

THE NEGRO COMES NORTH

KINGSLEY MOSES

NOTE: The negro has come North, in hundreds of thousands. What is to be done with him? How may society assimilate him? Frankly, we do not know. The problem is too big, too complex, too new. Comment and suggestion will be most welcome. We urge the readers of THE FORUM to express their opinions upon this problem—perhaps the most important internal social problem of the day.

IF within the space of six months every man, woman, and child should leave the city of Boston and wander away to the ends of the earth, so startling an exodus would occasion the most excited comment. If Baltimore, or either of the great states of Oregon or Maine were similarly deserted, there would arise a world-wide sensation. Yet since late last summer no less tremendous a migration, numerically at least, has been going on in those states of the old South bounded by the Potomac, Ohio, and Mississippi. For the most conservative figures estimate that during this comparatively short time between six and seven hundred thousand negroes have left their native homes and trailed northward in a straggling, haphazard, but never ending stream.

Why have they gone? And where? What will they do?

There is a well-known story to the effect that a certain Southern negro, ancient, cold and penniless, knocked without success at half a hundred doors of a certain Northern city, begging for food and shelter. Finally chance brought him to the modest cottage of an old Virginian. The door was opened by the "Cunnel" himself. At sight of the negro, a negro actually daring to knock at his front door, the Southerner exploded. "Yuh, yuh, black, good for nothin' wuthless houn'," he roared, "get on 'roun to the back do' an' yuh'll find a place to eat an' sleep." To which the negro replied: "Thank Gawd, I'se home again." And there is more truth than fiction, more pathos than jest in the anecdote, applied, as it is, to the typical Southern negro.

Way back in 1620, the very year of the *Mayflower* and of the first permanent settlement of the country, a Dutch ship, loaded to the decks with a cargo of unfortunate blacks, who had been snatched up and spirited away from their

jungles along the Guinea Coast, touched at Jamestown, Virginia, and sold several of its prizes to the cavalier settlers of the early colony. From that time almost until the outbreak of the War of the Secession the trade continued. The emancipation proclamation and the cessation of hostilities found most of these unhappy people—unhappy at least from the standpoint of humanity—but a generation or two removed from savagery, or even cannibalism; and but three generations have passed since that time.

With these facts in memory it is little wonder that the negro, as a race, has had little time to find himself, to adjust himself to white standards, and to reach up to white ideals. What he has been able to accomplish is all the more remarkable. In the North, where race feeling is less strong, and where the negro has been until this time an almost negligible factor in society, the advance has been pronounced and really noteworthy. But in the whole of the South, and particularly in those most typically Southern states, South Carolina and Mississippi, where the negro outnumbers the white, there appears to have been comparatively little progress. Many negroes have become landholders, it is true; in Atlanta, Birmingham, and other of the larger cities, substantial blocks of buildings are held by negro owners; but, in the large, toward nine-tenths of the negro race south of the Mason-Dixon line the old attitude of the white man during slavery days still exists. The negro, generally, is absolutely dependent upon the white man for food, warmth, and shelter. He knows it, and accepts the fact.

WELL-TO-DO ON TWO DOLLARS

Living costs him practically nothing. His food is supplied by the "white folks" to whom he has attached himself, sometimes as tenant farmer, sometimes as servant, more often simply as nondescript hanger-on. Clothing, too, comes from his benefactors, and there is always some kind of a cabin, shack, or tumble-down barn where shelter may be found. At a recent session of a police court in a small Southern city, Spartanburg, S. C., three young negro girls

were before the bar charged with petty larceny—picking up coal from a railroad's right of way. When questioned as to their means of livelihood the girls answered successively: "I washes an' irons foh white folks." And when it materialized that each of the girls had an income of from a dollar and a half to two dollars a week the second charge of vagrancy, which had been preferred against them, was dismissed, the magistrate remarking that they seemed to be pretty well off, and the girls nodding vigorous concurrence with his judgment.

