

# COLOR BLIND

A WHITE WOMAN  
LOOKS  
AT THE NEGRO

by

**Margaret Halsey**



**Color Blind\***, a unique discussion of America's urgent problem of race relations, has created a sensation among thoughtful citizens of this democracy. Says the noted anthropologist, Earnest A. Hooton: "I consider *Color Blind* the most helpful and practical book on Negro-white relations that I have read." Says novelist Dorothy Canfield Fisher: "Exactly what is needed, what hasn't been said, what it takes somebody as smart as greased lightning to say." Herewith PAGEANT brings its readers excerpts from a book all America is discussing.

**M**OST WRITING ON the race problem falls into one of two classes. Either it is passionate fiction about race clashes, lynchings and various forms of violence and degradation or else it is passionless nonfiction, loaded to the gunwales with statistics about wages and graphs about venereal disease. This volume is neither. I have never seen a race clash, and I am not equipped to write a treatise. I



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went to, which was a large one in an industrial town, but I do not remember. At college I was first introduced to the social sciences and read in books about the chronic and systematized injustice with which our Negro citizens have to contend. This filled me with a sense of outrage, but the people around me persisted in being Caucasians and I could think of nothing specific and immediate to do.

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When Pearl Harbor materialized, my husband disappeared into an organization which succeeded, where I failed, in making him pick things up, and I went to work at a servicemen's canteen.

I was at the Awkward Age for working in a canteen—31. At 31 you are regarded by a canteen clientele which is mostly ten years your junior as too old to be interesting, but not quite withered enough to pinch-hit for Dear Old Mom. The canteen, therefore, astutely disposed of me and my contemporaries by making us captains of shifts of Junior Hostesses. We each had a group of young women ranging in age from, roughly, 18 to 25.

The canteen where I went to work did not discriminate against Negroes. Negro servicemen were welcomed impartially along with the white boys, and of the 50 or 60 Junior Hostesses on my shift, about five or six were Negroes. Mostly college girls, well bred and well dressed, they were no more of a responsibility than the white Junior Hostesses, except for one thing.



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There is a certain type of white man who feels that any Negro woman, no matter how stately her conduct, is a legitimate target for the crudest sort of sexual advances, and this manner of man does not dissuade easily.

Realistically speaking, it is impossible for white people who have been accustomed to Negroes only in menial roles to be entirely at ease when they first start meeting educated Negroes on a footing of equality. Equality is an unconscious assumption, and if you feel you are treating someone as an equal, then you are not doing it. Until it is taught to them, white children have no prejudice against Negro children. But white adults, no matter how technically free from prejudice, cannot react to Negroes with childlike composure and stability unless they have a little practice.

Still, the canteen's no-discrimination policy was in operation for four years, and it worked. It worked because the people who launched it and kept it going wanted it to work. It had a two-fold effect. Among Negroes who came in contact with it, it built up a little desperately needed good will toward the American Caucasians. And it gave white people a chance to meet and talk to and work with Negroes who were not wearing bandannas or carrying mops.

When the policy was first proposed, some of the canteen's supporters broke the world's record for the standing backward jump. To these startled people, the equalitarian contingent stressed the fact



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that in neighborhoods inhabited by high explosive, tan and brown and black men become just as dead as white ones.

There would be "trouble." What kind of "trouble"? The first reply was—race riots. The equalitarians answered that, surprising as it may seem, men in the armed forces could not drop into canteens and recklessly start race riots. It got them into trouble (no quotes) with their C.O.'s.

In the course of four years, the canteen entertained about 3,200,000 servicemen, from all the United Nations. With so large and varied a pastorate, it was reasonable to expect that occasions might sometimes arise wherein one warrior would decide the hell with Socratic dialogue and take a poke at another warrior. For this contingency, provision was made. The orchestra was instructed, if a fight threatened, to play *The Star-Spangled Banner*, during which all servicemen have to stand at attention. The arrangement turned out to be almost unnecessary. In four years, there were only two such contretemps.

