

CHAPTER XI

THE NEGRO GETS BY

IT HAPPENS, then, that in the welter and chaos of codes, and amid the changes which have been forced upon him by circumstance, the Negro gets along and occasionally "gets by." One of the ways by which he gets along is by maintaining his faith in "the best white people." He cultivates their acquaintance and good will and, as evidence of it, will occasionally invite them to some special event as a gesture of respect. Moreover, he will go even farther than that:

"White people have attended Negro functions. They know that they have always been given, if not 'special' seats, places where they could enjoy the affair, and seats arranged where all the white folks would be together. When they walk in a function that is apt to be attended by mixed races, they always pause to see where the white people are sitting. This the Negroes know as well as the white people. . . . The white people know that they will get reserved seats; it is our time-worn custom, and as long as we want them we are going to give them, and contribute every courtesy and comfort of entertainment while they are with us.¹

In general, whenever a Negro convention, or conference, or association, or lodge meets in a city, white officials are invited to give addresses of welcome, or to "extend the keys of the city." Negroes know that the extended key will only unlock such places as those to which they normally go; but they also know that the gesture, by showing respect is effective in building up good will. On such occasions Negroes will invariably treat such persons with extreme courtesy but will feel at a disadvantage until the visitors have gone.

"Not that anything will transpire that has not already

160

BERTRAM DOYLE, THE ETIQUETTE OF RACE
RELATIONS IN THE SOUTH (1937)

THE NEGRO GETS BY

161

occurred, but there is a reserve which Negroes maintain in the presence of whites, partly to refute the charge that they are seeking social equality, and partly to conserve a dignity that refuses to be made a spectacle to the curious."²

And partly, we add, because in the existing state of conditions, they are not always certain that officials are really and truly "our best white folks."

In cases of conflict that break out between the races, Negroes generally utter a stereotyped remark, to the effect that the conflict did not occur in the ranks of the "best white people." Moreover, in an effort to subdue the disorder, they often send emissaries to representatives of this class, whose opinions they respect, to ask them what to do under the circumstances. If a new movement is attempted, the effect of which is unknown because it departs from the expected, they will consult the "best white people"—whose sanction, if given, will cause all to be well.³

This is the real significance of such organizations as the Inter-racial Commission and all those numerous associations in the South, in which white and colored persons meet and discuss their common problems. It preserves intact the communication between the Negro and the white people whose opinions he respects and whose standing he regards. It keeps open the channel of good will, which the Negro believes will finally assist in, if it does not complete, the solution of many vexing aspects of race relations.

The Negro also "gets along" because, when in doubt as to what is expected of him, he will ask what is customary—not what is the law. He seems subconsciously to feel that custom is more powerful than law. And yet there are instances where no one can tell him just what is the custom or what will be accepted. In this case he falls back on old habits. If these habits are not accepted, the Negro merely "turns on his personality" and, by apology, ingratiation, or laughter, will be able to turn even this hard corner.⁴

The Negro gets along, to some extent, because in some cases he appeals to law to right conditions which seem to him intolerable. He appeals to law, in fact, only as a last resort. Perhaps subconsciously he then reasons that, if his status is defined by law, it may be changed or even supported by the same means.

Organizations have, indeed, been established among Negroes which seek, by process of law, to change the system of relations now existing. Some, for example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, have been militant enough to attempt to change the forms which are observed between the races, in face of the fact that feeling and sentiment have not changed. These organizations do undoubtedly attain and preserve gains that otherwise would, perhaps, be impossible. They do not always bring peace. In fact, they almost never do so. The significance of the agitation for rights and equality, as exemplified in, say, Mr. DuBois, formerly a guiding spirit in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was that under his scheme the races were not to be allowed to come to terms, and race relations were not again to be fixed in custom and formulated in codes before the Negro had fully experienced his freedom. Resistance to compromise has, then, helped to keep the racial situation in a state of flux and has tended to serve notice on the white man that weaker peoples expect him to live up to the principles established in his laws—those laws to which he proclaims loyalty.⁵

In perhaps no other respect is the change in relations made clearer than in the development of what has been called "bi-racial organization." This has seemingly resulted from the destruction of the old intimacies upon which the racial code traditionally rested. The movement for complete segregation of the races not only destroyed those intimacies but also destroyed the system by which the white man was limited to one set of occupations and the Negro to another. As a result, a professional class of physicians, ministers, lawyers, teachers, and small business men has sprung up to provide services for mem-

bers of the Negro race who are unacceptable to white professionals as patients, parishioners, clients, pupils, and customers. In some instances they do, indeed, serve both races. But the common expectation is that they will confine their services to Negroes.⁶ A Negro undertaker, says Murphy, does not bury white persons in any discovered instance.⁷

Churches, following the trends begun in slavery and continued throughout the Reconstruction, have become definitely racial in organization. An old Negro may occasionally be found who is a member of a white church. "But with due regard, however delicately managed, for the sacred traditions which demand a distinction between black and white; no new members of the Negro race are received."⁸ In some instances, however, a white evangelist will hold services in a white church, and Negroes will be invited as special subjects for his ministrations. The service for Negroes may, then, be held in a Negro church; or Negroes may attend a special service; or they may sit in a special section, at the same service with white people, in the white church. It is not entirely proper for a Negro to "get religion" under the circumstances, however.