Such has been the situation for generations. The negro in the rural districts and small towns of the South, knowing nothing of any other way of life, has no ambitions; indeed, as the days of the Ku Klux, the Red Shirts, and other less well-ordered bands of vigilantes demonstrated during that shameful period of our national history so sardonically termed "Reconstruction," ambition was for the negro distinctly a dangerous thing. Naturally happy, care-free, and good-humored, the negro has seemed perfectly satisfied with his lot, and has grinned and laughed all day, and sung and wandered the country-side all night from decade to decade. And, remember, the Southern negro is never surly and seldom dangerous—never indeed unless driven mad by the vile liquor of the "blind tigers." Whether or not he is unjustly treated is a question—although not a question for discussion by those knowing nothing of living conditions in the South—but at any rate he seems, or has seemed until this past year, perfectly content.

And now suddenly, yet withal so quietly that little heed has been given, the negro begins to move; not individually or apparently thoughtlessly, but deliberately and by the hundreds of thousands.

Late summer and all the winter saw a steady procession of negroes, big and small, old and young, strong and feeble, man, woman, and child pouring north through the great Union Station at Washington. Here an old "uncle" tottered along under his tightly stuffed pack, fashioned clumsily out of an old bed quilt. Behind him was a vigorous young

couple, black as the native Hottentot, trailed by three stumbling youngsters; the woman with a well-wrapped pickaninny at her breast, the man sturdily lugging two heavy straw portmanteaus. Half a dozen mulatto girls, gaudy in the discarded finery of white mistresses, followed, grinning and giggling, pointing at the magnificence of the huge station and venting awed murmurs of: "Lawdy," "Ain't it gran'," "Mah soul," etc. Then more children, groups of robust men, and whole families laden with trunks, bundles, parcels, and baskets. Morning after morning, evening after evening the motley procession streamed by. And very few returned.

There were, at the time of the last census, approximately ten million negroes in the United States. Seven million or more of these lived in the South proper—south of the Potomac and east of the Mississippi. Of these six hundred thousand, or at least six per cent, have moved North. Good reasons there must have been for any such general migration.

And, as always, the real reason for the movement was economic. There is precious little fact in the wild tales of general terrorism and habitual bullying and maltreatment that have, from time to time, shrieked themselves forth from certain news columns. The negroes came, and still come, because they could scarcely make a living in the South while work was abundant in the North.

THE MISCHIEVOUS WEEVIL

Several years ago, over twenty in fact, a noxious little insect commonly known as the Mexican boll weevil, ferried himself across the Rio Grande in some devious manner, and laid his maggotty blight upon the cotton fields of southeastern Texas. The Southerner, ever unconcerned and careless of the future, made at first little effort to check the advance. Texas and Louisiana said: "Oh, well, the Federal Government will soon find a way to stop him." The rest of the cotton states echoed: "Of course it will, see what is happening to the potato bug, the cattle tick, and the plague

rats of New Orleans. Anyhow, the weevil can never swim the Mississippi." And yet that is exactly what he did do. Not only did the relentless and devastating little pest jump the big river, but he spread himself fast and far over Alabama and Georgia as well, got a firm foothold in Tennessee, and is even now hovering upon the borders of South Carolina with his tiny gray snout pointed directly toward the very northerly rim of the cotton belt of Virginia.

And with the coming of the weevil and the destruction of the cotton crop there suddenly disappeared the means of livelihood of the great mass of the negroes. Where once fifty hands had been needed for an hundred acre cotton plantation now five or six able-bodied men are amply able to take care of an even larger stock or grain farm. With his big cash cotton crop gone, the planter could no longer provide food for the families of his negro tenants; and the store-keepers, of course, unanimously refused credit. The tenant farmer could no longer secure provisions on tick from the merchant on expectations of the forthcoming crop; the planter could no longer obtain a credit from his bank on prospective cotton earnings; for there was no cotton, there was no crop, and there could be no earnings.

