



Paul Thompson

The little girls of the North Harlem Community Club for Negro Children patronize the most sophisticated of the arts —ballet dancing. And the young aspirants seem to take to it naturally, to say the least

## *“I’d Like to Show You Harlem”*

This Prosperous City of 150,000 Negroes (Where Even the Cops Are Colored) Is One Bright Spot in Our Black Problem

By Rollin Lynde Hartt

Author of “The New Negro”

**W**HEN we get possession of Africa,” a negro said to me in Harlem the other day, “we are going to build a civilization so splendid that white women will blacken their faces and frizz their hair.” He was joking, partly. But in all seriousness he added, “Who knows if we have a long time to wait? Already the spirit of prophecy is abroad; out West the Angel Gabriel has told a fifteen-year-old boy, ‘You negroes shall have Africa,’ and in Liberia the trees have cried out, ‘You negroes shall have Africa!’ and the rocks answered, ‘Yes, yes! Amen! Africa for the Africans!’”

I suppose I looked incredulous, for he went on, “Superstition? Well, we are superstitious.” And they are. More than that, they are quixotic. Outside the building where we chatted hangs the red, green and black flag of Africa. Within reigns—if you call it reigning—all Africa’s “provisional president,” his Excellency the Honorable Marcus Garvey. And yet negroes, like other folks, require some visible basis for their superstition and their quixotism. Back of both, in the new negro’s case, looms an achievement—namely, Harlem, the wonderful.

Greatest negro city in the world, it boasts magnificent negro churches, luxurious negro apartment houses, vast negro wealth, and a negro population of 130,000, or possibly 150,000, or, as enthusiasts declare, 195,000. Only fifteen years ago Harlem was white. Today it is an exhibit, not of darkest, but of brightest Africa. No matter what his attitude toward Garvey and Garveyism, every new negro argues, consciously or unconsciously, “If my race could make Harlem, pray, what on earth can’t it do?” and, in discussing race problems, he will remark, sooner or later, “I’d like to show you Harlem.” It is his Q. E. D. And a point well taken? Go see.

Climbing the subway stairs at 135th Street and Lenox Avenue, you suppress a squirm; also a rising humorosity. Both are foolish. This is no usual Black Belt or Little Africa or San Juan Hill. It is no mere glorified Lime Kiln Club. From the top of those stairs you get an impression of spaciousness, of cleanliness, of prosperity, of success—of brilliance, almost. A negro said to me once, “There’s no finer section of New York City.”

It was not a particularly wild exaggeration, you will find.

True, a certain amount of poverty and a certain very pitiable degree of overcrowding occasionally lurk behind those brownstone fronts or sadden the interiors of less antiquated dwellings, and one hears on official authority that crime and illiteracy in Harlem are above “normal.” Yet what meets the eye is all but universally cheerful—streets broad and well kept, houses scrupulously cared for, and the inhabitants admirably prosperous. You notice a profusion of “pussy-cat” hats. You see expensively clad

