

Chapter 12

Negro Doctors Treat White Patients

By Ray Sprigle

Right here this Jim Crow thing gets to the point where it's just plain silly - if a thing so replete with heartbreak and tragedy can ever be properly called silly.

Here we sit in the waiting room of Dr. - well let's say Dr. Bradford Gordon. He's got that kind of a New England sounding name but why mention it here, when it might be the cause of getting him Kluxed.

The room is filling up after the noon hour, white farmers in from the country with their wives and youngsters to get their teeth "fixed up." Other, better-dressed whites, men and women, plainly city dwellers. And a handful of Negro mothers with their children. No segregation here.

When Dr. Gordon appears he proves to be very, very black. He is a towering figure of a man, graduate of a famous northern university and a star on its football team. The man seems to beam with kindness and courtesy. If he isn't a gentleman, I never saw one. We chat a while.

White Woman First Patient

First patient to seat herself in the gleaming dental chair is a blooming young farm wife, as white as the doctor is black. Dr. Gordon's big black fingers will operate drill and probe and chisel in the young white woman's mouth. And in the mouths of hundreds of other white men, women and children, for Dr. Gordon is one of the most popular dentists in this great farming area.

But, if later that evening, Dr. Gordon, on his way home in bus or streetcar should seek to sit beside, or even near his patient he'd probably be arrested. If he tried it again he could very well find himself completely dead.

Dr. Gordon is just one of scores of Negro dentists in the South who, because of unusual skill, have found themselves with an ever growing white practice. One such Negro dentist the Negroes tell about made such a success down in this country that he moved to Nashville and opened elaborate offices. Now, they say, he's gone completely Jim Crow and doesn't accept any Negro patients at all.

White and Black Babies

Another day we drop into the office of Dr. C. C. Carruthers in a Tennessee town. Dr. Carruthers is aging fast now. He's been in practice here for 32 years. He didn't keep records of the babies he's helped into the world but there were hundreds of them - some years almost as many white youngsters as black ones. Many of "his" babies are married now and have children of their own. If he noticed one of "his" babies on a railroad train for instance - and sought to enter the white coach to greet her - well, he knows better.

But there's little enough of even the grimmest sort of humor in the impact of Jim Crow upon human lives.

Besides the Jim Crow regulations established by law, which are onerous enough, this Jim Crow pattern has been built up into a way of life in which even the few legal rights of a Negro are ignored.

No Justice for Negro

Records of actual court cases, prove there is no justice for the Negro in criminal court. Every Negro I talked to insists that there is equally no justice for him in civil courts.

"If you black, you never mess with no white man in court," a black share-cropper told me when I asked him why he didn't sue "The Man" (the landlord).

"All you git is mo' and worse trouble."

In different language, Negro leaders told me the same thing. A Negro banker I met, located in an area where there are few white banks, was urged by white plantation owners to deal with them for seasonal loans as he did for black farm owners. His reply was:

"How could I ever expect to collect in court if you refused to pay me?"

Testimony Not Given Weight

Frankly and openly, the courts and the law in the South let Negroes know that their sworn testimony in court is not to be given the same weight as that of a white man. Automobile insurance companies, when they do sell insurance to a Negro automobile owner never go to court when he is in collision with a white driver. They just pay. So, too, when a Negro without insurance collides with a car owned by a white man. There rarely is any question as to who was at fault. The Negro is told how much he is going to pay. And pays it.

If he goes to a white doctor or dentist he'll probably get service. But he waits until all the white patients have been cared for. If it's time for the physician to quit when he reaches his goal he's told to try it again some other time.

He can't enter a white library. But if there's a colored library branch in his town he can go there and any book he wants is obtained from the white library.

Better Not Resist

If a white man attacks him, he'd better not resist. If he does he's due for lynching. That's why Negroes, if they do resist a white man generally try to kill him. If you're going to be killed, better give the white folks something to kill you for, the black man figures.

In most Southern towns, benches in the little parks in the center of town are not for him. Some few towns have a few benches marked "Colored." But not many.

But surely even if you're black, if you've died for your country in France or Germany or on Saipan or Iwo Jima, the white folks will forget your color and remember only that you were a hero!

Reader, you don't know. Here is the ultimate in Jim Crowism.

In every southern town you'll find not one but two honor rolls, one for white, one for black, sometimes side by side, oftener the Negro honor roll hidden in the dingy Negro section.

No Negro is going to contaminate the white race by getting his name on the same honor roll with a white man even if he did die a hero in the service of his country.