

# THE TASK OF NEGRO WOMANHOOD

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THROUGHOUT the years of history, woman has been the weather-vane, the indicator, showing in which direction the wind of destiny blows. Her status and development have augured now calm and stability, now swift currents of progress. What then is to be said of the Negro woman of to-day, whose problems are of such import to her race?

A study of her contributions to any one community, throughout America, would illuminate the pathway being trod by her people. There is, however, an advantage in focusing upon the women of Harlem—modern city in the world's metropolis. Here, more than anywhere else, the Negro woman is free from the cruder handicaps of primitive household hardships and the grosser forms of sex and race subjugation. Here, she has considerable opportunity to measure her powers in the intellectual and industrial fields of the great city. The questions naturally arise: "What are her difficulties?" and, "How is she solving them?"

To answer these questions, one must have in mind not any one Negro woman, but rather a colorful pageant of individuals, each differently endowed. Like the red and yellow of the tiger-lily, the skin of one is brilliant against the star-lit darkness of a racial sister. From grace to strength, they vary in infinite degree, with traces of the race's history left in physical and mental outline on each. With a discerning mind, one catches the multiform charm, beauty and character of Negro women, and grasps the fact that their problems cannot be thought of in mass.

Because only a few have caught this vision, even in New York, the general attitude of mind causes the Negro woman serious difficulty. She is conscious that what is left of chivalry is not directed toward her. She realizes that the ideals of

beauty, built up in the fine arts, have excluded her almost entirely. Instead, the grotesque Aunt Jemimas of the street-car advertisements, proclaim only an ability to serve, without grace of loveliness. Nor does the drama catch her finest spirit. She is most often used to provoke the mirthless laugh of ridicule; or to portray feminine viciousness or vulgarity not peculiar to Negroes. This is the shadow over her. To a race naturally sunny comes the twilight of self-doubt and a sense of personal inferiority. It cannot be denied that these are potent and detrimental influences, though not generally recognized because they are in the realm of the mental and spiritual. More apparent are the economic handicaps which follow her recent entrance into industry. It is conceded that she has special difficulties because of the poor working conditions and low wages of her men. It is not surprising that only the most determined women forge ahead to results other than mere survival. To the gifted, the zest of meeting a challenge is a compensating factor which often brings success. The few who do prove their mettle, stimulate one to a closer study of how this achievement is won under contemporary conditions.

Better to visualize the Negro woman at her job, our vision of a host of individuals must once more resolve itself into groups on the basis of activity. First, comes a very small leisure group—the wives and daughters of men who are in business, in the professions and a few well-paid personal service occupations. Second, a most active and progressive group, the women in business and the professions. Third, the many women in the trades and industry. Fourth, a group weighty in numbers struggling on in domestic service, with an even less fortunate fringe of casual workers, fluctuating with the economic temper of the times.

The first is a pleasing group to see. It is picked for outward beauty by Negro men with much the same feeling as other Americans of the same economic class. Keeping their women free to preside over the family, these women are affected by the problems of every wife and mother, but touched only faintly by their race's hardships. They do share acutely in the prevailing difficulty of finding competent household help.

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Negro wives find Negro maids unwilling generally to work in their own neighborhoods, for various reasons. They do not wish to work where there is a possibility of acquaintances coming into contact with them while they serve and they still harbor the misconception that Negroes of any station are unable to pay as much as persons of the other race. It is in these homes of comparative ease that we find the polite activities of social exclusiveness. The luxuries of well-appointed homes, modest motors, tennis, golf and country clubs, trips to Europe and California, make for social standing. The problem confronting the refined Negro family is to know others of the same achievement. The search for kindred spirits gradually grows less difficult; in the past it led to the custom of visiting all the large cities in order to know similar groups of cultured Negro people. In recent years, the more serious minded Negro woman's visit to Europe has been extended from months to years for the purpose of study and travel. The European success which meets this type of ambition is instanced in the conferring of the doctorate in philosophy upon a Negro woman, Dr. Anna J. Cooper, at the last commencement of the Sorbonne, Paris. Similarly, a score of Negro women are sojourning abroad in various countries for the spiritual relief and cultural stimulation afforded there.