We who worked at the canteen were often asked: What did Southern servicemen do, when they came into the canteen and found Negroes mingling with white people? The answer is that, for the most part, they didn't do anything. The proportion of people brought up to have moderately good manners is just as high in the South as it is in any other part of the country.

Sometimes a Southerner for whom the emotional shock of the



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no-discrimination policy was more than he could bear would seek out a Junior or Senior Hostess, or the person in charge of the canteen, and explain in vigorous language just what he thought of such goings-on. With tactful handling—which meant a sympathetic understanding of the blind panic behind the Southerner's raging and intemperate language—these individuals could sometimes be brought to concede that we had as much right to our idiosyncrasies as they had to theirs.

As a matter of fact, the canteen's no-discrimination policy came, with the passage of time, to be accepted more and more unquestioningly. Perhaps the main reason was that it had behind it the whole spirit and intent of a couple of weather-beaten documents called the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

But the word "trouble," brought forward as an excuse for continuing to deny simple justice to the Negro American, means more than race riots. To that tindery and inflammable entity, the American imagination, the word "trouble" suggests a vision or fantasy of millions of beautiful white girls being seduced by Negro men with the machinelike regularity of a sexual Willow Run. Whereupon each beautiful white girl produces—almost instantly, too—a coal-black baby with purple high lights.

From a practical point of view, however, the production of coal-black babies by white women is not the lead-pipe cinch it is dreamed to be. Few Negro Americans are



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coal-black. White men have been cohabiting with Negro women for several hundred years, and so extensive and effective has this mingling of the races been that the American Negro is referred to by scientists as a mulatto and not as a true Negro type at all.

A white woman, therefore, wishing impishly to surprise the folks at home with a jet-hued grandchild, cannot just go out and lay her hands on a coal-black sire. And once found, there is no guarantee that the resultant offspring will be coal-black. Generally speaking, the child of a white person and a Negro tends to be somewhat lighter in color than the Negro parent.

Owing to the appetites of Caucasian males and the helplessness of many Negro women to defend themselves against these appetites, the Negro American is getting whiter all the time. The Negro represents only ten per cent of our total population, and even if intermarriage were encouraged—nay, positively cheered on—in every state in the Union, the white race would not become dark. The dark race would ultimately become white.

Our Junior Hostesses were expected to talk to and dance with any serviceman, regardless of race, creed or color, who was not drunk or otherwise offensive. But courtesy is not copulation, as all courteous people know, and none of our white Junior Hostesses had to go home to Papa with an interracial baby wrapped up in an old plaid shawl.



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While the canteen's no-discrimination policy did not result in "trouble," its launching and maintenance were a little more taxing than rolling off a log. If the no-discrimination policy had behind it the highest ideals of American thought and feeling, it had in front of it a veritable miasma of legends, myths, fairy tales and sweeping but inaccurate generalities. This meant work.

One thing contributed to make things easier, and that was the fact that we were working as a group. Except worry, there is very little that a single individual, working alone, can do about improving race relations in this country. The only way to make progress is to work with other people.

**SAYS CLARE BOOTHE LUCE:**

"Let those who despair, because our way of life has bred its political Bilbos, rejoice that it also gives us writers like Margaret Halsey who can supply the cure of truth."

One of the less dismaying aspects of race relations in the United States is that their improvement is not a matter of a few people having a great deal of courage. It is a matter of a great many people having just a little courage.

Our Junior Hostesses were not forced to dance with Negroes. The Junior Hostesses knew before they started working at the canteen that they were expected to dance with any well-behaved serviceman who asked them. If they could not whip themselves up to this pitch of im-



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partiality, they were entirely free to go and be hostesses at some other canteen.

