

Chapter 15

A Marble Monument To Cruelty

By Ray Sprigle

In this little, straggling Negro cemetery, its graves weed-grown, its headstones leaning drunkenly, stands a magnificent sarcophagus of white Alabama marble. It is an astonishing thing to find here on the edge of this Mississippi Delta town of Clarksdale. Quite likely there's nothing like it all up and down the Delta in either white or Negro cemetery.

Within it lie the bodies of a dark woman and her baby, both dead in the hour of the baby's birth. Proudly, Dr. P. W. Hill, wealthy Negro dentist, shows us through this gleaming mausoleum where his wife and baby lie and where some day he too will rest.

In all simplicity he regards it only as his tribute to the ones he loved.

Monument to Cruelty

But this beautiful tomb out here on the edge of the cotton fields is a monument to the cold-blooded cruelty of the white man; to the brutal mandate of a white world that black men and women must die rather than be permitted to defile a cot or an operating table in a white hospital with their black skins.

Marjorie Hill and her husband had planned to have their baby at home. Mrs. Hill was strong and active and in perfect health.

The competent Negro physicians in attendance foresaw no complications or difficulties. Her approach to motherhood was wholly normal until just a few hours before another little dark soul was due in this white world. Then something went tragically wrong. Only a Caesarian section could save his wife and baby, Dr. Hill was told by the doctors.

Clarksdale boasts of a small but adequate hospital. But it is sacred to white patients. Dr. Hill didn't even seek admission for his wife and unborn baby. Just before midnight he put them into an ambulance and started a mad drive north to Memphis and its Negro hospital, 78 miles away, in a desperate race with death. Death won. Mother and new-born baby both died on the operating table just before dawn.

Has Learned Big Lesson

Dr. Hill, small, spare, scholarly, reserved, is not, embittered. He has learned his lesson well. He is a black man in a white world.

"But, Doctor," I insisted, "you didn't even try. You didn't even ask Clarksdale Hospital authorities to admit your wife."

Both Dr. Clark and my companion broke in before I had finished:

"In the South," they told me, "when you're black you don't try to fight the pattern. Hospitals are for white people. White people do not admit black folk to their hospitals. Black folk do not even ask for admission. They just die."

But I wasn't satisfied. Back home, and a white man myself again, I decided that here was one barbarity charged to my race that I'd disprove.

I wired Miss Louise Francis, director of Clarksdale Hospital. Western Union reported back that the wire had been delivered to her personally.

"Clarksdale Negroes insist that no Negroes are admitted to Clarksdale Hospital even in emergency such as auto accidents, Caesarians. Will you wire me collect if Negroes would be admitted under any circumstances?"

No Reply to Telegram

I have yet to receive a reply.

Twelve days later I sent Miss Francis a registered letter referring to my telegram:

"Would you then be good enough to let me know if under any circumstances such as an automobile accident in front of the hospital or an immediate Caesarian, would a Negro ever be admitted to your hospital?"

I hold a postal receipt for that registered letter but there has been no reply. Which seems to establish the record and prove that Dr. Hill made no mistake when he didn't bother to seek admission for his wife even on the threshold of death.

A few years ago Miss Juliette Derricott, dean of women of Fiske University, and Miss Edna Johnson, one of her students, were fatally injured in an automobile crash just outside Dalton, Ga. Dalton has and had at that time a 40-bed white hospital. Again there was no attempt to seek admission for the two dying women. As one of the officials at Fiske University wrote me:

"It seems as if the unspeakable pattern made it not even thought of."

The two dying women were taken to offices of different white doctors. According to the record they were afforded humane, skillful first aid. Then they were taken to the funeral parlor of a Negro undertaker. Later that night, Dr. L. L. Fatten, a Negro surgeon from Chattanooga, arrived with a Negro ambulance. Three round trips of 66 miles each were required before the two dying women and two other students less seriously injured were delivered to Walden Hospital for Negroes in Chattanooga. The crash occurred at 3:40 in the afternoon. It was nine hours later, 12:30, the next day, before all the patients were in the hospital - one of them, Miss Johnson, already dead.

Smiled at Indignation

Dr. Fatten is getting old, he has been in practice in Southeastern Tennessee and Northern Georgia for 33 years. He's been encountering things like this all his life. He even smiled at my indignation.

"You'll learn, if you stay with us here in the South," he told me.

So I checked the "pattern" again. I wired F. K. Sims, director of Dalton Hospital, referring to the Derricott case and asking "If Negro would be admitted to hospital under any circumstances in emergency." Mr. Sims got the wire but I have no answer. So I wrote him by registered mail for which I hold his receipt:

"Would you be good enough to tell me, in a case of extreme emergency, automobile accident, Caesarian, has your hospital ever accepted a Negro patient or would it accept a Negro patient?" And no answer to that one either.

Just last year, the track team of Clark College, Atlanta, was on its way by automobile to track meet with Tennessee A. & I. State College at Nashville. Near Pelham, Tenn., an army trailer sideswiped a car driven by Clark track coach Charles McPherson. Jeffrey Jennings and Joseph Brown, two Clark track stars, were passengers. Both Jennings and Brown were seriously injured. Coach McPherson was slightly hurt. State police called an ambulance and a five-hour tour that covered more than 100 miles began.

At two hospitals, at Sewanee and Manchester, both of which treat both black and white patients, every bed was occupied some by Negro patients.

Refused Admission

But at Winchester Hospital, according to Coach McPherson, the desperately wounded patients were refused admission because they were black. They drove on to Fayetteville, Tenn., to a Negro hospital where both were admitted. Brown died shortly after. Jennings laid in a coma for three weeks and finally recovered.

Once more I checked this time on the definite charge that two Negroes, one dying were refused admission because they were black. So I wired Dr. Parker Smith, director of Winchester Hospital:

"I am told that on April 25, 1947, two Negroes badly injured in auto crash, were refused admission to hospital because they were Negroes. Can you inform me if this is correct?"

The wire was delivered to Dr. Smith. There has been no reply.

Then a registered letter with the same request for a denial of the definite charge. And Dr. Parker Smith is still silent.

Does anybody wonder that I found mighty little pleasure in that 3,400-mile tour of the South - much of it at 70 miles an hour? Every time we had a close shave with another car, I could see myself riding around in a Jim Crow ambulance, hunting a Jim Crow hospital while I slowly bled to death.