A spirit of stress and struggles characterizes the second two groups. These women of business, profession and trade are the hub of the wheel of progress. Their burden is twofold. Many are wives and mothers whose husbands are insufficiently paid, or who have succumbed to social maladjustment and have abandoned their families. An appalling number are widows. They face the great problem of leaving home each day and at the same time trying to rear children in their spare time—this, too, in neighborhoods where rents are large, standards of dress and recreation high and costly, and social danger on the increase. One cannot resist the temptation to pause for a moment and pay tribute to these Negro mothers. And to call attention to the service she is rendering to the nation, in her struggle against great odds to educate and care for one group of the country's children. If the mothers of the race should

ever be honored by state or federal legislation, the artist's imagination will find a more inspiring subject in the modern Negro mother—self-directed but as loyal and tender as the much extolled, yet pitiable black mammy of slavery days.

The great commercial life of New York City is only slightly touched by the Negro woman, of our second group. Negro business men offer her most of their work, but their number is limited. Outside of this field in Negro offices, custom is once more against her, and competition is keen for all. However, Negro girls are training and some are holding exceptional jobs. One of the professors in a New York college has had a young colored woman as secretary for the past three or four years. Another holds the head clerical position in an organization where reliable handling of detail and a sense of business ethics are essential. Quietly these women prove their worth, so that when a vacancy exists and there is a call, it is difficult to find even one competent colored secretary who is not employed. As a result of the opportunity in clerical work in the educational system of New York City, a number have qualified for such positions, one having been recently appointed to the office of a high school. In other departments, the civil service in New York City is no longer free from discrimination. The casual personal interview, that tenacious and retrogressive practice introduced into the federal administration during the World War, has spread and often nullifies the Negro woman's success in written tests. The successful young woman cited above was three times "turned down" as undesirable on the basis of the personal interview. In the great mercantile houses, the many young Negro girls who might be well suited to sales positions are barred from all but menial positions. Even so, one Negro woman, beginning as a uniformed maid in the shoe department of one of the largest stores, has pulled herself up to the position of "head of stock." One of the most prosperous monthly magazines of national circulation has for the head of its news service a Negro woman who rose from the position of stenographer. Her duties involve attendance upon staff conferences, executive supervision of her staff of white office workers, broadcasting and journalism of the highest order.

Yet in spite of the claims of justice and proved efficiency, telephone and insurance companies and other corporations which receive considerable patronage from Negroes deny them proportionate employment. Fortunately this is an era of changing customs. There is hope that a less selfish racial attitude will prevail. It is a heartening fact that there is an increasing number of Americans who will lend a hand in the game fight of the worthy.

Throughout the South, where businesses for Negro patronage are under the control of Negroes to a large extent, there are already many opportunities for Negro women. But, because of the nerve strain and spiritual drain of hostile social conditions in that section, Negro women are turning away from opportunities there to find a freer and fuller life in the North.

In the less crowded professional vocations, the outlook is more cheerful. In these fields, the Negro woman is dependent largely upon herself and her own race for work. In the legal, dental and medical professions, successful women practitioners have usually worked their way through college and are "managing" on the small fees that can be received from an underpaid public.

Social conditions in America are hardest upon the Negro because he is lowest in the economic scale. The tendency to force the Negro downward, gives rise to serious social problems and to a consequent demand for trained college women in the profession of social work. The need has been met with a response from young college women, anxious to devote their education and lives toward helping the submerged classes. Much of the social work has been pioneer in nature; the pay has been small, with little possibility of advancement. For, even in work among Negroes, the better paying positions are reserved for whites. The Negro college woman is doing her bit at a sacrifice, along such lines as these: as probation officers, investigators and police women in the correctional departments of the city; as Big Sisters attached to the Children's Court; as field workers and visitors for relief organizations, missions and churches; as secretaries for traveller's aid societies; in the many organizations devoted to preventative and educa-

tional medicine; in clinics and hospitals and as boys' and girls' welfare workers in recreation and industry.

In the profession of nursing, there are over three hundred in New York City. In the dark blue linen uniform of Henry Street Visiting Nurse Service, the Negro woman can be seen hurrying earnestly from house to house on her round of free relief to the needy. Again, she is in many other branches of public health nursing, in the public schools, milk stations and diet kitchens. The Negro woman is in the wards of two of the large city hospitals and clinics. After a score of years of service in one such institution, a Negro woman became superintendent of nurses in the war emergency. Deposed after the armistice, though eminently satisfactory, she retained connection with the training school as lecturer, for the inspiration she could be to "her girls." The growing need for the executive nurse is being successfully met as instanced by the supervisors in day nurseries and private sanitariums, financed and operated in Harlem entirely by Negroes. Throughout the South there is a clear and anxious call to nurses to carry the gospel of hygiene to the rural sections and to minister to the suffering not reached by organizations already in the communities. One social worker, in New York City, though a teacher by profession, is head of an organization whose program is to raise money for the payment of nurses to do the work described above. In other centers, West and South, the professional Negro nurse is supplanting the untrained woman attendant of former years.