The canteen had approximately a thousand Junior Hostesses, but owing to the high turnover characteristic of all volunteer organizations, it was necessary to interview—in the course of four years—about 4,000 girls. Of this number, approximately ten refused to work in our canteen on hearing that they would be expected to treat Negro servicemen just like any others. Not all the girls were Southerners. On the contrary, there were some young Southern girls acting as Junior Hostesses whose ability to grasp the nettle and come to terms with reality was worthy of a 21-gun salute.

I had one of these on my own shift—a pretty and a darling creature, a veritable sugarplum. One night I noticed that the floor was not crowded, nobody was cutting in, and my little Southerner was dancing with a Negro Coast Guardsman. Intuition told me that the girl was desperately frightened. It was almost a quarter of an hour before the orchestra arrived at an interval and stopped playing. But she didn't miss a step. It was one of those superb exhibitions of good manners for which the South is justly famous. I often think of her when I hear Northerners making sweeping denunciations of the South—especially Northerners who have never done anything about race relations except read books.

Not all prejudiced servicemen were Southerners, but the non-Southern ones generally limited



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have never done anything about race relations except read books.

Not all prejudiced servicemen were Southerners, but the non-Southern ones generally limited themselves to a sour remark or two and let it go at that. Southerners, though, love to talk. They like to talk about anything, but especially and in particular they like to talk about Yankees and Negroes.

Once in a while—not often, but once in a while—a denizen of Dixie turned up whose white-supremacy tenets did not sufficiently disguise a nature akin to the beast. Since they did not carry their shootin' arms with them, there was nothing drastic these characters could do. Nevertheless, they were frightening.

I was once sitting with a Negro sailor, when there suddenly materialized in front of me a soldier whose appearance suggested the hillbilly rather than the phantom of delight. He looked at the sailor and me with pure, blazing animal hatred. If I ever see that look again, I hope it will be in someone who is firmly anchored to a strait jacket. My Navy vis-à-vis kept on talking, so I took my cue from him and went on talking, too—though my heart was thudding like a piston. The canteen clock being right over the apparition's shoulder, I was able to observe that he stood there for seven minutes. Finally, when neither of us paid any attention to him, he walked slowly away, keeping his head turned over his shoulder and favoring us with that maniacal glare until he was out of sight.

But for every moment of strain



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caused by people like the hillbilly, there were hundreds and thousands of times when the canteen's interracial character impressed and educated white servicemen and soothed the raw nerves of Negro servicemen. When Negro servicemen wrote and told us that we had given them hope for the first time in their lives, and when white servicemen wrote and said that we were the kind of people they were glad to go overseas and fight for, we knew we were on the right track.

It is not my job, or anybody else's, to convert Southerners. Any converting of Southerners that gets done will have to be done by the Southerners themselves. No single individual, haranguing, can make a prejudiced person hit the sawdust trail. The modification of prejudice takes a long time, and occurs as the result of a thousand things that happen to the prejudiced person—things he sees and hears and reads, people he talks to and places he visits.

If I had to sum up in a single sentence my own experience of Southerners, it would be this: They do not have much fun. Admittedly, their rehashings of the War Between the States are tiresome. But passionately as many Southerners inveigh against the carpetbaggers, it is not really those long-dead entrepreneurs with whom they are angry. They are angry at something else—something they cannot put a name to. The real cause of those feelings is that, so far as race relations are concerned, history has caught the Southerners in a squeeze



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play.

Realistically considered, the rise in racial tensions cannot be blamed on anyone. We have fought two World Wars for democracy in the space of 30 years. In time of war, a nation gets very self-conscious about its national ideals. It has to. Otherwise its people wouldn't fight. Twice in 30 years Americans have rallied around the word "democracy," but when their glances fell on the Jim Crow section, they instinctively winced. Our two wars have given us a heightened awareness of democracy. But a heightened national feeling for democracy automatically produces a heightened outcry from the people whose habits of thought would be disturbed by the extension of democracy to the Negro American.