"Some years ago there was a great revival in one of the churches of my own city. The evangelist was fervently inviting all kinds of people to come to the 'anxious seat.' Tramps, beggars, and drunkards were among the number. At last it was announced to the officials that a Negro, upon one of the back seats, was under conviction. Here was a problem of serious import. The officials held an anxious consultation, and it was finally announced that the Negro might receive salvation provided he remained in the inconspicuous pew."⁹

No instance is found where a white person "got religion" in a Negro church; but the expectation is that the evangelist, the minister, and the congregation would all feel highly honored.

The question of segregation of the races has occurred also in the labor unions. It has finally been reduced to the problem of accepting the principle of affiliation of laborers or of separating

the races. The original solution was to exclude Negroes altogether from membership, but "in places where the Negro has shown his ability to compete, and has managed to gain a sufficient foothold to compel recognition, labor unions have made earnest efforts to bring Negroes into the unions."¹⁰ The unions, so far as discovered, are separate for white and black; and the latter seldom have affiliation with the national and international organizations.¹¹

To continue the list of institutions which show this biracial organization would have small value. A generalization covering the situation may be made:

"The Negro at the present time has separate churches, schools, libraries,¹² hospitals, Y.M.C.A. associations, and even separate towns. In general, it may be said that where the Negro schools, churches, and Y.M.C.A. associations are not separate they do not exist."¹³

Separation of the races, with reference to residences, "exists in some form in all American cities."¹⁴ And, though the line is indistinct in many cases, it is doubtless exceptional when the two groups appear together in a given block.¹⁵ The phenomenon is perhaps economic; yet it is so widely observed and understood that violations of the expected have brought legal and extra-legal attempts at enforcement.¹⁶ Within this Negro residential area the traits of the Negro are almost wholly uncontaminated by white traditions and customs. The inhabitants are almost completely shut off from the white world. Indeed some of them have become so race conscious that they resent the presence of white persons within the areas.

The extension of this feeling has doubtless brought about the establishment of Negro towns. To some extent this is a form of protective coloration, for in towns where all residents, as well as all officials, are Negroes, white persons seldom intrude.¹⁷

Along with the development of biracial organization has gone also the increase of race consciousness among Negroes. The motive to this type of solidarity; says Dr. Park, has come from

an increasing sensibility of the Negro to pressure and prejudice from without his own group.¹⁸ These responses represent accommodations to changing internal and external relations and typify what Moton has called the "defense mechanism."

For our purposes, however, whatever the stimulus or motive, the biracial organization and development of race consciousness tend to perpetuate the state of affairs in which the two races meet and associate as though across a great chasm. Under such circumstances communication and co-operation do proceed, but the chief effect is to maintain proper social distance. Race-conscious Negroes thus insist on a rigid observance of forms which preserve distance and protect personal reserves; but they decry those forms which seem to remind them of dependency or of inferiority.

White people also tend to realize that forms appropriate for use, when Negroes are considered as members of a lower social status, are not suitable when individual Negroes have risen to professional ranking. The mores may indeed prohibit absolute equality, but they do not completely prevent recognition of worth as Negroes arise to a higher status. Booker T. Washington testifies, for example, that in all his personal contact with the white people of the South, he "never received a single personal insult." Not long since, the city of Richmond, Virginia, Moton relates:

"... without hesitancy or solicitation, and quite spontaneously, officially set aside its segregation ordinances and opened street cars, taxis, restaurants, and soda fountains, and even the porches of private houses on the line of march, to the unrestricted use of visiting delegates to the annual convention of a great Negro fraternal organization."¹⁹

An instance has come to our attention where a Negro woman in a small Texas town is, by the upper class of business and professional persons, commonly addressed as "Mrs. X," even though the title is given to no other woman in her group. Dr. Park relates that a clergyman resolved to address a "colored

woman, recently married, as 'Mrs.'—out of respect for the holy estate of matrimony."²⁰ Ralph tells of two mulatto sons of a white farmer, who inherited their father's property:

"When they went to town, the bankers enjoyed conversing with them. . . . The best men of the countryside bowed to them, even conversed with them in passing on the roads. But no white man ever visited their beautiful home . . . except an Episcopal bishop, who dined with one. . . . The bishop died before many white men knew of his daring."²¹

