Chapter 4

A Discussion in a Pleasant Negro Home

By Ray Sprigle

We're at breakfast in this pleasant, comfortable, Negro home. One of the daughters is home on a visit from Tennessee where she and her husband are university instructors. The conversation drifts, as it inevitably will wherever and whenever Negroes gather, to the all-overshadowing race problem. Her 5-year-old son is at the table too. Whenever she uses the word "white," she spells it out w-h-i-t-e. She spells N-e-g-r-o too. So far, she hopes, her youngster doesn't know the difference between Negro and white. He probably doesn't because some of his relatives are as white in color as any white man and others range all the way to deep black.

Those spelled-out words highlight another and vitally important problem of the intelligent Negro.

When do you begin teaching your child how he is to live as a Negro? When do you begin teaching him the difference between black and white -- not as colors but as races? When do you begin teaching him how to live under the iron rule of a master race that regards him as an inferior breed? When do you begin teaching him that for him, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence are scraps of paper?

Parents Must Answer

Those are questions that every Negro mother and father has to answer.

"We try to let them have their childhood free of prejudice and confusion," the mother says after we have shooed young Bobby out to play. "But we've got to tell them before they come up against the hard facts of discrimination and prejudice for themselves. You people up North have only one set of 'the facts of life' to put before your children. Down here we've got two. And sometimes I think the racial facts of life are the most important." (When she says "you people up North," she does so with the assumption that I, too, am a Negro.)

Generally the Negro child gets his first lessons in race relations before he goes to school. But one couple I know delayed. So one day their little daughter brought home a white friend, a girl of her own age. They had encountered each other when their pathways to school crossed -- one on her way to her white school, the other on her way to the Jim Crow school house. The parents had to work fast.

First, as considerately as possible, they sent the little white girl on her way home with the understanding that she was never to come back. To their own little one they had to explain that she could not enter a white home except through the back door. That no white could enter a Negro's house except on business and that certainly no little white girl could ever visit a little black girl.

Guest From North

All through the day, friends of the visiting daughter of my hosts were dropping in to see her. And of course Mr. James R. Crawford, the guest from Pittsburgh, was introduced to all of them. (James R. Crawford was the name I was using.) So what was more logical and natural than that Mr. Crawford should seek to slant the conversation toward a comparison between life in the South and the North?

The Southern Negro woman, particularly one of refinement and culture, has Jim Crow problems all her own. For instance, there's the seemingly simple matter of buying hats and dresses. In most Southern cities — with the notable exception of Atlanta — no Negro woman is permitted to try on anything, not even a $200 dress if she's got the $200 right in her hand. In some millinery departments the sales girl will carefully pin a cloth over her black customer's head before she'll let her try on a hat. But in most places the Negro customer just picks her hats and dresses off the rack. If she touches them — she's made a purchase — they're all hers. All the women agreed that Baltimore was the worst town in the country for mistreatment of Negro patrons.

Shoe stores arbitrarily set aside certain benches in the rear of the store for Negro customers. Every woman there recalled what happened to Roland Hayes, famous Negro tenor, when his New York-born wife went into a Rome, Ga., shoe store for a pair of shoes. Hayes had purchased the plantation, not far from Rome, where his mother had been born and lived in slavery. He planned to establish a model plantation that would supply ideas, modern methods, pure-bred seed and stock to neighboring farmers, white and black. In town for the weekly shopping, Hayes had dropped his wife off at the shoe store and had driven on to park. In the shoe store, Mrs. Hayes sat down on the first bench available. A white clerk, determined to keep his race pure, ordered her to a rear bench. She refused. By the time Hayes got back to the store a noisy argument was underway. "If it can happen to Roland Hayes in Rome," agreed all the women, "it can happen to any Negro anywhere in the South."

Telephone Is Ordeal

Even using the telephone is likely to be something of an ordeal for a Negro woman in the South. One quite frequent difficulty stems from a peculiar quirk of Southern white psychology. No Southern white who even pretends to be worthy of the noble traditions of the South -- white supremacy -- the purity of the race, the sanctity of white Southern womanhood would ever call a Negro "Mr." or "Mrs." He'll call them "Doctor," "Professor," "Counselor," but he'd cheerfully burn at the stake before he'd ever so far forget his white heritage as to call one of the creatures "Mr." or "Mrs."

All of which presents a pretty involved problem to your Southern telephone operator who is emphatically Southern before she is a telephone operator. She won't say Mrs. to a Negro woman either -- not if she knows it.

One woman in the group, on a visit to Jackson, Miss., some time ago, wanted to telephone her family in Atlanta. She put in the call and gave her name as Mrs. John Black -- or at least Mrs. John Black will do for this story. If I used her real name she'd never get another long-distance

call through as long as she lives. Anyway, the operator asked her, politely, "What's your first name?" So she told her, "Grace."

"Is this the colored woman, Grace Black?" asked the operator when she rang back a little later. "Yes," was the response. A couple of other questions and the replies, "Yes," "Yes."

"Look here," was the infuriated response of the operator, "don't you yes me. When you talk to me you say 'Ma'am' if you know what's good for you."

Then there was the incident of a purchasing agent of Tuskeegee Institute who tried to call his wife from Atlanta. He put in the call for "Mrs. Morgan," and gave the Tuskeegee number.

"What's her first name?" demanded the operator. "There's only one Mrs. Morgan there," she was told. "Just get any Mrs. Morgan at that number and she'll be the right one."

"But she's a nigger ain't she?" was the wrathful response. "Do you think I'm going to say Mrs. to a nigger?"

Well, the next day Mr. Morgan was in the office of the telephone company manager. The lily white operator was summoned and summarily fired. But the soft-hearted black man interceded and she got her job back.

Negroes get normal telephone service in Atlanta today.