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"God Damned Those White Southerners"

Yaddo,
Saratoga Springs, N.Y.
January 27

Dear Jean —:

I have your letter with the enclosure from Mrs. — of —.

Mrs. — speaks of the high school library only. However, Mrs. — and her friends are trying to start a general library for colored people. She wrote me this week that they are now trying to find a room that can be used for the library.

I suppose I ought to have counted the books in the high school library, for they may have more than 100. I was so bitter from all my experiences in the South that everything seemed dark indeed.

I went to speak in the high school and found that the principal's "office" was on the assembly platform, and that the assembly, so-called, was a large room which had been partitioned off by bookshelves into class rooms. When there were meetings—as when I went there—the bookshelves had to be shoved here and there out of the way and chairs brought in by the children.

Then, the faculty of the high school did not dare ask me to stay for luncheon, for a white person cannot sit down with a colored person and eat like human beings.

Nor can colored people go to white homes and mingle as equals.

Nor could Mrs. — (you must be careful not to use her name) go to that school too often or show too much interest in it, lest it get about and she become known as a "nigger lover."

Nor could she invite any of the colored faculty to her home to meet Margaret Webster, who was to be in the town the following week. Even as it is, I fear that I may cause trouble for the colored faculty there merely by suggesting to the whites of Louisiana that everything is not all sweetness and light.

Take School Money

Again you cannot mention it, but Mrs. — has just sent me a booklet on educational funds in the South. From it, I do not see, as you say, that Louisiana is generous in its educational and library funds. I'd send you this booklet, but I sent it off yesterday to a newspaper woman I know. There are educational funds apportioned for both white and colored schools in the South, indeed, but the white county and parish officials take the money and use most of it for the white children only.

A group of white professors in — University in — told me of a region not far from that city where colored school teachers get just \$3 a month salary, and have to live from house to house to get food and shelter.

They said that schools might have 200 children in them, but the children had to walk for 5-6 miles a day to reach it; it was so exhausting that about 100 attended school; the children went every other day. These professors tried to arrange for me to return to — from Texas, and intended to take me out to see such things for myself. My schedule prevented me from returning to —.

The Bus Driver

Not only this, but when you say that colored people—students, workers and others—can order books by mail and pay the postage, you are taking many things for granted. I doubt if more than a handful of colored workers can read and write more than their name; nor do they know, about the library

service. Postage? Nor do they know what books to order.

I heard a bus driver talk to a colored worker as if he were a dog because the worker did not have 25 cents to pay for his extra fare.

I saw colored people standing in the aisles in buses when half the white sections were empty and I heard colored people called Niggers as a curse word. I saw a Northern white soldier ask a colored soldier to sit down by him, and the latter did so; then the bus driver stopped the bus and said:

"Stand up, Nigger!"

The colored soldier stood up. The white soldier said: "Aw hell!" and stood up also. But had that white soldier not been in uniform, I don't know what would have happened to him. As I went into — our bus stopped to take on a group of five or six colored men and two white women. The women were simply and tastefully dressed and their faces were intelligent and sensitive. The bus driver threw open the door and said:

"You Niggers stand back and let the whites on first."

The colored men stood back and the two women got on. Then, by some means, the driver saw they had colored blood. He slapped his thigh and roared with laughter and turned to us white passengers and said:

"Ain't that a god damned good joke on me? I thought they was white, but they're Niggers."

Like a Traitor

Now, when I heard this, I should have stood up and killed the driver.

But I sat there, petrified, sat there like a traitor to the human race.

I kept thinking of what Jesus would have done, and knew that He would perhaps have allowed Himself to be killed. I didn't.

I didn't do a thing for many reasons: because I was warned a dozen times by white people that if I did anything, it would be the colored people who would suffer for it. I would be thrown out of the bus and left by the roadside, but in the scuffle, it might be the colored who would be killed.

In this state of mind I went into — to lecture to a white institution, and I heard more and more intimate things about the colored problem. I stayed over a day to lecture to the colored high school and I went to it with shame in my heart; and everything seemed dark and bitter. I passed through the South like a traitor.

