

The Heart of the Race Problem

Quincy Ewing

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"And, instead of going to the Congress of the United States and saying there is no distinction made in Mississippi, because of color or previous condition of servitude, tell the truth, and say this: 'We tried for many years to live in Mississippi, and share sovereignty and dominion with the Negro, and we saw our institutions crumbling. . . . We rose in the majesty and highest type of Anglo-Saxon manhood, and took the reins of government out of the hands of the carpet-bagger and the Negro, and, so help us God, from now on we will never share any sovereignty or dominion with him again.'" — Governor JAMES K. VARDAMAN, Mississippi, 1904.

DURING the past decade, newspaper and magazine articles galore, and not a few books, have been written on what is called the "Race Problem," the problem caused by the presence in this country of some ten millions of black and variously-shaded colored people known as Negroes. But, strange as it may sound, the writer has no hesitation in saying that at this date there appears to be no clear conception anywhere, on the part of most people, as to just what the essential problem is which confronts the white inhabitants of the country because they have for fellow-citizens (nominally) ten million Negroes. Ask the average man, ask even the average editor or professor anywhere, what the race problem is, the heart of it; why, in this land with its millions of foreigners of all nationalities, the race problem of problems should be caused by ten million Negroes, not foreigners but native to the soil through several generations; and in all probability you will get some such answer as this: —

"The Negroes, as a rule, are very ignorant, are very lazy, are very brutal, are very criminal. But a little way removed from savagery, they are incapable of adopting the white man's moral code, of assimilating the white man's moral sentiments, of striving toward the white man's moral ideals. They are creatures of brutal, untamed instincts, and uncontrolled feral passions, which give frequent expression of themselves in crimes of horrible ferocity. They are, in brief, an uncivilized, semi-savage people, living in a civilization to which they are unequal, partaking to a limited degree of its benefits, performing in no degree its duties. Because they are spatially in a civilization to which they are morally and intellectually repugnant, they cannot but be as a foreign irritant to the body social. The problem is, How shall the body social adjust itself, daily, hourly, to this irritant; how feel at ease and safe in spite of it? How shall the white inhabitants of the land, with their centuries of inherited superiority, conserve their civilization and carry it forward to a yet higher plane, hampered by ten million black inhabitants of the same land with their centuries of inherited inferiority?"

To the foregoing answer, this might now and again be added, or advanced independently in reply to our question: "Personal aversion on the part of the white person for the Negro; personal aversion accounted for by nothing the individual Negro is, or is not, intellectually and morally; accounted for by the fact, simply, that he is a Negro, that he has a black or colored skin, that he is different, of another kind."

Now, certainly, there are very few average men or philosophers, to whom the answer given to our question would not seem to state, or at any rate fairly indicate, the race problem in its essence. But, however few they be, I do not hesitate to align myself with them as one who does not believe that the essential race problem as it exists in the South (whatever it be in the North) is stated, or even fairly indicated, in the foregoing answer. In Northern and Western communities, where he is outnumbered by many thousands of white people, the Negro may be accounted a problem, because he is lazy, or ignorant, or brutal, or criminal, or all these things together; or because he is black and different. But in Southern communities, where the Negro is not outnumbered by many thousands of white people, the race problem, essentially, and in its most acute form, is something distinct from his laziness or ignorance, or brutality, or criminality, or all-round intellectual and moral inferiority to the white man. That problem as the South knows and deals with it would exist, as certainly as it does to-day, if there were no shadow of excuse for the conviction that the Negro is more lazy, or more ignorant, or more criminal, or more brutal, or more anything else he ought not to be, or less anything else he ought to be, than other men. In other words, let it be supposed that the average Negro is as a matter of fact the equal, morally and intellectually, of the average

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white man of the same class, and the race problem declines to vanish, declines to budge. We shall see why, presently. The statements just made demand immediate justification. For they are doubtless surprising to a degree, and to some readers may prove startling.

I proceed to justify them as briefly as possible, asking the reader to bear in mind that very much more might be said along this line than I allow myself space to say.