Prejudiced Southerners certainly require a measure of compassion, as having what is probably the most complicated headache any set of human beings ever fell heir to. The South cannot go backward to slavery, but because it accepts as real many fantasies and legends about the Negro, it is utterly terrified to go forward to racial equality. And this is only the half of it. Southerners have their fair share of national instinct for decency, and that is what accounts for their fury at any suggestion that the Negro take his rightful place in our commonwealth. Only one thing makes people as angry as some Southerners become at the idea of racial equality, and that is the pricking of the angry person's own conscience.

The Southerners say shocking things because they are terrified.



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They are desperately afraid that the Southern Negro, spurred on by men of good will, will turn the tables and make white Southerners accept the liabilities under which the Negro now labors. This is just a bad dream they are having. Southerners are so used to having second-class citizens around that they cannot imagine any civilization without such a group. Instinctively, but incorrectly, they figure that if the Negroes are not second-class citizens, then they—the white Southerners—will be. The actuality is that neither the Negroes nor the men of good will want white Southerners to change places with the Negro. These people want a civilization in which *no* group is systematically discriminated against.

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The number of Negro servicemen entertained at our canteen varied according to whether there were Negro outfits stationed near or passing through New York. But on an average, about six or eight per cent of the servicemen who visited the canteen were Negroes—a proportion which was about the same as the number of Negroes in the armed services. People who heard of the no-discrimination policy sometimes asked curiously how the Negro servicemen behaved. These people seemed to have a preconceived idea that our Negro guests, discovering they were not going to be penalized for the color of their skins, plunged immediately into an orgy of arrogance and wanton rudeness. Actually, the Negro servicemen behaved just like any-



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body else.

Interracial projects are imagined—by people who have never been within a mile of one—to be uninterruptedly tumultuous. In practice, there is nothing especially dramatic in people getting along well together. As a spectacle, it is rather tame. The canteen considered that a Negro serviceman who was good enough to die for a white girl was good enough to dance with her.

As for the Negro servicemen themselves, they did not seem to be overwhelmed by the opportunity to dance with Caucasian ladies. Once in a while a Negro serviceman would select the blondest girl on the dance floor and go twirling away with a “Virginia-was-never-like-this!” expression on his face. But most of our Negro guests appeared to prefer the company of the Negro Junior Hostesses, and the Negro hostesses told me that, as a rule, a Negro serviceman did not ask a white girl to dance unless he had a particular reason. Either she was an exceptionally good dancer or else she was someone he had gotten to know and wanted to talk to.

“This is the very first time I have ever felt and been treated like a man,” a Negro serviceman once said to one of our workers, and similar sentiments were echoed in hundreds of letters the canteen received from Negro boys in the armed forces. But what the Negro servicemen liked about the canteen was not dancing with white girls, per se. What they liked was being free to choose with whom they would dance.



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Visionary is the word usually applied to people who believe in doing something palpable and tangible about the improvement of race relations. But only two races are involved in the troubled question of our Negro minority, and blissfully to ignore the feelings and reactions of one of them is scarcely hard-headed or practical. The strongly prejudiced section of our populace is so unlovely, when aroused, that one is greatly tempted to soothe and coddle it. But yielding to this temptation can scarcely be justified in the name of practicality when, by pampering our biased citizens, we give our Negro compatriots so much cause for righteous anger that they prepare to take up arms and build barricades in the streets.

We have spent good money to instruct all the schoolchildren in this country, Negro and Caucasian, that freedom is worth fighting for. That instruction is a *fait accompli*. It is too late now to wish we had been a little more sparing with it.

Reluctance to stir up the emotions of the Negrophobes is certainly a natural feeling and one that can readily be sympathized with. But a democracy has the right to maintain itself as a democracy, and a nation sometimes has to discipline its citizens as a parent does a child, and for the same reason.

