

# THE BOOK LEAGUE MONTHLY

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## TWELVE MILLIONS

BLACK AMERICA. *Scott Nearing*. Vanguard Press. \$3.00.

**T**HERE are in the United States today, if statistics do not lie, some twelve million Negroes. The population of the Argentine is not so large, nor that of Holland, nor that of Sweden. Eight million of these dark Americans live in the South. In Georgia alone there are more than a million colored people. In Mississippi 52.2 per cent of the population is Negro. In South Carolina the percentage is 51.4 of the population.

How do they live—these blacks in a country controlled by whites? Nearly two million engage in agriculture; others are in industrial plants doing the heaviest work; others are porters, house-servants, washer-women, day-laborers, bell-boys; and, in comparison to the masses, there is a handful of professional men, artists, and teachers. But do you ever see a black clerk in a store, a colored girl stenographer in an office, a brown cashier in a bank, a Negro street car conductor, or a dark-faced member of the president's cabinet? Not hardly! Practically speaking, all the decent jobs, little or big, important or unimportant, in this country are closed to Negroes. They must make their living almost always at the hardest, dirtiest, lowest paid, and most undesirable labor to be found. They cannot expect advancement. They cannot expect high wages. They cannot even be sure of their jobs. Large hotels in Atlantic City that have been employing colored waiters for years recently discharged them because white people needed the work. In times of industrial depression Negroes are the first to be fired, and the last to be hired again. When the whites walk out, of course, they are used as strike-breakers. But many labor unions deny colored people admittance to their ranks so that they cannot work in certain industries except at times of strike.

In the South the average farm wage is just over \$35 a month without board. In three states it is less than \$30 a month. Many Negroes, working under the share crop system in which the landlord is the bookkeeper, crop salesman, and storekeeper, probably receive even less than \$30. In the North the Negro in industry is often not paid as much as the whites for the same type of work and, as a rule, his wages, if they advance at all, advance at a much slower rate. In the teaching profession this is what happens to him: in Lexington, Kentucky, the minimum for white high school teachers is \$1,400; the maximum for colored high school teachers is \$1,200. Thus the highest paid Negro teacher in that city receives less than the lowest paid white teacher. Such a wage condition for Negroes is not rare.

Behind so harsh an economic color line, it is little wonder then that the Negro masses live badly or that their death rate is high. Because black men earn so little, most Negro mothers must work, so children are frequently badly cared for and the home life is broken. In the cities Negroes usually live in the oldest and most disreputable quarters while the rents they pay are often as high as 50 per cent more than the rents paid by the white people for similar accommodations. They are frequently forced into segregated black belts, overcrowded and dirty, with



little attention from the city's street cleaning or garbage collecting departments. There the youngsters grow up under the worst conditions.

In many parts of the country Negro children attend what are known as separate schools. Accommodations in these schools are almost invariably poorer than those found in the white schools. And in many districts of the South where the greater number of Negroes live, there are no schools at all for Negroes! For the education of each white child in Alabama every year the state spends less than \$27. For the education of each Negro child the state spends less than \$4. Some of the other Southern states do worse. None of them do much better. Where there are separate schools in the North they are usually very much overcrowded and often they are housed in old buildings which the whites have vacated.

Scott Nearing tells you of this in *Black America*. Aided by the latest statistics, by photographs, and by excerpts from social service reports he states simply and clearly, without emotionalism, the position of the Negro in the United States. The white man owns the land on which he works; the white man controls the industries in which he works; the white man's state directs his education, and often directs it poorly; the white man's politics govern him without allowing him, in the South, even a vote. Socially, too, the Negro is an outcast; refused food in public restaurants, Jim-Crowed on the Southern railroads, given the top gallery or the back rows at the theatres if he is admitted at all, served without courtesy in the shops, denied membership in the Y. M. C. A. or the Y. W. C. A. unless there are black branches, and compelled to have his own churches, and sometimes his own burial grounds. In South Carolina his life is endangered by the mob; in New York he is segregated; in Boston he is not wanted at Harvard; in California as a citizen he has fewer privileges than an Oriental unnaturalized. Continually from birth to death the taunt of being a Negro is forced upon him.

And yet he lives! In Mr. Nearing's book more than a hundred and fifty amazing photographs show him living. They picture Negroes at work in fields and factories, at play, at school, or merely walking on the streets. They show the conditions of Negro housing both rural and urban, and how the back alleys of South Chicago look. (And almost how they smell.) There are included also thirteen actual photographs of lynchings. Four are of a burning at Waco, Texas; and one is of four Negroes hung to the same tree. They are lovely examples of modern barbarism, almost unbelievable in their ugliness. But is it not almost unbelievable, too, that twelve million people should live in an American democracy under a caste system as pernicious in its effects, and as tightly unyielding in its way, as any in India? Yet Scott Nearing with his statistics, his pictures, his excerpts from social service reports, and his own simple comments in *Black America* makes you feel the terrible realness of it all. Mr. Nearing is a white man, but I, being a Negro, will swear that he has not lied.

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