Section 1

That the Negro is not a problem because he is lazy, because he declines to work, is evidenced by the patent fact that in virtually every Southern community he is sought as a laborer in fields, mills, mines, and that in very many Southern communities the vexing problem for employers is not too many, but too few Negroes. In certain agricultural sections, notably in the Louisiana sugar district, quite a number of Italians ("Dagoes") are employed. The reason is not dissatisfaction with Negro labor, but simply that there is not enough of it to meet the requirements of the large plantations. There is, perhaps, not one of these plantations on which any able-bodied Negro could not get employment for the asking; and as a rule, the Negroes are given, not the work which demands the lowest, but that which demands the highest, efficiency: they are the ploughmen, the teamsters, the foremen. If any one doubts that Negroes are wanted as laborers in Southern communities, very much wanted, let him go to any such community and attempt to inveigle a few dozen of the laziest away. He will be likely to take his life in his hands, after the usual warning is disregarded!

Section 2

The small politician's trump-card, played early and late, and in all seasons, that the Negro is a black shadow over the Southland because of his excessive criminality, serves well the politician's purpose, — it wins his game; but only because the game is played and won on a board where fictions, not facts, are dominant. Nothing is easier than to offer so-called proofs of the contention that the Negro's tendency to crime is something peculiar to his race; there are the jail and penitentiary and gallows statistics, for instance. But surely it should not be difficult for these so-called proofs to present themselves in their true light to any one who takes the trouble to consider two weighty and conspicuous facts: this, first, that the Negroes occupy everywhere in this country the lowest social and industrial plane, the plane which everywhere else supplies the jail, the penitentiary, the gallows, with the greatest number of their victims; and secondly this, that in the section of the country where these penal statistics are gathered, all the machinery of justice is in the hands of white men.

No Negro is a sheriff, or judge, or justice of the peace, or grand or petit jurymen, or member of a pardoning board. Charged with crime, again and again, the black man must go to jail; he is unable to give bond; he is defended, not by the ablest, but by the poorest lawyers, often by an unwilling appointee of the court; he lacks the benefit of that personal appeal to judge and jury, so often enjoyed by other defendants, which would make them want to believe him innocent until proven guilty; he faces, on the contrary, a judge and jury who hold him in some measure of contempt as a man, regardless of his guilt or innocence. He is without means, except occasionally, to fight his case through appeals to higher courts, and errors sleep in many a record that on review would upset the verdict. In the light of such considerations, it would seem impossible that criminal statistics should not bear hard upon the Negro race, even supposing it to be a fact that that race of all races in the world is the least criminal.

Let it be admitted without question that in most Southern communities the crimes and misdemeanors of the Negroes exceed those committed by an equal number of white people, and we have admitted nothing that at all explains or accounts for the race problem. For is it not equally true that in every other community the doers of society's rough work, the recipients of its meagrest rewards, are chargeable, relatively, with the greatest number of crimes and misdemeanors? Is it not true, as well in Massachusetts and Connecticut as in Louisiana and Mississippi, that the vast majority of those occupying prison cells are members of the social lowest class? that the vast majority condemned, after trial, to hard labor with their hands were accustomed to such labor before their judicial condemnation? Nothing is more preposterous than the idea that the race problem means more Negroes hanged, more Negroes imprisoned, more Negroes in mines and chain-gangs, than white people! If the Negro did not furnish the great bulk of the grist for the grinding of our penal machinery in the Southern states, he would constitute the racial miracle of this and all ages!

My own conviction is, and I speak with the experience of forty years' residence in Southern states, that the Negro is not more given to crimes and misdemeanors than the laboring population of any other section of the country. But be this as it may, it is abundantly certain that no race of people anywhere are more easily controlled

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than the Negroes by the guardians of law and order; and there are none anywhere so easily punished for disobedience to the statutes and mandates of their economic superiors. Courts and juries may be sometimes subject to just criticism for undue leniency toward white defendants; but that courts and juries are ever subject to just criticism for undue leniency in dealing with black defendants is the sheerest nonsense.

The frequent charge that the Negro's worst crimes partake of a brutality that is peculiarly racial, is not supported by facts. I need not enlarge upon this statement further than to say that the Negro's worst crimes, with all their shocking accompaniments, are, not seldom, but often, duplicated by white men. Let any one who doubts the statement observe for one week the criminal statistics of any cosmopolitan newspaper, and he will have his doubt removed.