Not long since, a daily newspaper reported that, when opponents of a Negro baseball team failed to appear for a scheduled game, white amateurs from the city league volunteered to play instead.²² In this instance, as in others that have appeared, and will continue to appear, "the individual's ability to get results gives him an interest and a status independent of, and quite overshadowing, the superficial marks of personality."²³

In many instances where the races meet daily, "boss" has supplanted both "mister" for white men and "George" for Negroes as a term of address.²⁴ "Conversation is introduced with common salutations about the day, or the state of one's health, and individuals are addressed in the second person."²⁵ "Even the asperities of segregation are sometimes accompanied by a smile of deprecation; that deplores its necessity and ridicules its absurdity."²⁶ One enthusiast writes:

"In no case are these discriminatory and segregational laws carried out to the letter. In many instances they are only half-heartedly applied. We often see Negroes on street cars riding in front of the whites. Only recently I was shown into a toilet in a theatre marked "For whites only." . . . The segregation laws are becoming noticeably weak in certain phases of community life. Nobody seems to care whether the letter of the law is lived up to or not, although in some cases very positive gestures are made by officious whites."²⁷

In the field of commerce there is a growing realization that the Negro group controls a vast purchasing power.²⁸ The

growth of the chain store, with its emphasis upon turnover and its impersonal contacts, has brought about the situation where Negroes "get in line" to be served as customers; where as in most other stores they wait, as Negroes, for white people to be served first.

Yet changes and infractions of the code to allow for association on the level of economic, matrimonial, professional, or social status do not imply absence of social distances. In fact, "the distances which separate the races are maintained, but the attitudes involved are different. The races no longer look up and down; they look across."²⁹

Racial conflict and friction exist, on the other hand, where tradition and racial prejudice are breaking down, and the social order which they supported seems to be going to pieces;³⁰ that is to say, in the instances where the Negro is "getting out of his place." The Negro in his place is a smiling menial, like the stereotypes carried in advertisements of Cream of Wheat, or of Swift's hams;³¹ or is a low-comedy character like Florian Slappey of Octavius Roy Cohen fame. These Negroes will, while feeling their inferiority, "do the dirty work and not fuss about it."³² On the other hand, a Negro who is acquiring property, approaching the standard of the white men, becoming educated, showing prosperity in a way to be seen by white people, or seeking to improve his status rather than his condition, is definitely out of place.³³ He stimulates, to an extent, the apprehension that the South may eventually be dominated by the Negro.³⁴

Conflict may also arise where the Negro who conceives his status as not in the nature of things subordinate, or who, because he has not felt the superiority of the white group, resents his treatment as a subordinate. He makes small attempt to ingratiate himself into the good will of white people and is classed as bumptious or as a "smart nigger." Writers have noted that this class has changed manners, rarely using "ma'am" or "sir" when conversing with white people, seldom

touching or removing their hats as a sign of respect; and even on occasion monopolizing the inner side of the sidewalk, which is the "white man's right of way."³⁵ Negroes of this class try to reach the highest point of achievement and want no more nor any less than equal opportunity, says Moton.³⁶ It is perhaps needless to state that this conception does not fit in with the traditional one held in the South.

"You used to could tell a nigger something, and they'd listen to you, but that time's gone by. She as much as said she knew more than I did, and I'd rather be called the meanest name there is than have a nigger tell me that."³⁷

However, it seems that there are no racial antagonisms that cannot be overcome by scrupulous adherence to etiquette.³⁸ When a new situation arises that produces racial conflict, it may generally be changed to bring about harmony if only the groups will revert to the etiquette of race relations. A corollary of this statement would be, then, that conflict is relatively greater either where the observances expected and accepted between the races have not been regularized and codified or where they are neglected.

There remains still one other potential source of conflict. A Negro will occasionally find great cause for merriment in contemplating the existing codes of etiquette.³⁹ It might be assumed that, if the person found such a source of joy, he would subscribe to the situation quite wholeheartedly. The attitude seems, however, to be one of contempt rather than one of cheerfulness. The expectation is that the individual will neglect the code since it seems to have no real significance. The person, however, has detached himself from the situation, has evaluated it critically, and needs to spend small emotional energy either in defending or decrying existing conditions. He may, or may not, be called upon to use the traditional forms. If he does use the forms, he plays at the practice, as at an amusing game. He feels no inferiority or superiority. And this, in the broadest sense, is the true emancipation of the Negro.

Summarizing, then, and comparing the period of slavery with the one beginning in the early eighties and continuing to the present, we find a remarkable resemblance in the forms and observances that have been, and still are, common to the contact and association of the two races. Separation of the races is relatively more prominent in this latter period, and the intimacy which was characteristic of the relations in slavery has seemingly vanished. Relations, that is to say, have changed. They have, however, changed so gradually that only here and there are differences made obvious.

