

## "COLOR LINES" AMONG THE COLORED PEOPLE

**T**HE "COLOR LINE" HAS BEEN CALLED "the crowning disgrace of our democracy," and the fact that it still exists, in spite of the Constitution's ringing words about "without distinction on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude," is the subject for many recriminations, especially by negroes. Yet a recent investigator of the subject regrets that "the negro race fails to observe even the shadow of consistency, and draws perhaps more rigid color lines within its own ranks than the white brother does on the outside." The writer, Y. Andrew Roberson, is a colored man, and presumably writes from an exceptionally thorough experience. He calls the country to witness, through the pages of *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, that, whereas the white man everywhere draws but one color line, "when the negro takes his brush in hand he draws a hundred—especially in the South." He specifies the South, says Mr. Roberson, because—

The great bulk of the negroes live there and will continue to do so, all things notwithstanding. Also because outside of Dixie, the "colored" lines, if they do absolutely fade out, merge into lines of education, occupation and wealth, while in the South these attainments only serve to give new twists to the color lines which the negroes draw among themselves.

With few exceptions the other sections of the country know the race only in its capacity of hall-boy, janitor, porter, waiter, laundress, maid or seamstress. As such, like the sons of Melchizedek, it serves and disappears and its employers have no more real idea of how its members spend their time "off" than if they were beings from another planet. Even in Dixie this is true, but to a much less extent. The servant classes of negroes, of course, exist in even greater numbers in the South than elsewhere—but there are other classes there that are seldom met with outside of the land of cotton, and it is among these classes that most of the "colored" lines are drawn.

Have you, for instance, ever met a negro banker, oil magnate or millionaire insurance operator? Have you ever shaken hands with a colored painter, poet, composer or novelist? Do you know any negro farmer who counts his acres by the thousand and his live stock by the hundreds? It is hardly likely, unless you did so in Dixie where there are many such folks, as well as thousands of men and women of the negro race in all the professions. Naturally these people have some sort of social life, and it is vastly different from the sort of thing that prevails in other parts of the country, and that brings a smile of tolerant amusement to your face at the very mention of negro "society." You are more than likely to recall the tales your washerwoman told you of the "scrumptious" time she had at the bellhops' ball. Maybe she did have a good time, but that is not saying that she was out in the real "Darktown" society. Whether or not she *could* break in depends on a great many things and, strange to say, *color* is one.

The daughter of a negro banker would be just as likely to go out doing housework by the day as her white prototype—perhaps less. Now there would be about one chance in a million of a white banker's daughter meeting a laundress on a footing of social equality, but owing to the negro's peculiar ideas about color, your laundress may have a much better chance. At the same time the unwritten rules that govern negro circles may put the up-stairs maid of your neighbor altogether out of the running.



**A TYPE THAT RISES.**

The pure negro strain, we are told, has produced more leaders than any of the mixtures.

Color will have its say here, the writer declares, as well a education and texture of hair and money. Down in Dixie, he reports:

Negro society is, like Cæsar's Gaul, divided into three parts: Yellows, Browns and Blacks, in the order named so far as social importance goes. The first includes types ranging from those whose blood is an even mixture of white and black to those whose veins hold only one drop of black blood in eight. Perhaps you know that there are hundreds of thousands of negroes who are as fair as any Swede, and in many cases just as blue-eyed and yellow-haired. This, because the world decrees that a single drop of black blood makes a negro, and consequently, as the late Booker Washington put it, "they fall to our pile." These mulattoes—I include them all in the term—regard themselves in much the same way as do white Americans whose ancestors came over on the *Mayflower*, setting themselves up as arbiters of things social. They form cliques to which the other two divisions

are admitted only by wealth or education. The first will secure the same sort of toleration for its owners in Negro-dom as it will in white circles, but the latter will cause the blacks to be treated as tho they were black as the result of some unfortunate oversight.

There are reasons for this "uppish" attitude on the part of the mulattoes that are the result of long years of thinking along certain lines, one might almost say, along a certain groove. During slavery times they were often the sons and daughters of their mas-



**A PATRICIAN.**

The 'yellows' and 'high-browns' are much admired. The types are often seen among the Creoles of Louisiana.

ters who, of course, were partial to them and saw to it that they were employed around the "Big House" where the tasks were light. In short; they were personal servants and their training as such stood them in good stead in case they were sold. Also their food and clothing were better than that enjoyed by their black brothers and sisters, who toiled with horny hands in the fields.

Thus the mulattoes were brought up in the very shadow of the courtly airs and graces of the Southern aristocracy and soon learned to ape them. Like a valet in his master's suit, they thought themselves very fine indeed and much superior to the aforesaid laborers. The masters themselves in their reverence for blood and birth could not quite rid themselves of the idea that these light-colored negroes *were* a trifle better than the rest of the slaves, for did they not have the South's finest blood in their veins?

At any rate, one of these golden-skinned slave girls would have as soon thought of marrying a black field hand as her proud mistress would have considered wedding a poor white. It was a long, long way from the "Big House" to the field hand's quarters, but this distance freedom was to shorten to a mere step.