Assuredly we do not hit upon the essence of the race problem in the Negro's propensity to crime!

Section 3

Do we hit upon it in his ignorance, in the fact that an immense number of the black people are illiterate, not knowing the first from the last letter of the alphabet? Hardly. For, almost to a man, the people who most parade and most rail at the race problem in private conversation, on the political platform, and in the pages of newspapers, books, and periodicals, are disposed rather to lament, than to assist, the passing of the Negro's ignorance. Ex-Governor Vardaman, of Mississippi, used the following language in a message to the legislature of that state, January, 1906: —

"The startling facts revealed by the census show that those [Negroes] who can read and write are more criminal than the illiterate, which is true of no other element of our population. . . . The state for many years, at great expense to the tax-payers, has maintained a system of Negro education which has produced disappointing results, and I am opposed to the perpetuation of this system. My own idea is, that the character of education for the Negro ought to be changed. If, after forty years of earnest effort, and the expenditure of fabulous sums to educate his head, we have only succeeded in making a criminal of him and impairing his usefulness and efficiency as a laborer, wisdom would suggest that we make another experiment and see if we cannot improve him by educating his hand and his heart. . . . Slavery is the only process by which he has ever been partially civilized. God Almighty created the Negro for a menial, he is essentially a servant."

This is the reply of an ex-governor of one of our blackest states to those who contend that the negro is a problem, a "burden carried by the white people of the South," because of his ignorance and consequent inefficiency; and that the lightening of the burden depends upon more money spent, more earnest efforts made, for the schooling of the black people. According to this ex-governor, and there are thousands who agree with him in and out of Mississippi, the race problem is heightened, rather than mitigated, by all attempts to increase the negro's intellectual efficiency. The more ignorant he is, the less burdensome he is to the white man, provided his heart be good, and his hands skillful enough to do the service of a menial. Nothing but slavery ever partially civilized him, nothing but slavery continued in some form can civilize him further!

Section 4

If we listen vainly for the heart-throb of the race problem in the Negro's laziness, and criminality, and brutality, and ignorance, and inefficiency, do we detect it with clearness and certainty in the personal aversion felt by the white people for the black people, aversion which the white people can no more help feeling than the black people can help exciting? Is this the real trouble, the real burden, the real tragedy and sorrow of our white population in those sections of the country where the Negroes are many, — that they are compelled to dwell face to face, day by day, with an inferior, degraded population, repulsive to their finer sensibilities, obnoxious to them in countless ways inexplicable? Facts are far from furnishing an affirmative answer. However pronounced may be the feeling of personal aversion toward the Negroes in Northern communities, where they are few, or known at long range, or casually, there is no such thing in Southern communities as personal aversion for the Negro pronounced enough to be responsible for anything resembling a problem. How could there be in the South, where from infancy we have all been as familiar with black faces as with white; where many of us fell asleep in the laps of black mammies, and had for playmates Ephrom, Izik, Zeke, black mammy's grandchildren; where most of us have had our meals prepared by black cooks, and been waited on by black house-servants and dining-room servants, and ridden in carriages and buggies with black hostlers? We are so used to the black people in the South, their mere personal presence is so far from being responsible for our race problem, that the South would not seem Southern without them, as it would not without its crape myrtles, and live-oaks, and magnolias, its cotton and its

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sugar-cane!

It is very easy to go astray in regard to the matter of personal aversion toward the members of alien races, to magnify greatly the reality and importance of it. What seems race-aversion is frequently something else, namely, revulsion aroused by the presence of the strange, the unusual, the uncanny, the not-understood. Such revulsion is aroused, not only by the members of alien races, alien and unfamiliar, but as certainly by strange animals of not more terrifying appearance than the well-loved cow and horse; and it would be aroused as really and as painfully, doubtless, by the sudden proximity of one of Milton's archangels. It was not necessarily race-aversion which made Emerson, and may have made many another Concord philosopher, uncomfortable in the presence of a Negro, any more than it is race-aversion which makes the Fifth Avenue boy run from the gentle farmyard cow; any more than it is race-aversion which would make me uncomfortable in the presence of Li Hung Chang. The Negro, simply, it may be, was a mystery to Emerson, as the farmyard cow is a mystery to the Fifth Avenue boy, as the Chinaman is a mystery to me.