However, the comparative peace of the South, which also was characteristic of the period of slavery and of relations between the races, still to a great extent continues, even though conditions have changed. The situation seems not necessarily to be due to the laws and enactments which seek to define the circumstances and conditions under which the races meet, for those laws may or may not be observed, and yet relative harmony will continue. The peace which exists is, perhaps, not due to the formal changes in the political status of the Negro, for these have not everywhere, or by all Negroes, been attained. Moreover, if they had been attained, it is possible that they would have provoked more discord than harmony. The mores, requiring separation of white and colored persons, may be held accountable for the present conditions; but they have made communication and reciprocal exchange of influence between the races more difficult.

Perhaps the explanation of the situation may be found in the generalization that, under the laws which define the status of the Negro, and within the limits of the mores which tend to segregate the races more and more, the Negro still moves freely. This is accomplished by expressing himself in the ways, and by observing the forms in personal relations, which have become expected and accepted.

He has learned, through two hundred odd years of slavery, to accept the superior status of, and to defer to, white people in

most situations. Moreover, he has withal gained a livelihood, some comforts, and a status, even if a lowly one, in the social order. He has a sentimental attachment for the *status quo*, and, in general, expects no cataclysm to change conditions overnight, if indeed he thinks of such things at all.

To the present situation he brings the assets of personal and racial adaptability gained under the harsh regime of slavery. He has learned to smile, to be pleasant, and to select from the situation such elements of adjustment as he can from among those which are available. Moreover, he has learned that the surest method of retreating from a difficult position is to express himself in ways that show he meant no offense.

The tempo of latter-day American society is such, however, that changes are inaugurated rapidly and extensively. As the Negro is forced into competition with white people new situations arise which demand new adjustments. Under the circumstances animosities are released, opposition of action, or antagonism develops, and conflict too frequently ensues. The Negro is conceived as "out of place"—that is to say, prejudice appears. And the prejudice, says Dr. Park, is reinforced by apparently natural contrarities in feeling.

The two races, however, are part of the same social order, articulated with and supplementing each other in many and diverse ways. Conflict prevents the co-operation which is necessary, even if at all times it seems not to be desired. Co-operation is, however, only possible when conflict ceases and accommodation occurs. In most cases, then, accommodation ensues when the Negro assumes the status generally assigned to him and when he adopts the forms of behavior commonly expected of him. That is to say, a reversion to the code of expected and accepted forms of behavior is generally calculated to solve situations where conflict exists in racial relations. For, by preserving the rank and precedence of persons, etiquette makes effective social action possible.

In still other situations where contact and competition with

white people is prohibited or tabooed, the Negro is compelled to seek expression in his own group. As a consequence he then tends to acquire status higher in type but separate and apart from the white people. He may, indeed, be considered by white people as a superior person, but he must keep his distance from them. Under these conditions, when members of the two races meet, the etiquette of racial relations is again reverted to, but it then preserves distance rather than rank and precedence.

If, however, as the Negro rises to a higher status in financial, academic, professional, or social life, he begins to see himself in a new light, and to adopt forms calculated to express the new sentiment, the circumstance may release latent animosities and may start the cycle of conflict-accommodation all over again. This latter situation may result in a return to the old code of etiquette, or, as seldom happens, it may end in extermination of the offending Negro. In most cases it will cut the Negro off from association with white persons, for they will not understand his conduct.

Occasionally, however, under the same conditions, white people may also see the Negro in a new light and see themselves in a new relation to him. They will then express themselves in such ways as to convey this change of sentiment, and the Negro will respond fittingly. In this way new forms, new observances, and new codes of etiquette will arise. Yet, since the mores require separation of the races, the new forms will preserve and maintain distances between the races.

"This is the significance of the ceremonial and social ritual so rigidly enforced in the South, by which racial distinctions are preserved amid all the inevitable changes and promiscuity of an expanding industrial and democratic society. While etiquette and ceremonial are at once a convenience and a necessity in facilitating human intercourse, they serve even more effectively to preserve the rank and order of individuals and classes which seems to be essential to social organization and effective collective action."⁴⁰

Considering, then, the relations of white and colored persons during the period of slavery, through the manifold changes of the Reconstruction, and into the more extensive changes of the present-day scene, we find that etiquette of race relations has been the earliest kind of government, the most general kind of government, and the government which is ever spontaneously recommencing in the contact and association of the two races. Moreover, besides preceding all other kinds of control, and besides having in all places and times where the races have associated approached nearer to universality of influence, the etiquette of race relations has ever had, and continues to have, the largest share in regulating their lives.