NEGRO MIGRATION

BY PERCY H. STONE

MEMBER OF THE SENIOR CLASS (1917), HAMPTON INSTITUTE

In the cycle of every race's development there are periods of unrest and adjustment. Sometimes they come as a result of pressure, and sometimes as an indication of progress. The last fourteen months have witnessed a possible beginning of such a period in the Negro race.

Since freedom the greater part of the ten million Negroes have resided in the South; here we have lived, worked, and built ourselves up into a recognized class. It is upon this class that the labor system of the South has been constructed. Her productive fields smile beneath our brawny muscles, and her shops and factories always run on full time so far as our labor is concerned.

Although many bills have been passed by the Legislatures of the Southern States which have been disastrous to our social and political welfare, we have continued doing the work of the South, contented with the open field for economic advancement. This contentment on our part has resulted in the labor system becoming more or less dependent upon us, and the problem caused by the two races living side by side has been looked upon as one strictly confined to the South, and one to be solved by the South.

Time and experience have taught us that our true recognition can best be won not by testing the validity of laws unfavorable to us, but by placing ourselves on a firm economic basis. So we have gone into the rural sections of the South and purchased land where it was available. We have vied with our white neighbors in the production of cotton and corn. In the city we have struggled against unsanitary surroundings in trying to establish homes, while at the same time we have attempted to season our economic growth by giving our boys and girls the best available education.

In normal times we have found it easy and desirable to live in the South; years of contact have brought about a peculiar mutual understanding between us and the white people. Educational advantages have been growing better, and our economic progress has continued undisturbed.

A little over two years ago, however, a crisis began to develop. The European war, drawing on this country's resources to keep its armies at the front, demoralized our economic situation. Food prices jumped to almost unheard-of figures, the cotton crop became almost unsalable, and all necessary commodities advanced in price far beyond the ordinary. In fact, everything went up except the price of labor; and, as the demand on this country's resources became greater, it became harder and harder for us to keep our balance.

While this problem was arising in the South there was still another part of it developing in the North. At the outbreak of the present world war the call of country, fatherland, and munition factory stripped the Northern and Central Western industries of their labor units; at the same time came an increased demand for manufactured products. This disastrous condition caused the manufacturer of the North and West to turn, as a last resort, to the only available labor in America.

Since that time general calls for help have been circulated over various sections of the South at different times, and we—some of us—smarting under the pinch of difficult living, crop failure, harsh treatment, and, in some cases, indebtedness, have already responded to the number of five hundred thousand.

In answering this call of an apparently better opportunity we are running a tremendous risk, because it is impossible for us to adapt ourselves to a new climate, new conditions, and new people without a great deal of suffering. The people of the North and West have always been friendly and willing to help us so long as we remained in the South, but now that we are distributing ourselves among them it may lead to a more prejudiced attitude towards us.

Taking advantage of this general movement among us, some would have it, and not without some foundation, that it was primarily to escape race discrimination and mistreatment. True, we resent most bitterly some treatment accorded us, but we have lived in the South since our advent into America. We understand the soil, the climate, and the life in the South; and, being by nature a race of peaceful people, we prefer to remain in the South and solve our problems by industry, thrift, and education.

Yet our plans for economic independence have been thwarted in these abnormal times, and the higher wages, the novelty of new surroundings, and other things are attracting some of us away from the Southland.

Various theories have been advanced as to what will happen
at the end of the European war. Some say that the influx of
foreigners impoverished by the ravages of war will displace and
leave us stranded—a people disappointed and ungrateful in the
eyes of the Southern people. But no one can truthfully predict
the final outcome. Although a million of my people may cross
the Mason and Dixon line in search of an economic outlet, the
South will still hold the things most necessary to our racial
progress—the opportunity of owning our homes and the chance
to develop our best characteristics.

Doubtless some of us who are now leaving the South will
return when conditions again become settled, but not all of us
will; we know that in this movement some, at least, are making
a great mistake and are inviting the criticism of our best
friends. Yet there is a possibility of valuable lessons being
learned.

Those people in the South who have looked upon our
presence as a burden and regarded our labor as an almost
worthless commodity in the market will find that, after all,
the work of our hands is a vital cog in the South’s industrial
machinery.

The race problem, thought for so long to be confined to the
South, will be spread; and the responsibility for our care and
treatment, ours being a backward race, will have more shoulders
on which to rest. And this great Government of ours that has
considered us an unfortunate problem will find that there are
more than ten million Americans who owe allegiance to no
country save America, and that we are willing to sacrifice
our homes, our familiar associations, and take up our abode in
unfamiliar sections of the country in order that the industrial
pivot around which this Government revolves may remain
unbroken.

And to all of us must come new opportunities and new re-
 sponsibilities. We who are working hard preparing ourselves for
leadership among our people will find that this opening of new
fields of labor will possibly foster a spirit of unrest and a tendency
on the part of some to drift about in search of things indefinite.

In any case, the call is for sane leaders whose visions go
beyond the immediate horizon; because with the unlimited,
undeveloped natural resources of the South, the completed
Panama Canal, the final settlement of affairs in Mexico, and
the end of the European war, it seems inevitable that the
southern half of this country will enter upon a period of great
industrial activity.

The immigrants who most likely will come from southern
Europe into the South will be attracted Southward by the demand
for labor and the agreeable climate. So, if we now allow our
outlook to be narrowed down to the immediate present and see
in it an opportunity to get away from the disadvantages of the
South, thinking to have a less obstructed path of progress in
other sections, we leave the soil to which we seem specially
adapted and the section that now affords us an opportunity to
build up institutions reflecting credit on ourselves; and in our
haste to grab the industrial opportunities of other sections we
defeat our own purpose, because our economic struggle is not
in itself an end, but a means to a more perfect home life and
social life.

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