But it took a long time, both for the landlord and for his tenants to realize this. Many of the great planters have held their lands from generation to generation; some by Royal Grant of English kings, long, long before the backwoodsmen of Nathanael Greene swept Ferguson, Tarleton, and Lord Cornwallis from the crest of Kings' Mountain, and little Andy Jackson, a tough little tyke of twelve years, thumbed his nose in the face of the Britishers. The Civil War, indeed, wiped out the cash savings of the aristocracy of the South; but it could not make sterile the rich lands of the valleys and the rolling uplands. And the cotton sprouted in '65 just as it had sprouted in '61, and brought wealth with its harvesting. But now that the cotton was gone what was to be done? That was the question, the unanswerable question of the landlord. Naturally the negro suffered.

Then, as if by a chance stroke of Providence, came the sudden and frenzied demand for labor in the Northern industrial plants. Necessity knew no law; and, even though it was contrary to the statutes of many Southern states to solicit or export labor, there were plenty of hardy individuals who were willing to risk a heavy fine and probable jail sentence in order to supply their employers with the legions of unskilled labor absolutely necessary for the filling of war orders, the construction of railroads, and the laying down of highways. And these labor agents swarmed over the South as busily and quite as noiselessly as an army of predacious ants.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILWAY

The most enticing offers were extended to the eager and open-mouthed negroes. Promises of a dollar and a half a day, two dollars—even more—unheard of wealth indeed—were made; long green railway tickets bearing the magical names of New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Pittsburg were thrust into willing hands; for the negro loves the new and strange even more than he loves his home heath—for a time. Less honorable means even were employed, certain roughly printed dodgers having brought to the attention of writer the engaging fact that a small town in southern Pennsylvania offers to the negro the hospitality of five saloons, two free dance halls and street cars without Jim Crow restrictions. The particular dodger did not mention the fact, however, that within the past few years a negro had been burned to the stake in that very community.

Some of the labor agents fell victim to the laws against peonage in effect in several of the states, but they were merely the pawns of great industrial and economic necessity, and the work went on unabated. It was a rare day that did not see on the forward end of the platform of any Southern station—the end nearest the place where the negro passenger car would pull in—a small group of big-muscled, white-toothed darkies clad in cheap store clothes or in brand new overalls, and burdened with any bundle from a well stuffed

bandana handkerchief to a canvas trunk bound about with rotten rope. And few of these darkies, when cross-examined by the local police officers, were so poorly coached as to admit that they had not purchased their tickets with their own money, so evading the law against transporting labor.

The Underground Railway was again operating; though its passenger agents bore little resemblance to those great-hearted fanatics of the old Slavery days.

Later came the exodus of women and children, a gay and colorful enough sight to the casual observer, but a sight deeply significant when one considers that the lower class of the negro man does not burden himself with a family when merely wandering aimlessly about the country in search of the new and strange. These negro women and children were going away from the homes of their people to try to find their places in the great and unknown hives of the North. There is a hard time ahead for these simple folk; for, as so keen an observer as Julian Street has said: "The South loves the individual and hates the race; the North loves the race and hates the individual." How will these individuals, ignorant and gullible women, helpless little children, fare among strangers?

LYNCHING AND TERRORISM

The simple laws of supply and demand underlie the whole question, furnish practically every explanation for a movement of people twice as great as the whole immigration to the United States during the past calendar year. But there are, of course, some few sparks of truth in the tales of injustice and maltreatment which the negro has experienced. A thoroughly trustworthy and highly respected negro, the Reverend Richard Carroll of South Carolina, gives several instances of negro farmers who have been threatened with bodily injury unless they left the state. Mr. Carroll's testimony is certainly veracious, and being directed at white farmers who live in the vicinity of Abbeville, S. C., where there occurred last fall a particularly atrocious and inexcusable lynching, are a grave reflection upon certain

