example, had been Catholic, south Ireland might have been devotedly Protestant; if George the Third had been president of a republic, George Washington might have been made king. And inasmuch as man makes God in man's own image, he was to have a new religion with a black God and black angels. In short, wherever he had seen a white face and straight hair in his past experience, he would place a black face and kinky hair in his future empire.

We will not be so hard upon the British as to charge also to their training or example the colossal conceit of Marcus Garvey. His megalomania and love of exaggeration are individual freaks, rather than either national or racial traits. During the period of his empire building, perhaps to boost the imaginary grandeur of his sway, he always spoke of "the 400,000,000 Negroes of the world," when there are only about 150,000,000. Two years ago he claimed to have four million members; to-day he claims six million; while most analyses of his other figures and data indicate that he has never had more than twenty or thirty thousand dues-paying members. He loudly announced that his 1922 convention would have "one hundred and fifty thousand delegates," but when his convention had been in session for a month, the most hotly contested issues, like those for offices and salaries, registered a vote of less than two hundred yeas and nays.

Yet his naive-minded followers accept the myth of "the greatest Negro organization in the world," and look forward confidently to an early conquest of Africa against all the powers of Europe. Indeed Garvey announced, amid thunderous applause, at the opening of his 1922 convention: "If England wants peace, if France wants peace, if

Italy wants peace, I advise them to pack up bag and baggage and get out of Africa!" And to substantiate the threat he marched through the streets of Harlem with an "army" assembled from "all over the world" and numbering less than six thousand men, women, little children, "Black Cross Nurses," local sympathizers, and unorganized camp followers. The "President" headed the procession, uniformed and plumed like a German field marshal, and pursued by various kinds of nobles in bright-colored robes and tassels.

Garvey understands mass psychology, with perhaps little formal knowledge of the subject, and the post-war spirit of the world was his ally, as exemplified in "Zionism," the Irish struggle, "self-determination" of peoples, and the great Negro migrations from South to North in this country. Some of these migrants had greatly improved their condition by one move, and, as simple minds run, a longer and more daring move, to Africa or somewhere, would make their happiness complete. He declared for a "Black House" in Washington, to match the White House. He organized a ten million dollar ship corporation, without any money, and called it the "Black Star Line," to match the "White Star Line."

Each year he held a thirty-one days' convention to dispose of the affairs of the non-existent state of Africa. Before the opening of each big meeting in "Liberty Hall" on West 138th Street, he marched up and down the aisles and finally to the platform, surrounded by a bodyguard and followed by a chorus, carrying the red, black, and green tricolor of the African Republic and singing: "God bless our President!" Garvey made these people at least *feel* important. There were the "Black Cross Nurses," for the most part uneducated working women who did not know the first principles of first aid, and there were the soldiers, with uniforms and arms, feeling as heroic tramping through the aisles of "Liberty Hall" as if treading the highways of an empire.

The human mind may dwell so long on an illusion that it will conceive that illusion as a reality. From the Tombs Prison in New York, Garvey proclaims to his subjects that he is "the victim of an international frame-up." He compares himself with O'Connell, MacSwiney, Gandhi, and Jesus. He regarded the judge and the United States district attorney as international and interracial tools. Petulant and suspicious, he dismissed his attorney and took charge of his own case, greatly delaying the progress of the court by his ignorance of the law, and creating a sort of "comedy of errors" by presenting the attorney Marcus Garvey, for the defendant Marcus Garvey, examining the witness Marcus Garvey. In summing up his case to the jury he talked for three hours, in true "Liberty Hall" propaganda style, expecting to overcome the evidence by the sheer multitudinousness and vehemency of his words. If sincere, he did not realize that he was *not* being tried for being the "President of Africa," for attempting to build a ship line, for rating himself as the only saviour of "the 400,000,000 Negroes of the world," nor for meeting the arrogant claim of Caucasian superiority with the equally absurd claim of black superiority,—but that he was being tried for the ordinary private crime of using the United States mail to defraud investors in a mythical ship. For stealing from his own subjects and supporters he was condemned on *their* testimony.

Some of his followers, believing that he was being persecuted for his doctrines, intimidated witnesses, wrote threats to the prosecutor and the court, and when on the last day he was being led away to prison, some of these dropped to their knees on the crowded pavement and asked God to intervene, informing Him that Garvey was being punished for the same reason that Jesus was crucified, ignoring the fact that the Man of Nazareth was never connected with financial fraud and debacle.

Intelligent American Negroes had only laughed at Garveyism, but became almost solid against him when in 1922

he launched the African Republic into the treaty-making business by apparently concluding the first pact with the Ku Klux Klan,—the Klan getting all the advantage in the diplomatic exchanges. When the invisible “government of Africa” came to an understanding with the “invisible empire of America,” naturally the terms of agreement had to be a secret, but they are easily inferred from Garvey’s voluminous speeches immediately following his visit to Atlanta, where he had conferred with the “Imperial Wizard.” The Ku Klux Klan were to be given America, so far as Garvey was concerned, and in return for his preaching that “this is a white man’s country” he and his followers were to be allowed to take Africa,—so far as the “Imperial Wizard” was concerned.

Then it was that the greater number of intelligent American Negroes decided that Garveyism had passed from the stage of amusing parade into a phase of actual menace to interracial tranquility. Nobody had ever feared that he would lead all Negroes back to Africa,—England and France would see to that,—nor that he could lead as many as one out of every ten thousand American Negroes anywhere. But there was the real danger of robbing the ignorant blacks of the South, thus rousing interracial suspicion and antagonism. It was decided that “Garvey must go!” And the four colored Americans whom we have named, issued a circular bearing that title and arranged a series of meetings to expose Garveyism in Harlem. Some of his uniformed legionaries and fanatics came to break up the meeting with knives and clubs. Police protection was secured and the exposé went on, every meeting drawing a bigger and bigger crowd of determined colored Americans, and the menace and folly of the “back to Africa” program was made plainer than it had ever before been made.

And there is a moral to the tale: it must be considered that Garveyism could never happen simply because there was a Marcus Garvey. There was an opportunity for him and a response to him. This opportunity consists in the

general repression of the Negro and Negroid peoples of parts of North America and parts of Africa. Like all humans the Negro is striving for self-expression and self-realization. And if these normal instincts are abnormally repressed, it will make him a prey to sharks and a menace to society. The very nature of this "black world" organization attracted into it sharks who would rend it to pieces, but the instinct for self-realization will still persist and must be invited and guided into useful channels or it will break out again in some new direction of waste and folly.

Life must somehow be made more normal for the colored minorities who live among white populations or who are in the power of governments dominated by whites. Movements for the advancement of the interests of such colored people must involve the co-operation of white and black. A movement of White against Black, like the Klan, or a movement of Black in contradistinction to White, like Garveyism, must do more harm than good.

Human science and intercommunication have made it improbable that the earth will ever again be divided geographically among monochromatic populations. The idea that one race should be set, geographically or otherwise, over against another is a reversion in civilization. Twelve million colored people of the United States can only consider plans for progress *in America*, but no fantastic schemes for egress from America. Any movement pivoted on any outside world is doomed to failure among this people.