

How it Feels to be a Negro

MR. ROBERT COLE, of the firm of Cole and Johnson, who are now on tour through Canada, in a musical play called "The Red Moon," to crowded houses, was asked by a representative of the *COURIER* "How it felt to be a negro."

"Before I answer your question, I would like to cite a little coincidence that happened to me, once when Johnson and I with our company were playing 'The Red Moon' in a town where there was situated a large coal mine. I took a trip down in the mine. I had heard a great deal about the many dangers in a coal mine, the deadly gases, the explosions, the cave-ins, etc., and I must admit I did not envy the coal miners' lot. Still I know that it was a part of the plan of Nature to hide the coal down there, but it seemed to me somewhat unreasonably cruel and unjust.

"I said to myself, 'I would not be a coal miner for anything.'

"I asked one old gray-haired man in the mine how it felt to be a coal digger. With a happy look on his face, he answered, 'Well, I've been one so long, it kinder feels natural.' Now I am like the miner. I have been a negro so long that it feels quite natural.

"The most painful inconvenience of the negro is not being able to get employment, 'because he is a negro.' No matter how proficient an artisan, when he applies for a position at mill or factory, he will invariably run up against the other stock phrase, 'We've got all the men we need.' Of course there are notable exceptions, gentlemen like Mr. Carnegie of the United States Steel Company, Mr. Rockefeller of the Standard Oil and others whom I might mention, care nothing for or about a man's colour, but seven-eighths of the captains of industry throw up the invisible barrier of prejudice.

"You ask me 'how it feels to be a negro.' Well, I can recall one time in my life when I felt very much embarrassed on account of it. It was in London, England. It happened that we were honoured by the Royal command to sing for His Majesty King Edward, their Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales at the Elizabethan Fete at Lincoln Field Inn, given under the auspices of the Duchess of Devonshire, for the benefit of the King's Hospital Fund. Present on this occasion was an eminent sociologist who on learning that we were American negroes, invited us to attend a dinner given by England's most eminent sociologists, scientists and literary men. We attended, of course.

"They entered into the discussion of an article just published in a London daily, called 'The Marvellous Progress of the American Negro.' One gentleman spoke and said in part:

"We have with us to-night two young members of a race of people whose progress in the forty years of their freedom from slavery, stands without a parallel in the history of the civilised world. Four millions of them were liberated by the Emancipation Proclamation of Abraham Lincoln in 1865, in absolute ignorance and poverty. In forty years they have reduced their illiteracy from 100 to 44 per cent., and from abject pauperism they have by their thrift acquired \$500,000,000 worth of taxable property. They own

and operate forty-seven banks, a score or more of well-established insurance companies, they own 177,000 farms (the combined acreage of which is more than Belgium and Holland combined), twenty-two per cent. of them own their own homes; of the ten millions, seven millions of them are church communicants, owning \$27,000,000 worth of church property; they own and edit two hundred creditable newspapers and magazines, two hundred and fifty drug stores, and scores of other creditable businesses are being operated by them. There is numbered among them 32,000 graduates from colleges and high schools of learning. They have excelled in athletics and college oratory, produced world-renowned educators, ministers, orators, poets, painters, sculptors, journalists, actors, singers, all in forty years, and from abject poverty and ignorance. It is simply marvellous. It sounds like a tale from the Arabian Nights. And mind you,' he continued, 'all this they have accomplished in spite of injustices heaped upon these poor, down-trodden people by the American white man, on account of a bitter race hatred against them.'

"I was embarrassed beyond any description, not so much so because I was one of the race who had made such marvellous progress, but mainly because for the first time in my life I had been placed in a position to defend the American white man. When I assured them that the abuses heaped against my people by the white man of America were not half so bad as had been pictured, they were somewhat astounded; even more so were they shocked when I told them that every white man in the United States and Canada who had ever amounted to anything was friendly towards my people.

"Nor do I feel ruffled up with pride because my race has produced such able educators as Booker T. Washington, Kelly Miller, Burkhardt Duboise, Prof. Scarborough; such ministers as Bishop Turner, Bishop Gaines, Bishop Payne, Bishop Walters, the Rev. C. T. Walker; such public men as Judge Terrell and Ralph Tyler; such poets as Wheatley, Dunbar, Braithwaite and James W. Johnson; such painters as H. O. Tanner; such sculptors as Rudin, pupil of Miss Warwick; such journalists as Minkins, Fortune, Crosby and Walton; such able women as Mary Church Terrell, Lucy Laney, Jane Bates and Mrs. Booker T. Washington.

"You ask me how it feels to be a negro. When I consider the above facts and regard the Great Plan of Nature designed by the Great Ruler of the Universe, I must answer, like the coal digger answered me: I've been one so long it kinder feels natural, and I've got so used to it now I wouldn't be anything else."



Mr. Robert Cole.



Mr. Johnson.

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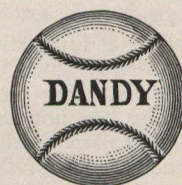
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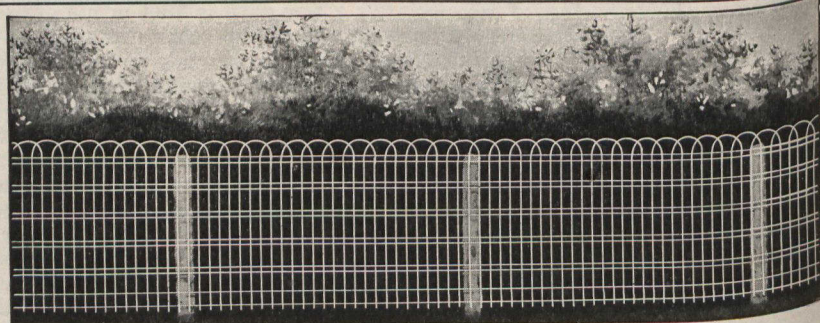
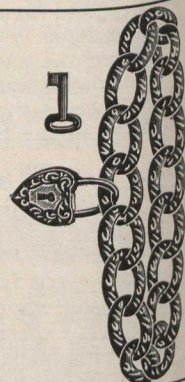
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