

# The Negro and The Social Graces

I have chosen to speak to you this morning on a subject which is very near to my soul, "The Negro and the Social Graces." By social graces I do not mean an attitude of cheap servility, assumed for the purpose of currying favor. I mean simply doing the courteous thing and making a pleasing appearance—the practice of everyday good manners so generally lacking nowadays in the conduct of the average young person, regardless of race.

My message for the most part is to that group of young Negroes from high schools and colleges whose education is above the average; for unfortunately many of these are inclined to associate all forms of politeness, fine manners, and social graces with the slavery time performances of the maid and the butler, and to discard anything which they feel might have come out of those days in which their ancestors were slaves. They forget that even in those days many Negroes were schooled in the "correct thing," and that "what they were not taught they caught," in the way of social demeanor.

One needs only to read any book, fiction or fact, associated with the life of Negroes in the households previous to 1865 to see that it was the Negro butler and maid who actually taught the social graces to the children of the aristocracy of the Southern white group; everything from learning how to curtsy to the art of walking with charm and grace across the ball-room floor. The canons of the social graces were learned by those slaves or servants as religiously as their masters learned the catechism.

Fortunate also are those whose parents, immediately after the Civil War, came under the wise and gentle tutelage of the flower of the white race that came from the North and Middle West, built private schools, became their instructors, and were their patterns for

intellectual, moral and social behavior. They taught our mothers and grandmothers the dignity of self-reverence and self-restraint. They taught our fathers—through example and precept—the proper attitude toward their women and what was expected of them in the new freedom which was theirs. These cultured Christian men and women gave to the students of that

day "Open Sesame" to the best culture that the world knew.

It is perfectly natural that we want to forget much that was associated with slavery and its aftermath; at the same time it is very necessary that we pay attention to some of the things gained by our foreparents through intimate association with an aristocracy schooled in the finer things of life. Well may we add to our modern culture and educational efficiency some of the fine manners of those bygone days.

After all, the success of the American Negro depends upon his contacts with other races who, through the years, have had greater advantages of learning the proper approach to life and its problems. The little courtesies, the gentle voice, correct grooming; a knowledge of when to sit, when to stand; how to open and close a door; the correct attitude toward persons in authority; good manners in public places, such as railroad stations, moving picture houses, and other places where we are constantly under observation—the acquisition of these graces will go a long way in securing that recognition of ability needed to cope with human society, and will remove some of the commonest objections to our presence in large numbers.

Alas, in our day good manners for both races are almost outmoded. In many instances we have lost the art of fine living. The Negro, with all his handicaps, has now the opportunity of his life to develop anew the art of fine manners as one of the means by

The author of this address was born in North Carolina, but early moved with her parents to Cambridge, Massachusetts. While a schoolgirl there, she won the friendship of Mrs. Alice Freeman Palmer, former President of Wellesley College, through whom she was privileged to know the Eliots, Cabots, Lowells, and other distinguished people. Educated for the teaching profession, she returned to North Carolina in 1901 and, without funds, started a private school which, in honor of her friend, she named Palmer Memorial Institute. With the help of friends North and South, this has grown into a well-appointed and important junior college.

After twenty-five years of teaching, Mrs. Brown took a year's leave of absence and won the bachelor's degree at Wellesley. She has also received two honorary degrees. She feels that it has been a peculiar privilege to live both North and South and to win friends among the choice spirits of both sections.—Editor.