



**Smithsonian Institution**

*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

## **The Crisis, Vol. 5, No. 6**

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## THE BLACK HALF By JACOB RIIS

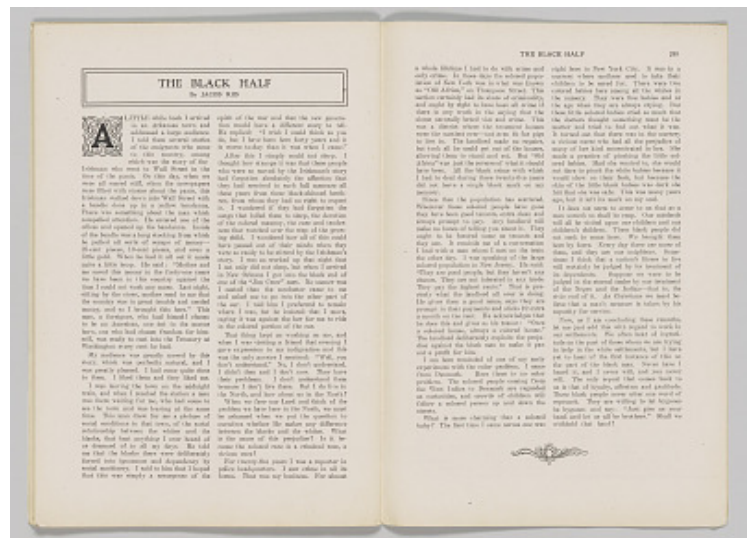
A Little while back I arrived in an Arkansas town and addressed a large audience. I told them several stories of the emigrants who come to this country, among which was the story of the Irishman who went to Wall Street in the time of the panic. On this day, when we were all scared stiff, when the newspapers were filled with stories about the panic, this Irishman walked down into Wall Street with a bundle done up in a yellow bandanna. There was something about the man which compelled attention. He entered one of the offices and opened up the bandanna. Inside of the bundle was a long stocking from which he pulled all sorts of scraps of money--25-cent pieces, 10-cent pieces, and even a little gold. When he had it all out it made quite a little heap. He said: "Mother and me saved this money in the forty-one years we have been in this country against the time I could not work any more. Last night, sitting by the stove, mother read to me tat the country was in great trouble and needed money, and so I brought this here." This man, a foreigner, who had himself chosen to be an American, one not to the manor born, one who had chosen freedom for him-self, was ready to cast into the Treasury at Washington every cent he had.

My audience was greatly moved by this story, which was perfectly natural, and I was greatly pleased. I had come quite close to them. I liked them and they liked me.

I was leaving the town on the midnight train, and when I reached the station a man was there waiting for me, who had come to see the town and was leaving at the same time. This man drew for me a picture of social conditions in that town, of the social relationship between the whites and the blacks, that beat anything I every heard of or dreamed of in all my days. He told me that the blacks there were deliberately forced into ignorance and dependency bu social machinery. I said to him that I hoped that this was simply a resurgence of the spirit of the war and that the new genera-tion would have a different story to tell. He replied: 'I wish I could think as you do, but I have been here forty years and it is worse to-day than it was when I came.'

After this I simply could not sleep. I thought how strange it was that there people who were so moved by the Irishman's story had forgotten absolutely the affection that they had received in such all measure all these years from these black-skinned brethren-ren, from whom they had no right to expect it. I wondered if they had forgotten the songs that lulled them to sleep, the devotion of the colored mammy, the care and tender-ness that watched over the step of the growing child. I wondered how all of this could have passed out of their minds when they were so ready to be stirred by the Irishman's story. I was so worked up that night that I not only did not sleep, but when I arrived in New Orleans I got into the black end of one of the "Jim Crow" cars. No sooner was I seated than the conductor came to me and asked me to go into the other part of the car, I told him I preferred to remain where I was, but he insisted that I move, saying it was against the law for me to ride in the colored portion of the car.

That thing kept on working on me, and when I was visiting a friend that evening I gave expression to my indignation and this was the only



answer I received: "Well, you don't understand." No, I don't understand. I didn't then and I don't now. They have their problems. I don't understand them because I don't love there. But I do love in the North, and how about us in the North?

When we face our Lord and think of the problem we have here in the North, we must be ashamed when we put the question to ourselves whether He makes any difference between the black and the whites. What is the cause of this prejudice? Is it be-cause the colored race is a criminal race, a vicious race?

For twenty-five years I was a reporter in police headquarters. I saw crime in all its forms. That was my business. For almost

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a whole lifetime I had to do with crime and only crime. In this days the colored pops-lation of New York was in what was known as "Old Africa," on Thompson Street. This section certainly had its share of criminality, and ought by right to have been all crime if there is any truth in the saying that the slums naturally breed vice and crime. This was a district where the tenement houses were the nastiest ever--not even fir for pigs to live in. The landlord made no repairs, but took all he could get out of the houses, allowing' them to stand and rot. But "Old Africa" was just the reverse of what it should have been. All the black crime with which I had to deal. during these went-fiveyears did not leave a single black mark on my memory.

Since then the population has scattered. Where these colored people have gone they have been good tenants, extra clean and always prompt to pay. Any landlord will make no bones of telling you about it. They ought to be favored some as tenants and they are. It reminds me of a conversation I had with a man whom I met on the train the other day. I was speaking of the large colored population in New Jersey. He said: "They are good people, but they haven't any chance. They are not tolerated in any trade. They pay the highest rents." That is pre-cisely what the landlord all over is doing. He gives them a good name, says they are prompt in their payments and sticks \$2 extra a month on the rent. He acknowledges that he does this and gives as his reason: "Once a colored house, always a colored house." The landlord deliberately exploits the preju-dice against the black man to make it peanut a profit for him.

I am here reminded of one of my early experiences with the color problem. I came from Denmark. Here there is no color problem. The colored people coming from the West Indies to Denmark are regarded as curiosities, and crowds of children will follow a colored person up and down the streets.

What is more charming than a colored baby? The first time I came across one was right here in New York City. It was in a nursery where mothers used to take their children to be cared for. There were two colored babies here among all the whites in the nursery. They were fine babies and at the age when they are always crying. But these little colored babies cried so much that the doctors thought something must

be the matter and tried to find out what it was. It turned out that there was in the nursery a vicious nurse who had all the prejudice of many of her kind concentrated in her. She made a practice of pinching the little col-ored babies. had she wanted to , she would not dare to pinch the white babies because it would show on their flesh, but because the skin of the little black babies was dark she felt that she was safe. This was many years ago, but it left its mark on my soul.

It does not seem to occur to us that as a man soweth so shall he reap. Our misdeeds will all be visited upon our children and our children's children. These black people did not seek to come here . We brought them here by force. Every day there are more of them, and and they are our neighbors. Some-times I think that a nation's fitness to live will certainly be judged by its treatment of its dependents. Suppose we were to be judged in the eternal scales by our treatment of the Negro and the Indian--that is, the civic end of it, As Christians we must be-lieve that a man's measure is taken by his capacity for service.

Now, as I am concluding these remarks, let me just add this with regard to work in our settlements. We often hear of ingrati-tude on the part of those whom we are trying to help in the white settlements, but I have yet to hear of the first instance of this on the part of the black man. Never have I heard it, and I never will, and you never will. The only report that comes back to us is that of loyalty, affection and gratitude. These black people never utter one word of reproach. They are willing to let bygones be bygones and say: "Just give us your hand and let us all be brothers." Shall we withhold that hand?

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