In New York City, nearly three hundred women share in the good conditions obtaining there in the teaching profession. They measure up to the high pedagogical requirements of the city and state law, and are increasingly leaders in the community. In a city where the schools are not segregated, she is meeting with success among white as well as colored children in positions ranging from clerk in the elementary school on up through the graded ranks of teachers in the lower grades, of special subjects in the higher grades, in the junior high schools and in the senior high schools. One Negro woman is assistant principal in an elementary school where the other assistant and



the principal are white men and the majority of the teachers white. Another Negro woman serves in the capacity of visiting teacher to several schools, calling upon both white and colored families and experiencing no difficulty in making social adjustments. Still another Negro woman is a vocational counsellor under the Board of Education, in a junior high school. She is advising children of both races as to future courses of study to pursue and as to the vocations in which tests prove them to be apt. This position, the result of pioneer work by another Negro woman, is unique in the school system of New York.

In the teaching profession, too, the Negro woman finds evidence of the white worker's fear of competition. The need for teachers is still so great that little friction exists. When it does seem imminent, it is smoothed away, as it recently was at a meeting of school principals. From the floor a discussion began with: "What are we going to do about this problem of the increasing number of Negro teachers coming into our schools?" It ended promptly through the suggestion of another principal: "Send all you get and don't want over to my school. I have two now and I'll match their work with any two of the best you name." Outside of New York City, the Negro woman teacher faces problems almost as difficult as those besetting the pioneers in the field. Night riders are terrorizing the leading educators of the South, with the same tactics used years ago in the burning of buildings and in the threatening of personal injury. Negro teachers in some sections show heroism matching that of such women as Maria Becroft, Mary Wormely, Margaret Thompson, Fannie Hampton, Myrtila Miner and others who in the early '80's faced riot and violence which closed colored schools and made educational work a hazardous vocation. Throughout the North and South, urban and rural teachers form an earnest and forward-looking group of women. They are endeavoring to hold for the future the progress that has been made in the past. The Negro woman teacher finds that, figuratively speaking, she must stand on her tip toes to do it, for educational standards are no longer what they were. Surrounded by forces

which persistently work to establish the myth of his inferiority, the Negro youth must be encouraged to think vigorously and to maintain a critical attitude toward what he is taught. The Negro teacher is bending herself to the task of imparting this power to hold the spiritual and mental balance under hostile conditions. Though her salary in most places lags behind the service she is rendering (exceptions being noted where the Jeannes-Slater and Rosenwald Funds bring relief), her inspiration is the belief that the hope of the race is in the New Negro student. Of more vital import than what he is compelled to be to-day, is what he is determined to make of himself to-morrow. And, the Negro woman teacher, bringing to the class room sympathy and judgment, is a mighty force in this battle.

Comparatively new are opportunities in the field of trained library work for the Negro woman. In New York City, the Public Library system has opened its service to the employment of colored women of college grade. The vision of those in charge of their training is illuminated by fires that have somewhat of a missionary glow. There is an ever-present hope that, once trained, the Negro woman librarian will scatter such opportunities across the country, establishing branches wherever none exist. Into such an emergency, the successful Negro woman head of the library of the Veterans' Hospital at Tuskegee, stepped from the New York Library on One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street. Recently at this same Harlem Branch Library a Negro woman has been placed in charge of the large, permanent collection of books by or about Negroes and examples of Negro art. Another is acting head of the children's department, and several others have been assigned to branches throughout the city where there is little or no Negro patronage. They are thus rendering exceptional service, and additionally creating an impetus for the enlargement of this field for Negro women.

One might go on to such interesting and more unusual professions as bacteriology, chemistry and pharmacy, etc., and find that though the number in any one may be small, the Negro woman is creditably represented in practically every one, and

according to ability, she is meeting with success. In the fields of literature and art, the Negro woman's culture has once more begun to flower. After the long quiescent period, following the harvest from the pen of Phyllis Wheatley, Negro women dramatists, poets and novelists are enjoying a vogue in print. There is every prospect that the Negro woman will enrich American literature and art with stylistic portrayal of her experience and her problems.