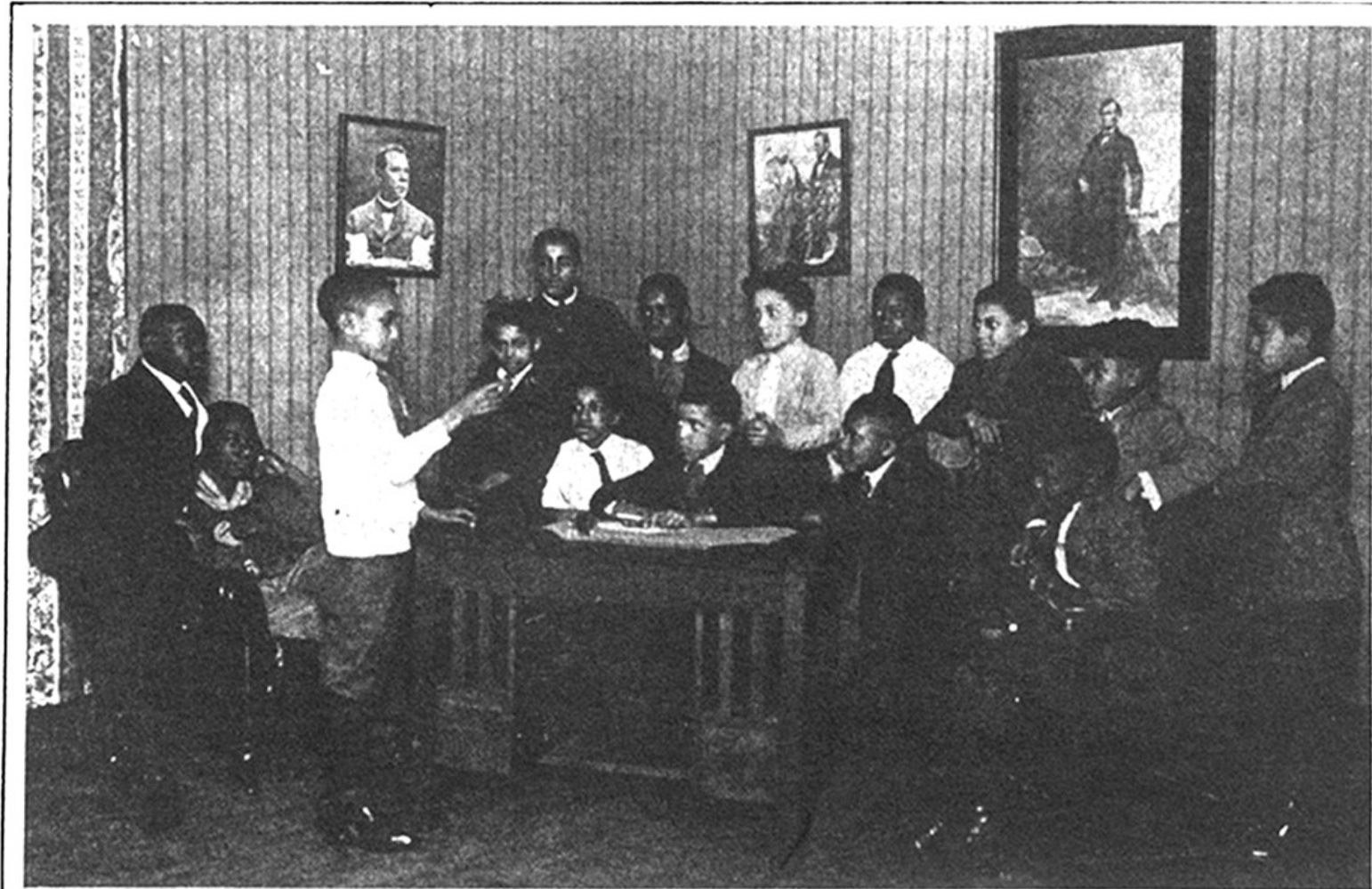


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mothers perambulating superb baby carriages. Beside Little Italy and the Ghetto, Harlem shines. And if its people are black, who cares? In ten minutes or less, you begin to forget, and in a half-hour or less you are color-blind, quite.

As for the humorous side, you may be tempted to poke fun a little at that Harlem grandee, Sir Walter Craig, musician, and at Professor Darling Mack's "twenty-five jazz demons, every member an irresistible jazz fiend," and at the basket ball promoter who advertizes, "Come out, bring your horns, bells, rattles, and cheer the home girls on in their fight to stop the invaders," nor will you keep an entirely straight face when reading, "Hats off to Lelia Edmunds! She has broken into the charmed circle of the three leaders of the Popularity-Beauty Contest." Perhaps you might also poke fun at the Jack Johnson Welcome Home Club. But Harlem is not amusing, in the main. In the main, it is impressive. Especially the churches.

St. Philip's, with 4000 communicants, has lately erected a \$300,000 Gothic edifice in stone and tawny brick. Note the mullioned windows, the exquisitely sculptured corbels, the fine brass, the reredos adorned with gleaming mosaic. Any parish, anywhere, might well be proud of such a church. Meanwhile the Metropolitan Baptists have taken over a handsome stone structure, vaguely Richardsonian in design and belonging originally to a white congregation. Of the many smaller churches in Harlem, a few are undeniably quaint. One, in a tiny shop, has a tiny restaurant down cellar. Another announces a "big baptizing." Still another puts out a sign, "Look! Look! Souls are being saved!" A fourth styles itself "Christadelphian Ecclesia." And the Spiritualists flourish, moderately, while a charm-



With Booker T. Washington and Abraham Lincoln approving from the walls, the very young men of the North Harlem Community Club get together in solemn conclave over all manner of important questions

ing wizard proclaims, "Magic words—secret, sure method of obtaining anything you want; postpaid for dime." But the usual Harlem church, tho little, is so beautifully built in such costly material that you ask, "Where do these negroes get all this money?"