Even the most wholeheartedly idealistic people are usually uncomfortable in their first contacts with Negroes as co-workers or as social equals. For one thing, these people feel trapped. Democracy does not require that you *like*



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every Negro you meet on a plane of equality, but most well-intentioned people unconsciously assume it does. They do not know what they are going to do if their first Negro turns out to be vain, pompous, greedy, selfish, tiresome, stupid or in some other way unappealing. Actually, nothing more is required of them than is required when meeting white people who have these qualities.

What makes well-intentioned people ill at ease in their first contact with Negroes on a footing of equality is a conflict between two opposing aspects of the civilization that formed them. On the one hand, these people have been taught, and have taken seriously, the democratic concept of equality and the religious concept of brotherhood. On the other hand, they have also been taught—in a thousand tiny, subtle ways and regardless of whether or not they were brought up in the South—to associate dark skin with

Spirituals

Big feet

Irresponsibility

Deplorable (from the point of view of Anglo-Saxon restraint) taste in clothes

Uncle Tom

Aunt Jemima

Rochester

Pullman porters

Inexhaustible sexuality

“Coal-black” babies

Rape

There is not room for these two reactions—the democratic one and the popular-legend one—in the same person at the same time. Not,



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that is, if the person is to be at all comfortable.

For reasons largely economic, the pigmentation of the Negro has been made to assume a staggering measure of importance, but in reality it has no importance at all. In reality, the dark skin of the Negro is *neither* good nor bad. It just is, like air or water. When the races of man—Caucasian, Malay, Mongol, Negro, etc.—were evolving from the primeval slime, the place in which the Negro happened to evolve was the jungle of Africa. For this reason, he developed dark skin, to protect himself against the actinic rays of the sun, and wide nostrils, to scoop in more of the wet, clinging air of the tropics. That, and that alone, is the sole meaning of the Negro's coloration.

There is another aspect of the Negro which has been weighted down, even for technically unprejudiced people, with feelings that do not actually have anything to do with it, and that is his comparative barbarity. The Negro did not develop a civilization in Africa comparable to those which were developed in the temperate zones because the jungle makes virtually impossible the two things which are necessary for a burgeoning culture—agriculture and communication.

Although strong emotions have been permitted to attach themselves to it, the relative barbarity of the Negro is a phenomenon of no particular significance. It may possibly be that he is incurably barbaric, but so far it hasn't been proved. What evidence there is seems to indicate that with half a



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chance—which is about all he gets, even with the breaks—he can get as much out of, and put as much into, the Temperate Zone culture as the people who evolved there.

**SAYS ALBERT D. LASKER:**

"I believe *Color Blind* will excite the nation, more than anything I have read on the subject, into a frank facing of just where we are. It is profound, discerning, entertaining and engaging."

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It now becomes necessary to talk in more detail about sex. The race problem would seem to be primarily economic. But if man is an economic animal, he is also a sexual animal, *and he is both simultaneously*. The economic and the sexual aspects of race relationships in the United States are inextricably intertwined. Some of our citizens—a touch more acquisitive than is recommended in the Bible—would like to keep the Negro as a supply of cheap labor. In a democracy, the wish to keep human beings and fellow men as a supply of cheap labor cannot be publicly, and seldom even privately, admitted to. It is therefore necessary to defend such a wish with arguments based, not on economic, but on sexual premises. (The premise, for instance, that Negro men have an obsessional desire to marry or to ravish white women.) By this expedient of concealing an economic motive with sexual red herrings, many well-meaning white people are confused. They are so deeply confused that, perhaps understand-



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ably, they recoil from the whole issue and leave the acquisitive citizens a clear field.

One of the things that accounts for this recoil of well-meaning whites from their responsibilities is that the subject of race is so overlaid with violent, melodramatic words and phrases. Well-intentioned white people leading uneventful, fairly well-regulated lives hear words like "lynching" and phrases like "race clash" and "race riot."

"Surely," they think to themselves, "this turgid and furious business cannot have anything to do with my undramatic life."