elements of the Southern people. But it is not the decent white man who is guilty of this sort of thing; only the lowest type of shiftless and good-for-nothing poor white descends to the detestable blackguardism of terrorizing innocent and helpless negroes. To such a specimen of the white race all progress by the black is a personal insult. The negro is making an honest living next door, and prospering; while the white man is pauperized, whiskey soaked and pellagra ridden. Venomous terrorism is to such a white man the natural recourse. But this sort of thing is rare even in Georgia, where the "cracker" is probably of the most primitive and illiterate type, and where almost a third of the lynchings of the whole of the United States during 1916 took place. The general and fast growing enlightenment of the South will surely soon wipe out whatever of lawless spirit may remain; and the evidence of the feeling toward fair dealing with the colored race is best illustrated by vigorous and rigorously condemnatory protest against lynchings by those very newspapers which a few years since covered up or condoned race massacres. There cannot again occur such a reign of terror as took place in Atlanta but a few years ago when scores of negroes—it can never be known just how many—were slaughtered in the streets.

Whether the negro is now better off in the North than in the South cannot be ascertained with any degree of exactness as yet. His advent in such numbers is too recent. But it is a serious problem that may confront the Northern municipalities when the exaggerated demand for labor subsides. What will the negroes do then? How will the cities take care of the thousands of colored people now engaged in labor that can be at the best but temporary?

THE NEGRO AND ORGANIZED LABOR

The authorities in control of the organized labor elements of the country frown upon the negro in the skilled industries. It is doubtful that the negro can affiliate with any, save one of two, of the branches of union labor. In Philadelphia, for example—a town that shows an astounding

increase in its colored population—a negro may be employed to prepare the roadway for the laying of a car line, but may not himself place the rails. The North, save in a very few isolated instances, does not countenance the employment of the negro as a waiter in hotels and clubs—a single house in Boston is, to the writer's knowledge, about the only first class hotel that still maintains negro service in its dining rooms. Domestic service, it is true, is open to negro women; but the employment agencies report a comparatively small demand. Public service in police or fire departments is practically closed to the race, only a handful of negro policemen being employed in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Boston; and these only in solidly negro districts. The army and navy have room for a few colored men, but prior to the outbreak of hostilities only practically perfect specimens of manhood were considered, and the literary tests bar out the great majority of the applicants. The roughest kind of manual labor in the streets and along the docks is open, and presumably will continue to be open to the colored man; and this may be his ultimate resort if foreign immigration is effectively choked off after the war.

In the large, therefore, the opportunity for continual employment at a living wage is the most serious question the negro must face if he is to remain in the North. And if he cannot get work what is he to do? How will the cities handle him? Not, it is to be hoped, as many of them handled the unemployment problem in the winter of 1913-14, by shunting the able bodied pauper from town to town.

Of the negro's ability to endure the Northern climate there has been some apprehension, but, on the whole, this does not seem to be a factor for serious consideration. The colored man is notoriously susceptible to pneumonia and tuberculosis; but the black death rate of almost any Northern city is far more moderate than in even the most up-to-date Southern town, due probably to the infinitely better sanitary arrangements and provisions. It is no exaggeration to estimate that three negroes die of typhoid in a Southern town for one that succumbs to pneumonia in a Northern city of

corresponding size, Charleston, S. C.—an extreme case it is true—had in 1910 a colored death rate of 37 in a thousand, while Coatesville, Pa., had a black death rate of but 8 in a thousand.

All evidence goes to show that the negro in proper environment will prove a worthy, peaceable and industrious citizen. The record of the race as a race has been an excellent one, and the North may well profit by the negro's presence; while the South too benefits, as the difficulty of the race problem is lessened by the withdrawal of the surplus colored population. But it is for the North to open to the negro enough fields of labor to provide him with the opportunity for a decent livelihood. That done there need be no serious misgivings concerning the colored migration.