You are right in saying that the Southern whites have a tendency to become beggars on the North; to let the Northerners do things for the colored people. From what I saw, if we wait for the South to shoulder responsibility, little or nothing will be done. The whites have everything, the colored come out at the small end of everything.

The South's Liberals?

Regarding education: I enclose a clipping which will interest you. The South gets around everything. While I was in Georgia the press reported that a colored man had been sentenced to ten years hard labor for stealing half a chicken and three sandwiches; and a colored woman had been sentenced to three years for stealing a pair of shoes.

From what I saw, I really wonder if white people would use the same books used by colored people. I spent an evening with white liberals in —. They had heard me speak at a white school. I had said, among other things, that China questions both American democracy and American Christianity because of our racial and color prejudice. A rustle started and spread through the entire audience. I didn't stop until it finished, but went right on. People told me afterwards that I could not go further than that and get away with it.

Hatchet Club

I'm writing Mrs. — about the high school in —. I'm going to tell her that the colored faculty there made no complaint to me about books or anything else. It was I myself who took up the matter. If I don't do this, the faculty there will suffer. You may not know it, but in that very region there used to be a Hatchet Club of secretly organized white men who made a habit of killing whole colored families that were suspected of "not keeping their places." The Southern whites hate Northern white people who say a word about the color situation. So I must try to protect those colored people in —.

God damned those white Southerners! I've never seen such savagery in my life as in the South.

One bus driver who saw me constantly watching the colored passengers and his treatment of them came right up to me at a station where we stopped, hoisted his blamed pants and laughed brutally in my face, then walked away, saying not a word.

I returned here with the belief that a day of reckoning is coming, and I told my friends that I was willing to have another civil war and to break the bones of the South, bone for bone.

Whatever we do in the North must be done with consideration for the colored people. They are the ones who suffer from the whites there when we do one damned thing. The whites take vengeance.

As soon as the newspaper woman friend of mine returns the booklet on educational and library and other facilities for colored people in the South, I will send it to you.

Colored Resentment Rising

If Mrs. — and her friends continue to work for the library for colored people, we must send what books we can. I'm sorry, but I simply don't believe the South will make more than token offers. The rising intelligence and spirit of resentment of the

colored people in the South is causing tension of a sinister kind in the South. A white professor in —, La., complained to me because the CIO is organizing colored workers in production plants and demanding decent wages for them. "These fellows come in here and make trouble," the professor said.

I agree with you that the — people can and should use a small room. They plan to do this. I have already written Mrs. — that the Rosenwald Fund could help with her plan.

The South's Alarm System

— intended to invite me back next year for another lecture. But I'm certain now that I will not dare go. I would be driven out of town for raising the colored issue. I'm certain there is whispering in that town, going from house to house.

The whole South whispers and the least thing breaks out.

In one town in Georgia a fight started in the colored section of the town. So great is the tension that the minute it started, the railway engine on the trains began to toot, the air-raid sirens went off as if there were an air-raid, police cars and motorcycles roared through the street and I heard firing of guns for fifteen minutes. A street fight starts such a night alarm.

I spoke at a colored college in that town and a white woman put me up. She watched me always with trepidation, though I said not a word to her. Of the college she said: "They are nice Negroes—make no trouble at all; well-behaved." The assumption being that Negroes generally "make trouble" and are not "well-behaved."

I'm sorry to be lecturing you, for God knows you do not need it.

You can use any of this letter you wish, but leave out the name of Mrs. — or the — high school; and the location of any place must not be mentioned. I suppose you've been in the South and need not be told of the tension that exists there.

I saw colored people cover—this is not imagination—and sit on the edges of their seats in buses. In some places they are simply pulverized.

The bus drivers in the South seem to be gangsters.

In Texas, I read a report of a colored soldier who was sentenced to 10 years' hard labor by a court martial; he had killed a white bus driver: if he had not been a soldier, he would have been hanged. I could understand his killing the man. In his own defense, he said that the bus driver kicked him over an argument about his bus fare. This soldier replied to the kicking—and I understood well, for I felt like killing more than one bus driver.

AGNES SMEDLEY.