Closing the door on the home anxieties, the women engaged in trades and in industry faces serious difficulty in competition in the open working field. Custom is against the Negro woman in all but a few trade and industrial occupations. She has, however, been established long in the dressmaking trade as helpers and finishers, and more recently as drapers and fitters in some of the best establishments. Several Negro women are themselves proprietors of shops in the country's great fashion district. In millinery, power-sewing machine operating on cloth, straw and leather, there are few Negro women. The *laissez-faire* attitude of practically all trade unions has, in the past, made of the Negro woman an unwilling menace to the cause of labor. When one reviews the demands now being made by white women workers, for labor colleges, for political recognition, and for representation at world conferences, one cannot help but feel how far back on the road of labor progress is the struggling group of Negro workers. Yet, they are gradually becoming more alive to the issues involved. One Negro woman has held office and been most active in the flower and feather workers' union. Another has been a paid organizer in the garment industry for several years. Still another has co-operated as an unpaid worker, in endeavoring to prevent Negro women from breaking union strikes. Pacing with pickets, or explaining at meetings the wisdom underlying union principles, she became convinced that the problem lay as much in the short-sighted, "wait-until-a-strike-comes" policy of the labor unions themselves, as in the alienated or unintelligent attitude of the Negro worker. More sincerity and understanding was greatly needed. Within the past year, she has worked with two Negro men, a white woman and two white men, all

union members, and with this committee of six has brought about a conference of accredited delegates from thirty-three unions in New York City. This is the first all-union conference held on adjusting the Negro workers' problem. As a result, a permanent organization has been formed called the Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers. Headquarters have been established and a program is well under way which includes:—organizing special industries, manned largely by Negro men and women; working to bring about changes in the constitutions of trade unions which make it impossible or difficult for Negroes to join; educating both black and white workers in union principles through conferences and speeches; making necessary adjustments among union members of the two races and taking part in righting any grievances of Negro union members.

In trade cookery, the Negro woman's talent and past experience is recognized. Her problem here is to find employers who will let her work her way to managerial positions, in tea-rooms, candy shops and institutions. One such employer became convinced that the managing cook, a young colored graduate of Pratt Institute, could build up a business that had been failing. He offered her a partnership. As in the cases of a number of such women, her barrier was lack of capital. No matter how highly trained, nor how much speed and business acumen has been acquired, the Negro's credit is held in doubt. An exception in this matter of capital will serve to prove the rule. Thirty years ago, a young Negro girl began learning all branches of the fur trade. She is now in business for herself, employing three women of her race and one Jewish man. She has made fur experts of still another half-dozen colored girls. Such instances as these justify the prediction that the foothold which is being gained in the trade world will, year by year, become more secure.

Because of the limited fields for this group, many of the unsuccessful drift into the fourth social grade—the domestic and casual workers. These drifters increase the difficulties of the Negro women suited to housework. New standards of household management are forming and the problem of the



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Negro woman is to meet these new businesslike ideals. The constant influx of workers unfamiliar with household conditions in New York keeps the situation one of turmoil. The Negro woman, moreover, is revolting against residential domestic service. It is a last stand in her fight to maintain a semblance of family life. For this reason, principally, the number of day or casual workers is on the increase. Happiness is almost impossible under the strain of these conditions. Health and morale suffer, but how else can her children, loose all afternoon, be gathered together at nightfall? Through it all she manages to give satisfactory service and the Negro woman is sought after for this unpopular work, largely because her honesty, loyalty and cleanliness have stood the test of time. Through her drudgery, the women of other groups find leisure time for progress. This is one of her contributions to America.

It is apparent from what has been said that even in New York City, Negro women are of a race which is free neither economically, socially nor spiritually. Like women in general, but more particularly like those of other oppressed minorities, the Negro woman has been forced to submit to overpowering conditions. Pressure has been exerted upon her, both from without and within her group. Her emotional and sex life is a reflex of her economic station. The women of the working class will react, emotionally and sexually, similarly to the working-class woman of other races. The Negro woman does not maintain any moral standard which may be assigned chiefly to qualities of race, any more than a white woman does. Yet she has been singled out and advertised as having lower sex standards. Superficial critics who have had contact only with the lower grades of Negro women, claim that they are more immoral than other groups of women. This I deny. This is the sort of criticism which predicates of one race, to its detriment, that which is common to all races. Sex irregularities are not a matter of race, but socio-economic conditions. Research shows that most of the African tribes from which the Negro sprang have strict codes for sex relations. There is no proof of inherent weakness in the ethnic group.

