

# SEVEN

## THE COLORED GIRL

What becomes of the colored girl? This is a question that cannot fail to be of interest to men and women everywhere, who have at heart the well-being of all the people.

That the term "colored girl" is almost a term of reproach in the social life of America is all too true; she is not known and hence not believed in; she belongs to a race that is best designated by the term "problem,"<sup>33</sup> and she lives beneath the shadow of that problem which envelopes and obscures her.

The colored girl may have character, beauty and charms ineffable, but she is not in vogue. The muses of song, poetry, and art do not woo and exalt her. She is not permitted or supposed to typify the higher ideals that make life something higher, sweeter and more spiritual than a mere existence. Man's instinctive homage at the shrine of womankind draws a line of color, which places her forever outside its mystic circle.

The white manhood of America sustains no kindly or respectful feeling for the colored girl; great nature has made her what she is, and the laws of men have made for her a class below the level of other women. The women of other races bask in the clear sunlight of man's chivalry, admiration, and even worship, while the colored woman abides in the shadow of his contempt, mistrust, or indifference.

How much easier it would be to be a good Christian and to be loyal to the better instincts of manhood, if these girls of color were not like other girls in heart, brain and soul. Yet her presence is inevitable. The character of American womanhood is, in spite of itself, affected by the presence of the colored girl. The current of her aspirations finds a subtle connection with the aspirations of the thousands who socially feel themselves to be beyond and above her. Nay, more; those who meanly malign and humiliate her are unconsciously sapping the sweetness and light out of their own lives. The colored girl is a cause as well as an effect. We cannot comprehend the term American womanhood without including the colored girl. Thanks to the All-wise Creator of men and things, the law of life is infinitely deeper than the law of society. The ties of kinship and love continually cross and recross the color line of man-made prejudices. The woman beautiful, the woman courageous, the woman capable is neither white nor colored; she is bound to be loved and admired in spite of all the meannesses that are of human

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origin. For, after all, "color is only skin deep." Has the colored girl the heart, spirit and subtle tenderness of womanhood? Such a question would be impertinent in an age where human life meant something too sacred to be loved or scorned, according to color.

It is because of this tyranny of race prejudice that the colored girl is called upon to endure and overcome more difficulties than confront any other women in our country. In law, religion and ethics, she is entitled to everything, but in practice there are always forces at work that would deny her anything. But yet, as meanly as she is thought of, hindered as she is in all directions, she is always doing something of merit and credit that is not expected of her. She is irrepressible. She is insulted, but she holds up her head; she is scorned, but she proudly demands respect. Thus has it come to pass that the most interesting girl of this country is the colored girl. Upon her devolves the marvelous task of establishing the social status of the race. Black men may work and save and build, but all their labor and all their savings and creations will not make a strong foundation for the social life of the race without the pure heart, cultivated mind, and home-making spirit of the colored woman. It is a heart aching task, but the colored girl must and will accomplish it.

At this hour when a thousand social ills beset her, she is taking hold of life in a serious and helpful spirit. It is becoming more and more evident that she is not afraid of the age in which she lives nor its problems. She is a daughter of misfortune but she contributes her full share to the joys of the life about her. She is the very heart of the race problem. She is beginning to realize that the very character of our social fabric depends upon the quality of her womanliness.

It would seem trite to recount her services to the cause of education. Take the colored girl out of our schools and all progress would cease. As an educator she does more work with less compensation than any other teacher in the country. Follow her, if you will, into the remote corners of the schoolless South, and you will find material for such a story of gentle martyrdom as would forever put to shame those who hold our girls in light esteem. As a teacher and guide to thousands who have had no moral training in home and school, she has fully earned the right to be, at least, respected. No class of our people have so quickly caught and appropriated the self-sacrificing devotion of the pioneer New England teacher as the colored girl. She has shown in cases innumerable that she can abandon social pleasures, good salaries, ordinary comforts, and the flattery of men for the sacred cause of bringing light out of darkness to the masses. Would you know the real heroines of the colored race, do not look for them among the well dressed throngs that parade our streets and fill our churches, but look in obscure places like Mt. Meigs in Alabama, the settlement in Georgia under the benign direction of Miss Julia Jackson,<sup>34</sup> or in the alleys of South Washington, where Mrs. [Sarah Collins] Fernandez<sup>35</sup> works, prays and waits. Here you will find women of real consecration and the spirit of Jane Addams, working with as well as for the unfortunate all around them. This type of colored girl

is increasing every day in numbers and influence. She will some day become the heart and the very life of everything that is best amongst us. This is a work that calls for courage, patience, love, and the best qualities of the human heart, because it must be wrought out in the midst of the very worst conditions and emphasized by example, as well as by teaching and precept.