As a matter of fact, these phrases represent only those parts of Negro-white relationships which have gotten out of control, and in the long run the whole resolution of racial tensions in this country is going to depend upon the building up of uneventful, undramatic, unremarkable relationships between Negro and white people in the same general economic and cultural classes and with the same general problems and interests.

One of the words which most disinclines white people to experiment in race relations is the word "rape." Southern servicemen who came into our canteen and talked to us about race relations used to get pitiably upset because they had gone away to war and left their wives and sisters alone in communities containing large Negro elements which had not been given opportunities to refine and improve themselves. Few of these servicemen could think of anything prac-



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tical to do about the situation except bring their guns back from the war and shoot the Negroes. If, that is, the Negroes had assaulted any white women in the interim.

This project always seemed to me a superlative example of inefficiency. The main objective is assumed to be the prevention of assaults on white women. Two factors are involved: One, that the white women *are* women, a condition for which there is no known cure. And two, that these women were living among a group of economically exploited Negroes. That the Negroes resented this exploitation was perfectly clear from the Southerners' fear that they would express that resentment in sexual assaults the minute the white males left for the wars. Given two factors—sex and resentment. It is impossible to do away with the sex, so the only course remaining is to do away with the resentment.

Before the Civil War, no such aura of sexuality and sexual arguments and disputations hung about the Negro as hangs about him to-day. Negroes were chattels. They did not have to be paid for the work they did, and their women could be enjoyed by white males as property. But after the war, the Negro became a worker who had to be paid for his work, and sexual forays against his womenfolk became sexual forays against women, and not the simple use of possessions.

Out of the unwillingness of various classes of whites to accept the new economic and spiritual status of the Negro grew a curious, two-fold legend. Part One of the legend



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and when a man's biological drives begin to push him beyond the framework of accepted behavior, it is of no particular consequence—from a strictly practical point of view—whether he is Negro or Caucasian. He says the same things and he has the same approach, because there is only one approach. A white hostess would have had exactly the same problem with a too-insistent Negro serviceman that she had with the too-insistent white ones, and a hostess who could not learn to master the problem of the overimpetuous male, of any description, had no business working in a canteen at all.

Too much cannot be said for our Negro Junior Hostesses. They were young women whose background and education entitled them to hold up their heads in any circle, but they had enough breadth of vision to be willing to risk encountering boorish and unmannerly people in order that the two races might have a chance to get to know each other better. While the backbone of the Negro sexual legend is that all Negro men want to sleep with white women, there is a sort of auxiliary myth to the effect that all Negro women want to sleep with anyone who comes along.

The unmistakable respectability of our Negro Junior Hostesses did not keep some of the white servicemen from trying the "*Combien?*" approach, though a child of four could have predicted the ensuing rebuff. Our no-discrimination policy certainly meant that we had to be alert to protect young girls.



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to be alert to protect young girls. But not young white girls.

White people—even white people with democratic impulses—are timid about letting Negro men meet white girls as equals because they think the Negroes will take advantage of proximity to ask the white girls to marry them. That, at least, is what white people *think* they think. Actually, this does not represent their thoughts with entire accuracy. Marriages are entered into voluntarily. What the white people are afraid of is not that the Negro men will propose to the white girls, *but that the white girls will say yes*. The whole implication behind the hackneyed old question, “Would you like your daughter to marry one?” is that your daughter *would* fall in love with one, and marry him quick as a flash, if she got the chance.

In all the talk about Negroes and sex, the emphasis is always on how supremely desirable Negro men find white women. But the real belief is exactly the opposite. The real belief underlying the wish to keep Negro men away from white women is that *white women*, if they get to know them as equals and can meet them without losing caste, *will find Negro men attractive*.

If the people who clamor for segregation knew what they were revealing about themselves and, by implication, about the women they want to keep “pure,” they would subside in an agony of blushes. For the real basis of segregation is not repulsion, but attraction. You do not have to put a wall between yourself and any object by which



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you are genuinely repelled. You can trust yourself to stay away from it without any wall.

