

MASSES

&

Mainstream

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The Negro Citizen Before the Bar

By **BEULAH RICHARDSON**

I stand before the bar of justice,
in the 'star chamber,' lily white,
I, the Negro citizen must wage battle
and weigh the price they would exact of me

My peers, with mink enshrouded dignity
file into their places.
And fittingly,
erase the smile of boredom from their faces
to assume the countenance of civic objectivity.

The Negro clerk, with servile step of one
who can no longer run in this race for life
places my case into the hands of the bailiff
who bids me rise.
The gavel sounds . . .
I stand before my judge.

Your honors,
were I a fool, I would within my tenement tinder box,
restricted place,
cautiously feed my thoughts on the rapid progress of my race.
And even as I flee before the flames that yearly devour
my childrens' lives,
join the refrain of gradually,
and inquire most casually for whom the bell tolls.
But I am not a fool.
Nor will I be both your victim and the tool
of my native land's destruction.
So I choose to speak.

In the name of all we hope for in the human dream of freedom
does it seem meet a nation question the loyalty
of that citizen whom it denies even the right to be
secure in his person . . .
safe beneath the eagle's wing?
Is that not the law, is that not the dream?
Do you expect I should abandon that dream
before I've tasted of its fullness?
Think you I have arrived at such a state of wretchedness
that you could now order me to finger human liberty?

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Beulah Richardson

"Come, come," you say,
 "are you, have you ever been?"
 "Come," you say, "name names,
 tell us where, with whom and when?
 You had better tell us true
 everything you say will be used against you.
 Come, incriminate yourself.
 By God in heaven swear!"

In answer I say here, here,
 I am he who in the halls of congress you have called
God damned black son-of-a-bitch!
 Wherefore do you bid me swear in the name of a Deity
 by whom I am already damned?
 Or, are there two,
 One who damns me and One who loves you?
 And if there is but one can it be
 that after all he is a respecter of persons?
 accomplice in your fight against my human rights?

Contempt, you say?
 I speak not contemptuously.
 What human utterance could express this court's contempt
 of me?
 Though you slay me that is the smallest price
 as I now count the cost you have placed on life.
 From behind the blood-stained shield of justice
 you bid me yield up that which makes me human!
 But, despite your acts, loopholes, hidden clause
 your supreme opinion,
 men are not dogs, to heel, point, roll over and lie down.
 No kin is he to the blood-hound tracking human prey.
 His but to do, say according to his conscience.
 His not to do or die at the order of a master.
 His always to reason why and avoid the disaster,
 the awful calamity of being neither man nor beast
 but beneath all things!
 This is your price.
 You would tear from my throat the unearthly cry,
 "I'm a rat and a spy and I want to die."

Oh NO!
 Your jails imprison honest citizens
 who found that price too dear to pay.
 Charge them as you will.
 With infamous tongue declare that they with force and violence
 seek to overthrow the American way.
 To that I must say this:
 I've stumbled, trudged along that way
 and too often have come upon the mangled and dismembered
 corpse of some black citizen
 done to death in the true tradition.
 I've wandered past open doors where labels like iron bars
 make vast luxurious prisons
 and the smiling inmates take their pale pleasure
 from the galling cup of custom.

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I've boarded a train where the ticket purchased humiliation.
 Full well, too well
 I know the crimes of this nation against the souls of man,
 your American way,
 so like Rome's Appian road of yesteryear.
 Along its treacherous curves and turns
 have met traveling there
 the many and varied victims of your doctrine of despair.

But then, I wandered upon another path
 and came upon sacred ground,
 searching, yea, rising and falling
 I somehow found that bright, broad highway
 paved with brotherhood, friendship and love.
 Won with struggle and courage bold
 bought with brave patriots' blood.
 I will march here with these,
 the soldier citizens,
 hewers of democracy.
 the peace loving people of this nation
 fighting ever to make it free!
 and speak with these the speech of hope,
 that even the fearful will dare to whisper,
 the suffering heave sighs of relief,
 the army of the toiling millions
 knot their fists and stamp their feet
 with a thundering, "AMEN"!

I, the Negro citizen will be numbered among these
 the many,
 shouting the alarum,
 Come, they murder human liberty
 come stake your claim for freedom
 never surrender humanity!
 The amassed and gathering millions
 will banish from the earth your living hell
 and together striving onward, upward
 we will forge a liberty bell
THAT WILL NOT CRACK!
 To that, I pledge undying loyalty!