The Negro is not a mystery to people whom he has nursed and waited on, whose language he has spoken, whose ways, good and bad, he has copied for generations; and his personal presence does not render them uncomfortable, not, at any rate, uncomfortable enough to beget the sense of a burden or a problem.

It may be very difficult for Northern readers, to whom the Negro is in reality a stranger, a foreigner, to appreciate fully the force of what has just been said; but appreciated by them it must be, or they can never hope to realize the innermost meaning of the race problem in the South.

So much for what the race problem is not. Let me without further delay state what it is. The foundation of it, true or false, is the white man's conviction that the Negro as a race, and as an individual, is his inferior: not human in the sense that he is human, not entitled to the exercise of human rights in the sense that he is entitled to the exercise of them. The problem itself, the essence of it, the heart of it, is the white man's determination to make good this conviction, coupled with constant anxiety lest, by some means, he should fail to make it good. The race problem, in other words, is not that the Negro is what he is in relation to the white man, the white man's inferior; but this, rather: How to keep him what he is in relation to the white man; how to prevent his ever achieving or becoming that which would justify the belief on his part, or on the part of other people, that he and the white man stand on common human ground.

That such is the heart of the problem should be made evident by this general consideration alone: namely, that everywhere in the South friction between the races is entirely absent so long as the Negro justifies the white man's opinion of him as an inferior; is grateful for privileges and lays no claim to rights. Let him seem content to be as the South insists he shall be, and not only is he not harshly treated, not abused, and never boycotted, but he is shown much kindness and generosity, and employment awaits him for the asking. Trouble brews when he begins to manifest those qualities, to reveal those tastes, to give vent to those ambitions, which are supposed to be characteristic exclusively of the higher human type, and which, unless restrained, would result in confounding the lower with the higher. The expression "Good Nigger" means everywhere in the South a real Negro, from the Southern standpoint, one who in no respect gets out of focus with that standpoint; the expression "Bad Nigger" means universally one who in some respect, not necessarily criminal, does get out of focus with it. So, stated differently, the race problem is the problem how to keep the Negro in focus with the traditional standpoint.

But we are very far from needing to rely upon any general consideration in support of the proposition advanced above. It is supported by evidences on every hand, waiting only the eye of recognition. Scarcely a day passes but something is said or done with this end in view, to emphasize, lest they forget, the conviction for both white man and Negro that the latter is and must remain an inferior. Let me instance a few such evidences.

Consider, first, the "Jim Crow" legislation in the manner of its enforcement. Such legislation is supposed to have for its object the separation of the races in trains, street-cars, etc., to save the white people from occasional contact with drunken, rowdy, ill-smelling Negroes, and to prevent personal encounters between the whites and blacks. How is this object attained in the street cars of Southern cities? Members of the different races occupy the same cars, separated only by absurdly inadequate little open-mesh wire screens, so tiny and light that a conductor can move them from one seat to another with the strength of his little finger. Needless to add, these screens would serve to obscure neither sound, sight, nor smell of drunken rowdies who sat behind them! In summer cars black and white passengers may be separated not even by a make-believe screen; they are simply required, respectively, to occupy certain seats in the front or the back end of the cars.

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In Birmingham, Alabama, the front seats are assigned to Negroes in all closed cars, and the back seats in all open ones. Why the front seats in the one case, and the back seats in the other, it is not easy to understand in the light of the letter and alleged spirit of the Jim Crow law! The underlying purpose of the law is clearly not the separation of the races in space; for public sentiment does not insist upon its fulfillment to that end. The underlying purpose of it would seem to be the separation of the races in status. The doctrine of inequality would be attacked if white and black passengers rode in public conveyances on equal terms; therefore the Negro who rides in a public conveyance must do so, not as of undoubted right, but as with the white man's permission, subject to the white man's regulation. "This place you may occupy, that other you may not, because I am I and you are you, lest to you or me it should be obscured that I am I and you are you." Such is the real spirit of the Jim Crow laws.