The popular expression is that Negro men want white women. But the popular, though unstated, belief is that they not only want them, but they can get them, unless every barrier ingenuity can devise is raised. And even with all the barriers up, in every possible field—social, economic and educational—the people who erect those barriers have no real confidence in them. They are in a constant panic for fear the walls will prove inadequate.

Quite aside from all the whispered myths and furtive folklore, the structure of American society makes it clear that white Americans believe the Negro American has got something sexually which they, the whites, haven't got. The obvious question arises whether this belief has any basis in fact and truth.

Most, and perhaps all, white people take it for granted that Negroes are more musical, more rhythmical, better co-ordinated muscularly, more impulsive, more spontaneous, closer to the child and the pagan than white people are; and from this they infer that the sex life of the Negro is more uninhibited and more gratifying than the sex life of white people, with its hesitancies, shyness, self-doubts, misgivings, embarrassment and other hampering phenomena.

So far as I know, there are no reliable, scientific studies or surveys of the comparative sexual potency of the Negro American and the white American. No conclusion can



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be arrived at, therefore, except what may be inferred from observing the factors conducive, or not conducive, to potency in the lives of two groups.

**SAYS DR. JOHN HAYNES HOLMES:**

**This book "contains more common sense, courage and sheer wisdom, to the single line and paragraph, than any other book I can remember on the Negro problem in America."**

The sex patterns of a group or of an individual are all of a piece with the nonsexual patterns of that group or that individual. That is to say, if all the other patterns are simple, the sexual patterns will be simple, too. If all the other patterns are complex, the sexual patterns will also be complex. The patterns of white American society are complex. Achievement, both spiritual and material, at the price of curbing the reproductive instinct, is characteristic of that society. But the Negro American does not live *in* white American society. He only lives next door to it. Except as a servant, we do not let him into our homes, our churches, our schools, our clubs or any of those places where we are most completely ourselves and where, were he admitted as an equal, we could expect to exercise the most profound and noticeable influence on him.

It therefore seems safe to say that where simple nonsexual patterns of life have been forced upon the Negro, his sexual patterns will be simple, too. That is to say, in those situations where he is denied all



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outlet for his ambition and not allowed to prepare himself for accepting responsibilities which would drain his energies out of sexual channels, he probably has fewer inhibitions than the white American and greater sexual potency, on the adolescent level.

It has been my own observation, for what it is worth, that those Negroes whose lives are most like the lives of white people—whose education and responsibilities are most nearly parallel to those of the whites and who are most accustomed to mixing with white people as equals—also show signs of being conditioned by the white man's restraints and inhibitions about sexual activities.

No white person, even when he wants to, can understand what it means to be a Negro living in the United States of America, any more than a non-combatant can understand what it means to be in action. The constant danger which enshadows the Negro American all his life—danger of small and great indignities, and of actual physical harm or outright destruction—is something that cannot be conveyed to those who have not lived through it. The inability of white Americans—even those who want to—fully to comprehend what life is like for the Negro American is one of the two factors which are basic in the lack of understanding between the races.

The other factor is that the white man's complex civilization inevitably makes him sexually jealous of the Negro. The many satisfactions of the white man's nonprimitive civilization—endur-



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ing family relationships, multiple achievements, etc.—are maintained only by the limitation of his reproductive drive. This not-fully-expended drive makes it impossible for the white man to view sexual activities calmly and without distortion.

The white man is attracted to and envious of all primitives. It was not just an accident that Dorothy Lamour's sarong gained such a foothold in the national imagination. But he is most intensely fascinated by and jealous of those people living according to a primitive structure right in the same country with him.

