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Crusade for Justice: 1972

The Autobiography of
IDA B. WELLS

Edited by Alfreda M. Duster

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Remembering English Friends

I HAD BEEN SENT TO ONE OF THE TEMPERANCE HOTELS TO STOP when I first reached London in May. But at almost the first meeting arranged for me, a lady came up afterward and introduced herself. She inquired where I was stopping and on learning that I was practically alone at the hotel, she immediately invited me to become her guest, and for the rest of my stay in London I was the honored guest of Mr. and Mrs. P. W. Clayden. I did not know when I accepted the invitation that he was editor of the *London Daily News*, the second largest morning paper in London. Mrs. Clayden had no children and perhaps because of that had more time and disposition to mother me.

Nothing could have been more delightful than the way in which she and her friends and the maids in her home took pleasure in ministering to my wants. After every meeting the committee purchased not less than one hundred copies of whichever

paper had the best report. The next morning's work was to gather around the table in the breakfast room and mark and address these newspapers. They were sent to the president of the United States, the governors of most of the states in the Union, the leading ministers in the large cities, and the leading newspapers of the country. In that way the United States was kept fairly well informed as to the progress of the "Negro Adventuress and her movements."

Among those who came every morning to help in this work was a young African. His name was Ogontula Sapara. I had received a letter from him shortly after going to London in which he asked to be permitted to call and also bring some other Africans who were studying in London. As a result, seven African students called on me at the hotel. Two of them were women. Such excitement you never saw, and several of the residents of the hotel said they had never seen that many black people in their lives before. Most of them had finished their courses and were ready to leave for their homes. Dr. Sapara had another year's work to do in the hospital.

He therefore put himself at our disposal to help in the clerical work of mailing out the newspapers. He told me several amusing stories of how patients, who had never seen a black man, were too frightened to let him minister to them. He didn't mind, because he knew that it was an innocent fear, that there was nothing of the hatred and prejudice in it which were shown in my country by white people. Indeed, Mrs. Clayden often remarked that she thought that my success would have been much greater if I had been a few shades blacker. For it was a remarkable fact that after English people got to know black people they seemed to prefer their company.

Mr. Clayden was a man of few words, but he evidently approved of all he and his wife did in my behalf. I owe to him a distinction in words about which I had not given thought. At the dinner table one night a remark was made about someone being sick. Mr. Clayden said, "You mean ill?" and I asked,

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“What is the difference?” “You mean sick when you are nauseated, and the word ought never to be used except in that connection.” I silently thanked him and have tried to remember the difference all these years. One other remembrance I have of Mr. Clayden is that he steadily refused to take sides with any political party. He held that an editor should hold himself absolutely free from bias so that he could conscientiously render his opinion.

After my return to this country, a little book was gotten out by a friend. The title was *Afro-American Women and Their Progress*. It was written by Mrs. N. F. Mossell of Philadelphia. In it she was generous enough to give large space to the work I had been able to do in England. All of her information had been gotten from the newspapers, and, of course, did not give full credit to the friends who had been most helpful, simply because she did not know these facts, and I was not at hand to give them to her. She mailed a copy of the book to the Claydens, and I received from him a most vigorous protest because there had been no mention of their many kindnesses to me. I had to bear the reproach in silence because it would do no good to explain to him that I had nothing whatever to do with the writing of the article, or the publication of the book.

Both of those dear friends have passed into the great beyond, before I had either time or inclination to write these reminiscences. I could very much wish that it will be possible some way that those long years of silence could be crossed, and that both of these dear friends could know that in all the years that have intervened I have never failed to appreciate every moment of the many happy weeks spent in their home and with the protection of their moral support.