Yet there are men and women who profess to be fair and just who still insist that the colored girl is without character. It is true that we have our trifling girls, and in this respect we are thoroughly human.

While we believe that the colored girl of character amongst us is a constantly increasing factor in our progress, she has but few ways of making herself known beyond her immediate environment. She has inspired no novels.<sup>36</sup> Those who write for the press and magazines seldom think of this dark-skinned girl who is persistently breaking through the petty tyrannies of cast into the light of recognition. She has enterprise and ambition that are always in advance of her opportunities. At this very moment she is knocking at every door through which other women, less equipped than she, have passed on from one achievement to another.

In Chicago, for example, where the color line is quite rigidly drawn against the colored girl in almost every direction, still it is possible to find her pluckily challenging this humiliating color line, and in many surprising instances with success. I know of more than a score of girls who are holding positions of high responsibility, which were at first denied to them as beyond their reach. These positions so won and held were never intended for them; to seek them was considered an impertinence, and to hope for them was an absurdity. Nothing daunted these young women, conscious of their own deserving, [who] would not admit or act upon the presumption that they were not as good and capable as other girls who were not really superior to them. It is certainly not too much to say that the colored girl is fast developing character and spirit sufficient to make her own way and win the respect and confidence of those who once refused even to consider her claims of character and fitness.

What the colored girl craves, above all things, is to be respected and believed in. This is more important than position and opportunities. In fact there can be for her no such thing as opportunity, unless she can win the respect of those who have it in their power to humiliate her. How can she win this respect? This question is addressed to colored men quite as much as to white men. I believe that as a general thing we hold our girls too cheaply. Too many colored men entertain very careless, if not contemptible, opinions of the colored girl. They are apt to look to other races for their types of beauty and character. For the most part the chivalry of colored men for colored women has in it but little heart and no strength of protection. They ought to appreciate that a colored girl of character and intelligence is a very precious asset in our social life, and they should act accordingly.

Among the Jewish people, for example, their women are safe-guarded and exalted in ways that make their character and womanhood sacred. The colored girl has already done enough for herself and her race to deserve at

least the colored man's respect. We have all too many colored men who hold the degrading opinions of ignorant white men, that all colored girls are alike. They lose sight of the fact that colored girls like other girls are apt to be just as pure, noble, and sweet as the best of our men shall insist upon their being. How rare are the reported instances of colored men resenting any slur or insult upon their own women. Colored women can never be all that they would be until colored men shall begin to exalt their character and beauty and to throw about them the chivalry of love and protection which shall command the recognition and respect of all the world. There is something fundamentally wrong in our social instincts and sentiment, if we fail to recognize the ever enlarging difference between the pure and impure, the upright and degraded of colored women.

The colored girl of character and accomplishments is abroad in the land. She wants and deserves many things, but the greatest of her needs is the respect and confidence of those who should exalt and respect her. Is the colored man brave enough to stand out and say to all the world, "Thus far and no farther in your attempt to insult and degrade our women?"

It is not in any mere sentimental sense that this plea is made for a more generous respect for colored women by colored men. Our women have comparatively none of the social paraphernalia and settings that command general admiration. If they are to be respected and admired to their full deserving, it must be for what they are and not for what they have. In this respect they are unlike the women of other races. The very unpopularity of their complexion obscures their merits.

The colored man, as well as the white man, is more apt to be attracted by womanly appearance than by womanly merit. For example, there are at this hour thousands of superior young colored women in this country who are compelled to fill occupations far below their accomplishments and deservings. Are they respected and admired because of the courage of their determination not to be idle? Scarcely. Those who make up and are responsible for what is called the higher life amongst us are apt to scorn the colored girl who works with her hands. Only the parlor girl finds social favor. This sort of borrowed snobbishness is responsible for the going wrong of many of our girls.

What our girls and women have a right to demand from our best men is that they cease to initiate the artificial standards of other people and create a race standard of their own. In no other way can we make prominent and important the colored girl of character and intelligence. What the colored girl needs today is encouragement to do whatever her hands find to do, and be protected and honored for it. If the colored girl of character and intelligence must cook, who shall say that she is not as deserving of the honors of the best social life as the girl who plays the piano or manipulates the typewriter?

The way to exalt the colored girl is to place a higher premium on character than we do upon the quality of her occupation. A fine girl is the supreme thing. Let her be loved, admired, encouraged, and above all things heroically protected against the scorn and contempt of men, black as well as white.