The ending of slavery gave the black man a chance to use his splendid muscles for himself and to own some of the land he knew so well how to till. The South was poor after the war and few of the aristocrats were able to keep up a large retinue of personal servants. This was hard on the mulattoes, who found their training a drug on the market. Many of them went North; others continued to live in the South on land given them by generous relations (?) and many more jumped at the chance to marry the hitherto despised black men who were such good workers when that attribute meant much. In justice it must be said that the men proved themselves quite athletic in the business of jumping—meeting the girls half-way at least. They had long cast fond glances at the tawny-skinned maids, and there is an old melody that runs,

*"I wish I had a nickel,  
I wish I had a dime,  
I wish I had a yellow gal,  
I'd kiss her all the time."*

From the union of these two color divisions, we are the race got a new color that, "for intelligence and downright

physical beauty in the women is superior to either of the others, for such is the origin of the 'brown skins.'" Mr. Roberson goes on to explain:

The term as the negro applies it is a broad one, ranging all the way from some who in color barely miss being mulatto, through that most wonderful of all shades, that the French call *café au lait*, to "stove pan" and "midnight" browns, which are brown by courtesy only and are usually applied in ridicule to persons who by using a great deal of face powder are able to pass as very dark browns under artificial light. When daylight comes they, like Cinderella, must go back into the ranks of the blacks.

The social status of the particular browns known as "high-browns" is scarcely different from that of the mulattoes. By this term the negro usually means one whose color is a very light brown and whose hair is straight, but not so coarse-grained as that of the mulatto. That is the usual meaning, but some times they have the hair without the color, and vice versa. They are accepted everywhere as equals and quite often some of the girls are

blest with so great a measure of beauty that by their popularity they are able to oust the mulatto girls as favorites. An indication of the way they are regarded may be gleaned from the following verse of a once much-sung collection, featured around the levee camps and dance-halls:

*"The high yaller gals ride in automobiles,  
The high-browns ride the trains,  
Poor black gals ride old gray mules,  
But she gets there just the same."*

The words were frequently made up as the entertainer went along and sung to the tune of "All Night Long." The sentiment was always that in spite of a rough deal the black girl "got there just the same." In this there is more truth than poetry, because it is a fact that the average black girl, given the same training, will go her lighter colored sister one better on anything from baking a pie to rendering the "Moonlight Sonata." Also black men are to a great extent the race's leaders in business—the trades and professions as well as religion.

If one should at random pick out a dozen names that stand high in the negro world, seven of them would belong to black men. Then look at the wives of the seven, and six of them will

be either high-brown or mulatto. In the South a light colored wife is the black business man's badge of success, because it takes money to bring such a marriage about.

The mulatto women look with favor on such matches, feeling that the darker her spouse is the more credit he will allow for straight hair and pink cheeks. They go through life with a pleasant feeling of having married beneath themselves, but this they are careful to hide, for the spouse is constantly watching for signs of it. If there are children, they go to swell the ranks of the browns, of which there are eight recognized shades, namely: *high, pleasing, teasing, tantalizing, bronze, chocolate, midnight and stove pan.* The last two being, as I said, brown by courtesy only.

Louisiana has more ramifications of the "colored" lines than



**VARYING SHADES  
ALONG THE  
COLOR LINE.**

These personable young persons are members of the "Shuffle Along" Company



**DANCER AND SINGER**

Like the girl on the opposite side of the page, she benefits by the color lines drawn inside the "color line".

any other State, largely because a great part of the negro population there speak a French *patois*. They call themselves Creoles, and are almost without exception Catholics and mostly mulatto. Since the Catholic Church draws no color line, they are accustomed to worship in the same church as the whites, and from such a little thing as that they form the idea that they are better than the rest of the negroes, including the other mulattoes.

Of all America's negro population some of these Creoles have perhaps a better foundation for their pretensions than any others. This is because many of the older families among them were never slaves in the United States but migrated from the West Indies where they were honorable descendants of French planters. The so-called Creoles form the bulk of the brick masons and bakers trades in Louisiana. This is the one class of mulattoes into which black men seldom marry, altho mingling freely socially. The Church is the main barrier, and if the parents are of what is called "old stock," this is another barrier. I have known a member of one of them to attempt to throw a fit when one of his daughters made known her desire to wed a black man who had been her classmate at college. The Creoles are very clannish in all ways, and particularly when it comes to marrying.

There are no Catholic schools of higher education open to them in the State of Louisiana, so they mostly attend a certain college in New Orleans, where a black face is seldom seen. The few seen are usually the sons of wealthy black planters who are Catholics. A black girl, no matter what her faith or wealth, would find life there intolerable. The graduates of this school are generally regarded as being well versed in little save the social graces and manners.

Outside of Dixie the negroes' color lines fade out, because they are mostly working folk, and one chauffeur is as good as another, and a butler as good as either a policeman or bellhop. If there are enough negroes in a city to support a few negro professional men the latter must not be snobbish, or away goes their business. It is not like in the South where negroes are more or less forced to patronize their own merchants, lawyers and doctors. There are other differences, too.

Attend a negro dance in the West, for instance, and ask the nearest man who the girl in the blue frock is who just whirled by and smiled at you and ten-to-one he will not know. Ask the same sort of question in the South under the same circumstances and you will not only learn her name but her father's business, her age, what school she attends, who her admirers are, their chances of winning her, where she spent her last vacation, who makes her dresses, the size of her shoe, what she had for dinner, and sometimes whether or not her appetite was good. In Dixie every one knows every one else, or will before going very far with them socially. Therein is the reason for the South's social cliques—both white and black.

In any other part of the country "colored" lines would be something less than silly. Like all indications of caste, they require some tradition and enough of a leisure class or a class having genteel employment to entertain itself. A little more race pride is the remedy.

## THE LITERARY DIGEST

March 18, 1922