Where, indeed? Their "Y" cost \$350,000. Their "Y. W." cost the same. St. Philip's deals in real estate and has holdings valued at \$1,000,000. All told, the Harlem negroes control real estate worth \$20,000,000 according to the lowest estimate, \$300,000,000 according to the highest. Nobody knows precisely. You hear of "four millionaires" and "ten half-millionaires"; also you hear that individual wealth rarely exceeds \$75,000. But there are two banks owned and operated by negroes, and of New York's 500 negro automobile licenses a majority are held in Harlem, and the Harlem shop-windows display goods at prices by no means humble—\$18 for a smoking-table, \$30 for a lamp.

The explanation is, negroes have gone into business—the real estate business, the insurance business, the amuse-



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ment business, and a dozen other kinds of business, large and small. A negro millinery shop offers "a variety of styles in the latest Parisian shapes" created "by expert negro designers." A negro apothecary advertizes, "Why Not Go to Our Own Drugstore? They employ all colored men." A negro music shop sells negro "spirituals" and records of "Lucille Hegamin, the wonderful colored singer, accompanied by the Blue Flame Syncopaters." And what chances one hears of for investment! The African International Traders, Inc. "are buying and selling for negroes the world over." S. S. Bassa arrives with "a rich cargo of mahogany for the Gold Coast Import and Export Company." "Kpakpa Quartey, West African timber and mineral lands owner, will entertain general business propositions." "The World Wonder Oil and Gas Company of Kansas City, largest oil company operated by negroes, has opened its eastern headquarters in the beautiful office building owned by Dr. Wiley Wilson." And the Crocker Air Line Company (Detroit) is "equipping locomotives with compressed air" and desires \$100,000 "to erect a machine shop to employ 50,000 laborers of our own race. Our boys and girls have been educated to a commercial and business knowledge, but, owing to the lack of business industries have been compelled to let it waste and have had to go to the other race and accept lower positions."



To a certain extent the charge is true. But more and more the negroes are driving the whites out of business all thru Harlem, and this is one reason why Hampton and Tuskegee seek recruits so confidently there, and why such establishments as the Toussaint School of Professional Photography, the Crichlow-Braithwaite Shorthand School, the New York Academy of Stenography and Typewriting, the National School of Music, and Mme. Grant's School of Dressmaking attract pupils. Young Harlem will soon be independent of "the other race." Its own race advances rapidly, for, while undesirables, of a sort, pour in from the Southern states, a highly ambitious and on the whole very well educated type arrives from the British West Indies. To this influx of West Indian negroes—40,000 have come, they say—Harlem's prosperity is largely due.

Why do they come? Explanations vary. Some will tell you, "It is because land in the British West Indies is held in large estates; a negro has no chance to buy in and get a start." Others say, "It is because we lacked opportunities for technical education." And when you ask if the much more drastic color line in the States was not a deterrent, they shrug their shoulders and change the subject. They feel it, tho—especially the mulattoes. In the British West Indies, there is a distinction between "colored people" and negroes. Here, the West Indian mulatto finds himself a man without a race. The whites scorn him. He scorns the blacks. Meanwhile he is not too fond of the Spanish-speak-



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ing folk—West Indian cigarmakers from Cuba and Porto Rico. Harlem has 15,000 Porto Ricans. In the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library you will see an array of photographs, "Old Homes of New Americans—Porto Rico." You will also see *La Tribuna* and *La Gaceta*, newspapers printed in Spanish.

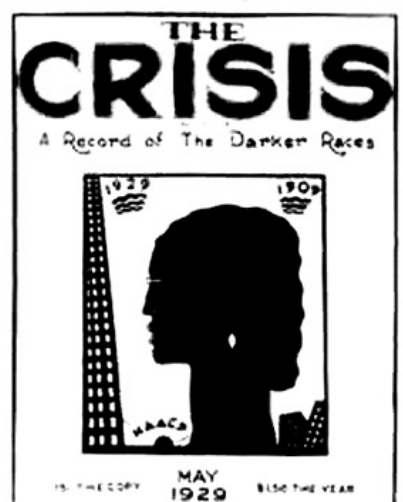
This, obviously, is a first step in Americanization. Once the Spanish-speaking negroes have been attracted to the Library, they may begin to show interest in its forum, where race problems are discussed by visiting celebrities, and perhaps even in its collection of books on race problems. Harlem reads enormously. Harlem thinks, tho you would little imagine it at first. What with festivities loudly announced by "the Great Fraternal and Loving Order of Grand United Mosaic Templars," the Colored Amateur Billiards Association, the Waiters' Association, the Brotherhood of Pullman Porters, the Professional Chauffeurs, and the Royal Four Social Club ("first prize \$5 in gold to the lady wearing the prettiest silk waist and stockings"), the place seems frivolous.



