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Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt

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CHAPTER 20.

The Negro and the World War.

No book written in the year 1918 would be complete without a word about this awful conflagration which is now sweeping over the earth.

One sometimes thinks that the end is near and that the world is being destroyed.

We know that everything that has been invented to advance civilization is now being used to destroy it. Our one consolation is that however imperfect we may have been as a nation, we know that our cause is just and because of this we believe that in the end we will and must win. The right has always been more powerful than the wrong, even more powerful than might and it will prove true in this case.

I am being constantly asked by white men in both the North and South, "How does the Negro regard this war and what about his willingness to share in its responsibilities." I have only one answer for such questions: "The Negro now knows but one word 'Loyalty.' He is no alien, he owes no allegiance to any other country, there is no hyphen to his name, he is all American, he is willing to fight and die, that the world might be made safe for democracy." He only asks that he may share in this democracy.

Already there are practically 200,000 Negroes who

have been called to the colors and thousands of others are expected to be called. I hear of but few if any slackers among them, while thousands of slackers of other races are being rounded up by the police in various cities throughout the country.

The 200,000 Negro soldiers who are now at the front and in the camps have gone with as brave hearts as any American citizen. They say, "Silver and gold, have I but little, but I give my life to Uncle Sam, it is all that I can do."

The Negro is not only furnishing men to the National Army, but he is doing his part to support the boys at the front. He has bought Liberty Bonds to the fullest extent. Many of his business organizations, societies and lodges have bought large blocks of these bonds.

On Sunday morning, June 14th, Dr. Cortland L. Myers of Tremont Temple, Boston, in his sermon told of an incident of an old colored woman who had worked hard and saved up three hundred dollars in order that she might not at the end be buried in the paupers' field, but when she read that the United States wanted money, took all she had and carried it to the bank to the agent. When the agent gave her the Liberty Bond and told her that she would get four per cent on her money, she was utterly surprised and said, "Lord, Boss, I thought I was giving this money to Uncle Sam." This woman had only three hundred dollars, but she gave all.

You remember what Christ said about those who were contributing to a great cause on one occasion. Many made large gifts, but one poor woman came up

and gave a penny which was all she had. Christ on commenting on this to his Disciples said that she had given more than all, because she had given all she had. Many incidents of this kind may be cited as proof of the Negroes' loyalty in this struggle.

Not only in the Liberty Loan drive, but in the Red Cross and War Savings Stamp drives, the Negro is doing his part. There are Negro agents all over the South who are educating our people up to what the Government at Washington wants. Such schools as Snow Hill, Laurinburg, Denmark, Utica, Okalona and Calhoun and many others are serving as bureaus of information for this war work among the Negroes.

Nor is this all. The Negro is doing his part in the various industries of the country. I have heard of many strikes and walk-outs since we entered the war, but not once have a group of Negroes struck. In some places where a few are working with the unions, the unions have forced them out at the risk of their lives, but where he is free, nowhere in this country has the Negro struck during the war.

He is doing his bit on the farm. Everywhere the Negro farmers, man, woman and child, believe that they can help win the war by making a good crop and they are at work on the farm trying to do this, so you see that the Negro in every way is in the war to a finish.

These are answers to questions asked me by the white man both North and South as to the attitude of the Negro toward this world's war.

But on the other hand the Negro soldiers and civilians are not asleep and they too are asking such questions as these:—

"Are we to share in the democracy for which we are giving our lives?

When the world is made safe for democracy, will the entire country be made safe for it?

Will my father, mother, sister and brother be allowed to share in this democracy?

Will lynchings and burnings at the stake cease?

Will the white man who makes the laws allow these laws to take their course?

Will they allow us or give us a fair trial before their courts, which have only white men as jurors?

Will they cease taxing us without representation?

Will they give us an equal part of the money spent for education? (In many places in the Black Belt the Negro child receives thirty cents a year for education, while the white child receives fifteen dollars.) Will the Negro be given any work that he is capable of doing and not be denied it on account of his color?

Will it be possible for a Negro travelling from Alabama to California or Massachusetts, to find a place to sleep at night?

Will the baggage masters and the conductors of the South ever treat the Negro passengers with courtesy and respect and finally will the white man in the South after making the laws for the qualifications of voters, allow a Negro to vote if he measures up to these qualifications?

The Negro does not care what these qualifications may be. He only wants a fair chance in case he measures up to them.

The Negro only seeks equal rights and justice before all the courts of the land. He expects this because of his teachings. He was brought to this country against his will, even against his protest. He has been given the white man's language, his history, his literature, his Bible and even his God. His aspirations, inspirations and desires have been brought about as a result of these and if they are wrong, the white man is to blame. The Negro has been taught to believe that God is no respecter of persons and therefore his subjects should not be. He thought that if he did what other men did he would obtain the same results.

Now evidently the Negro is a man. He loves as other men do, he lives as others do, he dies as others die, he has joy and sorrow as others do, even hates as others do, laughs and cries as others. He must therefore, be a man as man is the only being which possesses these faculties. Then he asks for a man's chance and the world will never be right until this is given him. The world will never be safe for democracy until all the races of the earth are allowed to share in it.

In answer to all of the foreging questions asked me by both the white and black, I have said that things will be better for the Negro after the war. I have said that it was impossible for the world to be made safe for democracy unless every county in the South is made safe for it.

I have gone as far as to cite a recent occurrence in Camden, Wilcox County, Alabama, where more than one hundred and forty Negroes were sent to the cantonments and I was asked to be one of the speakers on

the occasion. The white people there gave the Negroes a great banquet and in my remarks after thanking them for their hospitality, I said "That it would be foolish and cowardly on my part to stand here in your presence and say that as a race we have no grievances, for we have them, but this is no time to air them. When the house is on fire it is no time for family quarrels, but the thing to do is to put the fire out and then we can adjust the quarrels after.

"Today our National house is on fire and it is the duty of every man, both white and black, rich and poor, great and small, to rise in his might and put the fire out and when the fire is out, we will see you about these grievances."

I went a step further and told that "already the war had brought some good results as this was the most democratic day that this little city had ever seen. Before the war, two expressions were commonly used by the white man and the Negro. The Negro's expression was this:—"I haven't any country," and the white man's expression was:—"This is a white man's country." Now both of these classes are saying, "This is our country." I further said that "we should win this war, because democracy was right and autocracy is wrong, and if we lose, and God forbid that we should, the fault will not be in democracy, but it will be due to the fact that we are not practicing what we preach."

At the close of my remarks many of the white citizens, including the judge, the sheriff, lawyers and other prominent men came forward and congratulated me on what I had said and some said that the white

people of Camden needed more of such plain talk. I took these signs to mean that better things were coming for the Negro of the South after the war, but I must admit that when I read in the evening papers of June 27th that Senator John Sharp Williams of Mississippi had practically defeated the bill for women suffrage, because he said that he favored the vote for white women only and that the bill in its present form would not be allowed in his state—I must confess that this action almost took away all of my hopes especially after there was no one to rise and rebut his argument. There was no one in the United States Senate to speak for democracy for all the people. Now I think that just such spirit as this exhibited by that great Senator from Mississippi is at the foundation of this world's war and until that spirit is crushed, I fear that this war will continue. For of a truth, "God is no respecter of persons."

Now I have given my answers to both the Negro and the white man. What is the answer of the white man?

Are we fighting for democracy for all the people, or are we fighting for democracy for the white man only?

This question has never been answered by the white man, but it must be answered after this great war.