On the last night of my stay in their home, they gathered together a most brilliant company in honor of my presence and my leaving. At the conclusion of an evening of social pleasure, they formed an Anti-Lynching Committee. Some of the names of that committee formed some of the most brilliant in the British Kingdom. I think I could do no better than to give that

list right here. This list was headed by the Duke of Argyle, K.G., K.T.; Rev. C. F. Aked, Liverpool; Mr. W. G. Allan, M.P., Gateshead-on-Tyne; Mr. William E. A. Axom, Manchester, editor, *Manchester Guardian*; Rev. Richard Armstrong, Liverpool; Mrs. Thomas Burt, M.P., Morpeth; Hon. Jacob Bright, M.P., Manchester; Mrs. Jacob Bright; Mr. William Byles, M.P., Bradford, editor, *Bradford Observer*; Mrs. Byles; Mr. W. Blake, Odgers; Mr. E. K. Blyth; Mr. Percy Bunting, editor, *Contemporary Review*; Mr. Robert Burrows; Mr. P. W. Clayden, editor, *London Daily News*; Mrs. P. W. Clayden; Rev. John Clifford, D.D., London; Sir Charles Cameron, M.P., Glasgow; Mr. Francis A. Channing, M.P., Southampton; Rev. Ellin Carpenter, Oxford; Mr. Moncure D. Conway and Mrs. Moncure D. Conway of the United States of America and London; Mr. William Crosfield, M.P., Onaghan; Mr. T. E. Ellis, M.P., Nottingham; Mr. A. E. Fletcher, editor, *Daily Chronicle*, London; Miss Isabella Ford, Leeds; Sir T. Elden Gorst, M.P., Cambridge University; Mr. Frederick Harrison; Mr. Justin McCarthy, M.P., Longford; Mr. D. Naoriji, M.P., India and London; Rev. Newman Hall, D.D.; Rev. Robert Horton, D.D.; Mr. T. A. Long, London; Miss Kate Ryley, Southport; Lady Stevenson, London; Dr. and Mrs. Spence Watson, Gateshead-on-Tyne; Mr. J. Murray McDonald, M.P.; Mr. Tom Mann, London; Rev. W. F. Moulton, D.D., Cambridge; Sir Joseph Pease, M.P., Durham; Sir Hugh Gilzwn Reid, Birmingham; Mrs. Henry Richardson York; Sir Edward Russell, editor, *Daily Post*, Liverpool; Mr. O. Sapara, Africa and London; Mr. C. P. Scott, Manchester; Prof. James Stuart, M.P., London; Mrs. James Stewart; Mr. Charles Schwann, M.P., Manchester; Miss Charman Crawford, Ulster; Rev. Canon Shuttleworth, London; Rev. Alfred Steinthal, Manchester; Mrs. Stanton Blatch, the United States of America and Basingstoke; Alderman Ben Tillett, London; Mr. Alfred Webb, M.P., Waterford W.; Mr. S. D. Wade, London; Mr. Mark Whitwill, Bristol; Miss Wigham, Edinburgh; Mr. William Woodall, M.P., Hanley; Mr. J. Passmore Edwards, treasurer; Miss Florence Balgarnie, secretary.

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Later on the *Philadelphia Press* published this list and added the names of a number of influential Americans. Among other Englishmen were Sir John Gorst, member of Parliament from the University of Cambridge and student of social phenomena; Sir John Lubbock; Willis Ashley Bartlett; Right Reverend Edward White Benson, Archbishop of York and Primate of all England; Mrs. Humphrey Ward, president of the Women's Auxiliary Branch of the League; Lady Henry Somerset, the countess of Aberdeen; the Countess of Meath, founder of the Ministering Children's League; and J. Keir Hardie.

There were some American names added, among them, Richard Watson Gilder of the *Century Magazine*; Samuel Gompers, labor leader; Miss Frances Willard; Archbishop Ireland; Dr. John Hall; W. Bourke Cochran; Carl Schurz; Mgr. Ducey; Bishop David Lessums of the Protestant Episcopal diocese of Louisiana; Archbishop Francis Jansens of the Roman Catholic diocese of Louisiana; Bishop Hugh Miller Thompson of Mississippi; Bishop A. Van de Vyer of Virginia. These names were added by the committee, left in London, who went to work to aid in the propaganda against lynching. However, it added that Mr. J. Passmore Edwards had about five thousand pounds on hand to aid in carrying on the work.

In all this propaganda there was no financial contribution from my own people in the States. But among the first donations that the committee received was fourteen pounds, or nearly seventy dollars sent by a dozen Africans who were residing at that time in London.

