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A Colored Woman in a White World

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Chapter 19: Notable Lecture Engagements

-- 173 --

.... "While we are on the street car going to the building, I'll try to think what I had better say on the Race Problem to a group of young white people who know very little about it, I assume." As I rode along to this engagement which I dreaded more than any I had ever filled before, it occurred to me that the best thing for me to do would be to relate briefly to the pupils the progress which colored people have made -- particularly the women -- and then appeal to their sense of justice.

As I concluded my talk to about four hundred of these Normal School pupils, I told them I was not asking them to embrace a colored person every time they saw one. "You may have an insuperable aversion to people whose skins are dark. If that is true," I declared, "I do not blame you at all. I pity you. It is your misfortune, not your fault, to dislike human beings whom our Creator has made, simply because their complexion is darker than yours. But even though you may dislike

-- 174 --

to be near a swarthy individual, you can be just to him and treat him like a human being and give him a chance." I told them that there are thousands of colored boys and girls who have good minds and whose aspirations are high, but who have to knock their heads against a stone wall of race prejudice every time they try to enter certain trades and occupations and professions from which they are barred solely on account of their race and color, although they are fitted by native ability and training to engage in them as well as the youth of other races. I implored them to decide then and there that when they grew to be men and women they would throw the weight of their influence on the side of justice, opportunity of all kinds and fair play in behalf of their brothers and sisters of a darker hue.

Letters which came to me later from some of the pupils of that Normal School proved conclusively that the lesson I tried to teach had been well learned. Some of them wrote me that they had never thought about the difficulties which confront colored boys and girls in their effort to earn a living. But since they realized what a hard row they had to hoe, they pledged themselves to do everything in their power to remove these disabilities and improve conditions for their handicapped brothers and sisters when they grew to manhood and womanhood. Having discovered that it was possible to interest white youth in the Race Problem, thereafter I accepted every invitation to address pupils in the public schools, or students in colleges and universities, which was received.

Oberlin College, my alma mater, invited me to deliver the Thursday lecture. It happened, however, that I did not speak Thursday, the day of the week on which lectures to students were generally delivered, but on Wednesday. This caused Professor Charles Martin, one of the professors who had known me well in my

youth, to remark facetiously that "Mollie Church was the only person in the world who could deliver a Thursday lecture on Wednesday."

The impression which my talk made on some surprised me greatly. The dean of women, Mrs. A. A. F. Johnston, who had been very fond of me while I was a student and who had written the letter inviting me to become registrar, expressed deep regret that her former pupil had grown so "bitter." I had presented practically the same facts in about the same way to audiences

-- 175 --

in many southern cities in which there was usually a fair sprinkling of white people, and never once did a white southerner suggest that he took exception to anything I said and not one of them gave me any reason to believe he thought I was bitter. On the contrary, some of the finest commendations I have received as a public speaker have come unsolicited from white southerners, and I have made it a rule to which there has never been an exception to use the same arguments in the South and in the same way that I do in the North.

Mr. J. W. Spencer, who was president of the Farmers and Mechanics Bank of Fort Worth, Texas, urged me to talk to the white people of the South and declared he thought it was my duty to do so. He had heard me speak to my own group and felt that the points I made would give white people something to think about. When I stated that I feared the white people of the South would not give me an opportunity of talking to them about the Race Problem, he cheerfully promised to do everything he could to make it possible. Entirely unsolicited he sent me a letter of commendation which ended by saying that my lecture was "wholly devoid of bitterness."

After the same speech delivered at Fort Worth was pronounced "bitter" by a northern woman, my eyes were opened to a fact which I had never known before. Colored people so seldom tell certain truths about conditions which confront their race that, when they do, even white people who are interested in them feel that they must be "bitter." In this case truth is confounded with bitterness.

Nothing delighted my heart more than to receive invitations to deliver addresses in the South. The response from my own group in that section was always cordial and the satisfaction of trying to inspire young and old was great. Without exception the white people who came to hear me acknowledged that I presented nothing but facts, although some of them were frank enough to admit they did not derive any great amount of pleasure from hearing them. They agreed, however, that the disagreeable facts should be told in an effort to remedy some of the evils which are a blight upon this country and a disgrace.

Many amusing incidents occurred during my tours in the South, but none surpassed this one which happened in a small town in Texas. The address was delivered in the Court House

-- 176 --

and the white janitor elected to come to hear me. Custom and tradition in that section demand that there shall be a definite and distinct separation of the races at a public meeting. This problem was easily solved by the janitor. He sat on the platform in the seat of honor, while the distinguished colored people of the town who had invited me to speak sat humbly at his feet in the audience.

During that same lecture tour I had a memorable experience indeed, while I was riding on a Jim Crow car. I am sure the conductor thought I was a prisoner being taken to a Convict Lease Camp or to some other place to be incarcerated. A sheriff had brought a group of prisoners into this car and gave a bunch of tickets to the conductor. I sat in a seat in front of the prisoners. The conductor looked at me, evidently took it for granted that I belonged to the crowd in charge of the sheriff and passed by without asking me for my railroad ticket. For a long time I preserved that ticket as a rare souvenir of an experience which is guaranteed to give a thrill that comes only once in a life time.

My engagement at Wellesley was delightful, and one of the teachers wrote me it was productive of much good. I was assigned a room in the dormitory which was occupied by a senior from Mississippi. She had requested that she be allowed to show me this hospitality. She greeted me most cordially when I arrived,

showed me where I could find the articles which she thought I might need, and expressed genuine pleasure that she had the "honor" of entertaining me in her room.

The occasion on which I accepted an invitation extended me by the Principal of the Randolph-Macon Institute for girls in Danville, Virginia, stands out distinctly in my mind. I spoke to the pupils at a morning session, feeling that it was a rare opportunity to present to the girls from the best families of the South the subject in which I wished to interest them in their youth. They listened with close attention, and, while I was speaking, behaved exactly as they would have done if a woman of their own group were addressing them. Then something happened which had not been prepared for the program. When the school sang at the close of the exercises, the principal stepped to my side, offered me his hymn book and we sang out of it together. Some of the small girls who sat in the front seat tried

-- 177 --

hard to conceal their surprise, but in spite of their fine self-control, I could easily see they were shocked.

I believe that if certain facts were presented to the young white men and women in the various universities and colleges of the country, the status of colored people in the next thirty or forty years would be greatly improved. Both Mr. Moorfield Storey and Mr. John Milholland agreed with me on this point and opened up opportunities for me to render this service whenever they could. Because I believed that if young white people were enlightened concerning the struggles which colored people are making to forge ahead -- particularly the women -- they would be more interested in them and more willing to work for their welfare, I sent a year's subscription of the *Crisis*, the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, to Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Smith, Vassar and Wellesley Colleges....