Sex being the white American's Achilles' heel, it is as if, when he looks at the Negro American, he had blinders on. He can see only one thing in the Negro—a talent for silken dalliance which he, the white man, does not have. He does not see that this talent exists in different degrees in individual Negroes, and does not necessarily appertain to all Negroes. He does not see that it is a part and only one part, of a pattern which has been imposed on the Negro American to serve an economic purpose. He does not see how lonely it is for the Negro in these United States.

It is just as true of the Negro as it is of anyone else that he cannot have his cake and eat it, too. If he is free to live wherever he can afford it, to eat wherever he can pay the check, to go to the same schools and churches white people go to, to hold whatever jobs his abilities warrant, he will have to satisfy these ambitions and attain



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these multiple objectives in the same way the white man does—i.e., at the expense of the reproductive drive. The further the Negro gets into complex white society, and the more of its advantages he enjoys, the more also he comes within range of its powerful and chastening disciplines.

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People of good will, and especially people of good will who have daughters, are made very unhappy by the stereotyped old question, "Would you like your daughter to marry one?" They do not wish to say no, because they feel it is a slur on a group of their fellow citizens. On the other hand, they have a dismaying mental picture of the daughter living in Harlem, bearing "coal-black" babies, cut off from family and friends, possibly being ill-treated by the Negro community and in general leading the life of a miserable outcast. But they exaggerate the danger. The most persistent mistake the white man makes in his relationship with the Negro is to assume that because he, the Caucasian, has something in mind, the Negro has it in mind, too.

In his book, *An American Dilemma*, the Swedish scientist, Gunnar Myrdal, compiles a list of what the Negro American wants and another list of what white Americans think the Negro wants. On the Negro's list, intermarriage is at the very bottom. On the white's list, it is at the top.

What attracts the Negro about white people is not what we *are*, but what we *have*—our freedom from humiliation and insult, and



## COLOR BLIND

the scope we have for gratifying our ambitions and our achievement drives. Negroes are not interested in intermarriage for the very sound reason that there is no percentage in it for them. If they marry white people, they do not move into the white community. They must attempt to take their white partners into the Negro community.

Despite the fact that Negro-white marriages are rare, and despite the fact that the Negro needs and wants educational and economic equality a good deal more than he needs and wants interracial unions, intermarriage is a focal issue in Negro-white relations in this country. And it will remain a focal issue until the operation of the Christian and democratic conscience has drawn the Negro far enough into complex white society to be modified by its disciplinary pressures.

In view of the forces at work in the situation, the integration of the Negro American into American society will, when it is finally accomplished, be one of the greatest monuments to the human spirit in all of history. As intermarriage ultimately develops, there will probably be a small group of whites who marry only whites; a small group of Negroes who marry only Negroes; and a much larger group in between of Negroes and whites who feel free to marry each other *if they want to*. It is a mistake to try to envision that future in terms of the way many white Americans feel now. By the time such an era arrives, the necessary adjustments to it will have been made.



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There was a time when sincere and well-meaning people felt, and felt passionately, that to administer an anesthetic for an operation was to flout the will of God. In the same way, the feelings, myths and prejudices about the Negro American which now seem so vivid and real to some of our white contemporaries will take their place on the shelf along with the belief in witches and the notion that the earth is the center of the solar system.

Meanwhile, to avoid crippling disillusionments, steps taken to improve race relations have to be made in the full knowledge that some Negro Americans and some white Americans are not ready for them. At the same time that we open jobs to Negroes that have not been held by Negroes before, and neighborhoods to Negroes where they have not lived before, we will have to be providing the education which will make them equal to their new responsibilities. Simultaneously, we will have to educate white people the way the canteen educated them—by laboratory demonstrations that interracial projects will not only work, but will free the white people who participate in them of a very considerable burden of guilt.

We will, to sum up, have to do many things at once. This is neither so novel nor so frightening a prospect as may at first be imagined. There is nothing especially new to human experience in having to take care of everything at once. It is often, as a matter of fact, referred to with pride as The American Tradition.