The English people felt that having done all that they could in the way of propaganda, I should return home and follow up the advantage which their moral support had given the work. They insisted that there must be many of the descendants of the old Abolitionists who would be now willing to help carry on the war against lynching.

Thus I set sail in July in the company of Mr. and Mrs. Moncure D. Conway, who were returning to America for a visit. They advised that I take passage with them on one of the ships

which made the longest trip, since I needed the rest so much. Accordingly, we came by way of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence and then I took the train to New York.¹ When I arrived there, the people of New York held a rousing meeting for me at Fleet Street A.M.E. Church, New York City. At that meeting representatives of every newspaper in New York were present, and they sent reports of my first address throughout the country. It was stated at that meeting that "the Afro-American has the ear of the civilized world for the first time since Emancipation."

At that meeting I announced that we, the colored people, in appreciation of what the English people had done for us, should form the same sort of organization and carry on the propaganda throughout our own country, thus following up the entering wedge which had been driven by our English friends. I rededicated myself to the cause and announced that I would give the year to carrying the message across the country if I could get the financial support of my own people.

Not only this, but Mr. Fortune, W. T. Dixon, W. L. Hunter, Rev. A. G. Henry, Rev. W. H. Dickerson, Mr. S. R. Cottron, Rev. Lawton, Drs. W. A. Martin, Coffee, and Harper and Mr. Rufus L. Perry, a lawyer, formed the Central Executive Council, which undertook the work of organizing our people for this purpose. They issued a call through the newspapers and in the mass meeting called upon our people everywhere to contribute

¹ Miss Wells arrived in New York approximately 24 July 1894. An editorial in the *New York Times* of 27 July says, "Immediately following the day of Miss Wells' return to the United States a Negro man assaulted a white woman in New York City 'for the purpose of lust and plunder.'" The editorial sarcastically commented on the crusader's stumping the British Isles to set forth the brutality of white men and the unchastity and untruthfulness of white women. "The circumstances of his fiendish crime," it concluded, "may serve to convince the mulatress missionary that the promulgation in New York just now of her theory of Negro outrages is, to say the least, inopportune."

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to a fund which would bear the expenses of the campaign. I told these friends that for the nearly two years I had been in England every cent of the expense connected with the campaign had been met by the English friends; that although they had paid me no salary they had provided for every need. I thought that it was up to us to show that we could do as much for ourselves as they had done for us; that if they would be responsible for raising the necessary funds for the expenses of traveling, and personal needs, I would gladly donate another year to the cause.

I waited in New York nearly a month for the response from the appeal of this committee, but somehow it seemed that the necessary funds were not forthcoming. In the meantime, I began to receive invitations from my own people to visit different cities and lecture. These invitations I accepted, and I charged a fee for so doing at each place I visited. After delivering my lectures I would remain in town long enough to make a personal appeal to the newspapers, to ministers of leading congregations, and wherever an opportunity was presented. For after all, it was the white people of the country who had to mold the public sentiment necessary to put a stop to lynching.

I could fill a book with the interesting experiences of my visits to each one of the cities that invited me to come. I kept my word about giving one year to the cause and went from the Atlantic to the Pacific in the endeavor to follow the good work our English friends had begun for us. In every town I called together the representative colored people and organized anti-lynching leagues whose business it would be to crystallize sentiment and raise money for the cause.

My first big meeting of any consequence was held in Brooklyn, New York, in the Academy of Music, and was presided over by Hon. Stewart Woodford, ex-minister to Spain. We had a crowded house and a splendid meeting; no speaker in England had been stronger or more outspoken against lynch law than were the friends who were gathered on that occasion. I spent nearly two weeks in an endeavor to get a chance to speak in

Plymouth Church. This was Henry Ward Beecher's historic congregation, presided over by Rev. Lyman Abbott. I ought to say that in addition to this powerful committee that was left in Great Britain, I brought back to this country an appeal to the Christian ministers of the United States to give me the same opportunity for speaking from their pulpits as had been given me by the English clergymen. This appeal had been signed by the leading ministers of all denominations in Great Britain, so that when I sought an interview with an American minister he was presented with this appeal. Rarely was it unsuccessful, because our American ministers knew that this powerful committee in London would receive reports as to their attitude on this burning question.