Why is it that in every Southern city no Negro is allowed to witness a dramatic performance, or a baseball game, from a first-class seat? In every large city, there are hundreds of Negroes who would gladly pay for first-class seats at the theatre and the baseball game, were they permitted to. It can hardly be that permission is withheld because theatres and baseball games are so well attended by half the population that first-class seats could not be furnished for the other half. As a matter of fact, theatre-auditoriums and baseball grand-stands are seldom crowded; the rule is, not all first-class seats occupied, but many vacant. Surely as simple as moving from seat to seat a make-shift screen in a street-car, would it be to set apart a certain number of seats in the dress-circle of every theatre, and in the grand-stand of every baseball park, for Negro patrons. The reason why this is not done is perfectly obvious: it would be intolerable to the average Southern man or woman to sit through the hours of a theatrical performance or a baseball game on terms of equal accommodation with Negroes, even with a screen between. Negroes would look out of place, out of status, in the dress circle or the grand-stand; their place, signifying their status, is the peanut-gallery, or the bleachers. There, neither they nor others will be tempted to forget that as things are they must continue.

How shall we account for the "intense feeling" (to quote the language of the mayor of New Orleans) occasioned in that city one day, last July, when it was flashed over the wires that the first prize in the National Spelling Contest had been won by a Negro girl, in competition with white children from New Orleans and other Southern cities? The indignation of at least one of the leading New Orleans papers verged upon hysterics; the editor's rhetoric visited upon some foulest crime could hardly have been more inflamed than in denunciation of the fact that, on the far-away shore of Lake Erie, New Orleans white children had competed at a spelling bee with a Negro girl. The superintendent of the New Orleans schools was roundly denounced in many quarters for permitting his wards to compete with a Negro; and there were broad hints in "Letters from the People" to the papers that his resignation was in order.

Certainly in the days following the National Spelling Contest the race problem was in evidence, if it ever was, in New Orleans and the South! Did it show itself, then, as the problem of Negro crime, or brutality, or laziness? Assuredly not! Of the Negro's personal repulsiveness? By no means! There was no evidence of Negro criminality, or brutality, or laziness in the Negro child's victory; and every day in the South, in their games and otherwise, hundreds of white children of the best families are in closer personal contact with little Negroes than were the white children who took part in the Cleveland spelling bee. The "intense feeling" can be explained on one ground only: the Negro girl's victory was an affront to the tradition of the Negro's inferiority; it suggested — perhaps indicated — that, given equal opportunities, all Negroes are not necessarily the intellectual inferiors of all white people. What other explanation is rationally conceivable? If the race problem means in the South to its white inhabitants the burden and tragedy of having to dwell face to face with an intellectually and morally backward people, why should not the Negro girl's triumph have occasioned intense feeling of pleasure, rather than displeasure, by its suggestion that her race is not intellectually hopeless?

Consider further that while no Negro, no matter what his occupation, or personal refinement, or intellectual culture, or moral character, is allowed to travel in a Pullman car between state lines, or to enter as a guest a hotel patronized by white people, the blackest of Negro nurses and valets are given food and shelter in all first-class hotels, and occasion neither disgust, nor surprise in the Pullman cars. Here again the heart of the race problem is laid bare. The black nurse with a white baby in her arms, the black valet looking after the comfort of a white invalid, have the label of their inferiority conspicuously upon them; they understand themselves, and everybody understands them, to be servants, enjoying certain privileges for the sake of the person served. Almost anything,

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the Negro may do in the South, and anywhere he may go, provided the manner of his doing and his doing is that of an inferior. Such is the premium put upon his inferiority; such his inducement to maintain it.

The point here insisted on may be made clearer, if already it is not clear enough, by this consideration, that the man who would lose social caste for dining with an Irish street-sweeper might be congratulated for dining with an Irish educator; but President Roosevelt would scarcely have given greater offense by entertaining a Negro laborer at the White House than he gave by inviting to lunch there the Principal of Tuskegee Institute. The race problem being what it is, the status of any Negro is logically the status of every other. There are recognizable degrees of inferiority among Negroes themselves; some are vastly superior to others. But there is only one degree of inferiority separating the Negro from the white person, attached to all Negroes alike. The logic of the situation requires that to be any sort of black man is to be inferior to any sort of white man; and from this logic there is no departure in the South.