Gradually overcoming the habitual limits imposed upon her

by slave masters, she increasingly seeks legal sanction for the consummation and dissolution of sex contracts. Contrary to popular belief, illegitimacy among Negroes is cause for shame and grief. When economic, social and biological forces combined bring about unwed motherhood, the reaction is much the same as in families in other racial groups. Secrecy is maintained if possible. Generally the married aunt or even the girl's mother claims the illegitimate child as her own. The foundling asylum is seldom sought. Schooled in this kind of suffering in the days of slavery, the Negro woman often tem- pers scorn with sympathy for weakness. Stigma does fall upon the unmarried mother, but perhaps in this matter the Negro's attitude is nearer the modern enlightened ideal for the social treatment of the unfortunate. May not this, too, be considered another contribution to America?

With all these forces at work, true sex equality has not been approximated. The ratio of opportunity in the sex, social, economic and political spheres is about that which exists between white men and women. In the large, I would say that the Negro woman is the cultural equal of her man because she is generally kept in school longer. Negro boys, like white boys, are usually put to work to subsidize the family income. The growing economic independence of Negro working women is causing her to rebel against the domineering family attitude of the cruder working-class husband. The masses of Negro men are engaged in menial occupations throughout the working day. Their baffled and suppressed desires to determine their economic life are manifested in overbearing domination at home. Working mothers are unable to instill different ideals in the sons. Conditions change slowly. Nevertheless, education and opportunity are modifying the spirit of the younger Negro men. Trained in modern schools of thought, they begin to show a wholesome attitude of fellowship and freedom for their women. The challenge to young Negro womanhood is to see clearly this trend and grasp the proffered comradeship with sincerity. In this matter of sex equality, Negro women have contributed few outstanding militants, a notable instance being the historic Sojourner Truth. On the whole the Negro



woman's feminist efforts are directed chiefly toward the realization of the equality of the races, the sex struggle assuming the subordinate place.

Obsessed with difficulties which might well compel individualism, the Negro woman has engaged in a considerable amount of organized action to meet group needs. She has evolved a federation of her clubs, embracing between eight and ten thousand women in New York state alone. The state federation is a part of the National Association of Colored Women, which, calling together the women from all parts of the country, engages itself in enterprises of general race interest. The national organization of colored women is now firmly established, and under the presidency of Mrs. Bethune is about to strive for conspicuous goals.

In New York City, many associations exist for social betterment, financed and operated by Negro women. One makes child welfare its name and special concern. Others, like the Utility Club, Utopia Neighborhood, Debutantes' League, Sempre Fidelius, etc., raise funds for old folks' homes, a shelter for delinquent girls and fresh-air camps for children. The Colored Women's Branch of the Y. W. C. A. and the women's organizations in the many churches as well as the beneficial lodges and associations, care for the needs of their members.

On the other hand, the educational welfare of the coming generation has become the chief concern of the national sororities of Negro college women. The first to be organized in the country, the *Alpha Kappa Alpha*, has a systematized, a continuous program of educational and vocational guidance for students of the high schools and colleges. The work of Lambda Chapter, which covers New York City and its suburbs, has been most effective in carrying out the national program. Each year, it gathers together between one and two hundred such students and gives the girls a chance to hear the life stories of Negro women, successful in various fields of endeavor. Recently a trained nurse told how, starting in the same schools as they, she had risen to the executive position in the Harlem Health Information Bureau. A commercial artist showed how real talent had overcome the color line. The graduate phy-

sician was a living example of the modern opportunities in the newer fields of medicine open to women. The vocations, as outlets for the creative instinct, became attractive under the persuasion of the musician, the dressmaker and the decorator. A recent graduate outlined her plans for meeting the many difficulties encountered in establishing a dental office and in building up a practice. A journalist spun the fascinating tale of her years of experience. The *Delta Sigma Theta* Sorority (national in scope) works along similar lines. Alpha Beta Chapter of New York City, during the current year, presented a young art student with a scholarship of \$1,000 for study abroad. In such ways as these are the progressive and privileged groups of Negro women expressing their community and race consciousness.

We find the Negro woman, figuratively struck in the face daily by contempt from the world about her. Within her soul, she knows little of peace and happiness. But through it all, she is courageously standing erect, developing within herself the moral strength to rise above and conquer false attitudes. She is maintaining her natural beauty and charm and improving her mind and opportunity. She is measuring up to the needs of her family, community and race, and radiating a hope throughout the land.

The wind of the race's destiny stirs more briskly because of her striving.