However, it was not until Deacon White of Plymouth Church interested himself in the matter that Dr. Abbott finally consented to give me fifteen minutes at the close of a Sunday morning service.

The newspapers by this time continued many articles on the subject of my presence, as well as interviews. Indeed, when it was known I was to be interviewed by the *New York Sun*, 3 August 1894, I was waited on by a delegation of the men of my own race who asked me to put the soft pedal on charges against white women and their relations with black men. I indignantly refused to do so. I explained to them that wherever I had gone in England I found the firmly accepted belief that lynchings took place in this country only because black men were wild beasts after white women; that the hardest part of my work had been to convince the British people that this was a false charge against Negro manhood and that to forsake that position now, because I was back in my own country, would be to tacitly admit that the charge was true, and I could not promise to do that.

When the *Sun* reporter came I gave him facts just as I had done for the English papers. And those facts were published

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in the *Sun*. That article created a furor. The subject was mentioned on the floor of Congress, and passionate letters in protest were written. Mr. Richard Henry Dana himself sent for me and questioned me on the subject. I asked him if he ever read Burton's *Arabian Nights*. When he said that he had, my reply was "then you know that I tell of no new thing under the sun." Not only this, but he let me make that same statement in reply to a letter published in his columns which attacked me for "defaming the honor of the white women of the country." In that letter I said, just as I had told Mr. Dana, "those who have read Burton's *Arabian Nights* know that I tell of no new thing under the sun when I say white women have been known to fall in love with black men, and only after that relationship is discovered has an assault charge been made.

The Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* said that it would pay Memphis to send for me and pay me a salary to keep silent; that as long as I was living in Memphis and publishing only a "one-horse" newspaper few people outside of my district knew about me; but after they had driven me out of that town the whole world had a chance to know about conditions which had been unknown until that time.

After New York my next visit was to Philadelphia. The people of that city had formed an organization and invited me over, at which time I delivered an address to a crowded house. They also had Mr. Douglass come over from Washington to speak with me, on the same platform. We had a wonderful meeting. Mr. Hiram Bassett, ex-minister to Haiti, was the moving spirit of that meeting. Here, too, I remained for more than two weeks appearing at white churches and gatherings.

On the Monday morning following my address, I visited the white Methodist ministers' meeting, the Baptist ministers' meeting, and the Congregationalists. I then went to the A.M.E. ministers' meeting, where they were awaiting my arrival. After being introduced and making a short talk, I took my seat. Im-

mediately thereafter one of the ministers arose and offered a resolution of endorsement of me and my work. I thought they intended it as an expression of appreciation of the work that had been accomplished, but the Reverend Dr. Embry objected to the resolution's passage on the ground that they ought to be careful about endorsing young women of whom they knew nothing—that the A.M.E. church had representative women who ought to be put before the public and whom they could endorse unhesitatingly.

That sentiment was echoed by one or two others of lesser note. By this time I had somewhat recovered from my amazement, and rose to a question of personal privilege. I indignantly asked if that was why they had invited me there, to hear them discuss whether or not they could afford to endorse me. I told them that I had cut out one of the four meetings to which I had been invited that Monday morning in order to show my appreciation of the courtesy they had extended me. That at every meeting in which I had appeared that morning, the announcement of my presence had been greeted with applause, and I had been instantly given opportunity to appeal to them to use their influence to help put a stop to lynching in this country. First, by giving me a chance to address their congregations; second, by passing the resolutions against lynchings which had been passed in every one of my meetings in Great Britain.

This, I said, had been immediately done and glowing words of commendation had come from every one of those white gatherings on the work they said that I had done; it had remained for the ministers of my own race to bring me before them to hear them discuss whether they could afford to endorse me. "Why, gentlemen," I said, "I cannot see why I need your endorsement. Under God I have done work without any assistance from my own people. And when I think that I have been able to do the work with his assistance that you could not do, if you would, and you would not do if you could, I think I have a right to a feeling of strong indignation. I feel very deeply the insult which

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you have offered and I have the honor to wish you a very good morning." With that I walked out of the meeting and left them sitting with their mouths open. That was the beginning of a great deal of the same sort that I received at the hands of my own people in the effort to follow up the splendid work which the English people had begun for us.