Inconsistent, perhaps, with what has been said may seem the defeat in the Louisiana Legislature (1908) of the anti-miscegenation bill, a measure designed to prohibit sexual cohabitation between white persons and Negroes; to be specific, between white men and Negro women. But there was no inconsistency whatever in the defeat of that bill. In all times and places, the status of that portion of the female population, Lecky's martyred "priestesses of humanity," whose existence men have demanded for the gratification of unlawful passion, has been that of social outcasts. They have no rights that they can insist upon; they are simply privileged to exist by society's permission, and may be any moment legislated out of their vocation. Hence the defeat of an anti-miscegenation measure by Southern legislators cannot be construed as a failure on their part to live up to their conviction of race-superiority. It must be construed, rather, as legislative unwillingness to restrict the white man's liberty; to dictate by statute the kind of social outcast which he may use as a mere means to the gratification of his passion. To concede to Negro women the status of a degraded and proscribed class, is not in any sense to overlook or obscure their racial inferiority, but on the contrary, it may be, to emphasize it. Precisely the same principle, in a word, compasses the defeat of an anti-miscegenation bill which would compass the defeat of a measure to prohibit Negro servants from occupying seats in Pullman cars.

At the risk of reiteration, I must in concluding this article take sharp issue with the view of a recent very able writer, who asks the question, "What, essentially, is the Race Problem?" and answers it thus: "The race problem is the problem of living with human beings who are not like us, whether they are in our estimation our 'superiors' or inferiors, whether they have kinky hair or pigtailed, whether they are slant-eyed, hook-nosed, or thick-lipped. In its essence, it is the same problem, magnified, which besets every neighborhood, even every family."

I have contended so far, and I here repeat, that the race problem is essentially not what this writer declares it to be. It is emphatically not, in the South, "the problem of living with human beings who are not like us, whether they are in our estimation our superiors or inferiors." It may be, it probably is, that in the North, where the Negro is largely a stranger, a foreigner, very much to the same degree that the Chinese are strangers and foreigners in the South; and where, consequently, the Negro's personal repulsiveness is a much more significant force than it is in the South. Assuredly there would be no race problem, anywhere, were there no contact with others unlike ourselves! The unlikeness of the unlike is everywhere its indispensable foundation. But we get nowhere unless we carefully distinguish between the foundation of the problem and the problem itself. There is nothing in the unlikeness of the unlike that is necessarily problematical; it may be simply accepted and dealt with as a fact, like any other fact. The problem arises only when the people of one race are minded to adopt and act upon some policy more or less oppressive or repressive in dealing with the people of another race. In the absence of some such policy, there has never been a race problem since the world began. It is the existence of such a policy become traditional, and supported by immovable conviction, which constitutes the race problem of the Southern states.

There was an immensely tragic race problem distressing the South fifty years ago; but who will suggest that it was the problem of "living with human beings who are not like us?" The problem then was, clearly, how to make good a certain conviction concerning the unlike, how to maintain a certain policy in dealing with them. What else is it today? The problem, How to maintain the institution of chattel slavery, ceased to be at Appomattox; the problem, How to maintain the social, industrial, and civic inferiority of the descendants of chattel slaves, succeeded it, and is the race problem of the South at the present time. There is no other.

Whether the policy adopted by the white South, and supported, as I have said, by immovable conviction, is

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expedient or inexpedient, wise or unwise, righteous or unrighteous, these are questions which I have not sought to answer one way or another in this article. Perhaps they cannot be answered at all in our time. Certain is it, that their only real and satisfactory answer will be many years ahead of the present generation.

In the mean time, nothing could be more unwarranted, than to suppose that the race problem of one section of this country is peculiar to that section, because its white inhabitants are themselves in some sense peculiar; because they are peculiarly prejudiced, because they are peculiarly behind the hour which the high clock of civilization has struck. Remove the white inhabitants of the South, give their place to the white people of any other section of the United States, and, beyond a peradventure, the Southern race problem, as I have defined it, would continue to be — revealed, perhaps, in ways more perplexing, more intense and tragic.