But pause in front of Young's Book Exchange and see what Harlem buys. In one window you will notice "Dunbar's Poems," "Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln," "The Journal of Negro History, Vol. I," "Frederick Douglass, Orator," "The Negro Soldier in Our War," Emilio's "A Brave Black Regiment," Booker Washington's "My Larger Education," Du Bois's "Dark Water" and "Souls of Black Folk," Wiener's "Africa

and the Discovery of America," Hatcher's "John Jasper," Henson's "A Negro Explorer at the North Pole," Ray Stannard Baker's "Following the Color Line," Pickett's "The Negro Problem," Stewart's "The Haitian Revolution," Dowd's "The Negro Races," "Zabriskie's "The Virgin Islands," Seligmann's "The Negro Faces America," Stoddard's "The Rising Tide of Color." Incidentally, Harlem supports five negro newspapers, all of which endeavor persistently—and successfully—to keep race problems uppermost in Harlem's mind.

One result is a growth of race pride. To be sure, the "beauty" business still flourishes, quite as in the days when Mme. Walker became the richest negress in America and built a \$250,000 house on the Hudson. Miss Martha Simpson, "beauty culturist," advertizes "hair pressing," while "the Star Hair Grower," a "wonderful preparation," can be used "with or without straightening irons," and Dr. Fred Palmer's "Skin Whitener" is a "delicately tinted and scented face powder preferred by all race women of refinement." Moreover, certain mulattoes style them-



*Crisis* was an important magazine, edited by W.E.B Du Boise. It continues to this day.



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selves the "high brown" and would establish a color-line-within-the-color-line. But far more significant is the thriving trade in negro doll-babies. You find them displayed everywhere, with the legend, "Why should a negro child play with a white doll?" I wish they were blacker—yet they at least show that negroes are getting over their craven envy of the white race and learning to respect their own. Again, Harlem exhibits self-respect in its increasing readiness to care for its own unfortunates.

I imagine, however, that the negro children play with white children. Most likely they go to school with white children. Of the two large public schools in Harlem, one is 25 per cent white, the other 10 per cent. And no doubt it is permissible to applaud white entertainers at the Lincoln Theater, where they share the honors of vaudeville with negroes and seem hugely to relish the laughter of a black audience, as vanity knows no color line. But the loudest applause and the most uproarious laughter are reserved for negro performers.

Now it is not to be supposed that Harlem turned from white to black without something of a pang, and it would be interesting to find out just how the process began. According to one legend, a landlord put in negroes from spite. According to another, the negroes took the initiative and got in by employing a set of agents, sub-agents, and proxy sub-agents, who tricked the whites. It little matters. The negroes are there. They own the district—figuratively and to a surprising extent literally.

Soon there will be no old residents left. If present tendencies continue, there will be no white shopkeepers. And, little by little, black Harlem is spreading. Is it not conceivable, then, that somewhere along its borders, if not within it, there may develop the spirit that leads eventually to race warfare? Today, by all one can learn, no such spirit exists, tho Harlem is on its guard against just that sort of thing, and whenever the white race wants "trouble," "trouble" will be forthcoming. There are "guns."

I have this from inside. During the series of race riots, in Chicago, Washington, and elsewhere—not so long ago it was—a police officer consulted a leading negro in Harlem. "How's this?" said the officer. "Coming up the subway stairs, I notice that every negro's hip pocket bulges out, and I feel, and, sure enough, there's a gun. What would you advise me to do? Enforce the law against carrying concealed weapons?"

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“My advice is, let 'em alone. They won't start anything. But if somebody else does, taking away all the guns you can won't make any difference. There'll be thousands more.”

So the officer did nothing. And Harlem did likewise.

*New York*

