
A New Nation in Harlem

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In that section of New York City, beginning approximately at East 125th Street and continuing to 145th, known as Harlem, and inhabited almost entirely by Negroes, there is a new flag. During the month of August [1921] it is flaunted gaily from the walls of the three buildings which house the offices, industrial exhibit, and Second Annual Convention of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. It is a tri-color of red, green, and black, the present emblem of the UNIA and the future flag of Africa!

Inside Liberty Hall, an immense one-story structure on East 138th Street where the convention holds its sessions, there is further tangible evidence of this new nationality. From the ceiling are suspended not only the flags of the association, but the red, green, and black banners representing the 418 chartered divisions of the Association in the United States, the West Indies, and Africa. Here, one after another, an African chieftain, a missionary returned from Abyssinia, a delegate from Spanish Honduras, an organizer from Louisiana, tell the tales that are weaving the diverse past and present of the Negro into a homogeneous future in the UNIA. "In Abyssinia," said the returned missionary, "I pay a silver dollar bearing a black man's head to a black station agent for a ticket on a train owned by black men and manned by a black crew." The crowd applauds and sees an Africa quite different from the picture it has had of an abode of cannibals. In a building across the street there is yet more proof of this new unity in the Women's Industrial Exhibit. There samples of dress-making, millinery, and cookery of the American Negro women are displayed next to the intricate basketry, weaving, and leatherwork of native African women, and the fancy work and grass-plaiting of the West Indians.

But it is at the evening meetings of the UNIA, the only one of the three daily sessions open to the public, that one sees the new nation-

ality in action. Under the banners of South Carolina, Trinidad, Liberia, sit the delegates from the 840 divisions, chartered and unchartered, of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and, to quote the speakers, "of four hundred million downtrodden Negroes in the world." While the crowd awaits the parade which precedes the meeting, ushers sell phonograph records of the Honorable Marcus Garvey's speeches, and distribute pamphlets advertising shares in the Black Star Steamship Line and the \$2 million loan for industrial work in Liberia and *The Mistakes of W.E.B. DuBois*. The official band of the Black Star Line plays and the audience sways in rhythm, drinks pop, and watches the door. The band is suddenly silent, the pop forgotten....

A gowned choir, singing the new anthem of Ethiopia, leads those essentials of a full-grown nation which are illustrated in the nightly procession. There is the head of the future government, the Honorable Marcus Garvey, President-General of the UNIA, in his official robe of red silk and green velvet, surrounded by his statesmen. There is the national army — twelve or more martial figures in attractive blue, red, and gold uniforms. There is the corps of Black Cross Nurses and the girl and boy scouts. There is the living symbol of a national life, a black Liberty, draped in red and green, carrying a new scepter, crowned with a black *pileus*. The audience gazes with rapture, thrilled with all the joys of a nationality, without, as yet, any of its responsibilities.

It may be merely an *opera bouffe*; it may be the beginning of all that Mr. Garvey and his followers believe it is. Whatever its future, its present is a vital force in Negro life. Tomorrow Marcus Garvey, hailed in the Harlem newspapers as The Man of the Hour, may be forgotten, but the ideal he has shown and the work he has done thus far toward the attainment of that ideal will not be. He has given the colored peoples the idea of racial self-determination, the blueprint — however vague — of a national home.

If the assumption some of us possess that the exponent of an ideal should be pale, hungry-eyed, worn thin by vigils, is a general one, then Marcus Garvey is a disappointing figure. He is black, apparently too well-fed, exceedingly well groomed. In short, he does not look like — himself. It is when he speaks, whether in the privacy of his office or in the glare of the lights in Liberty Hall, that one recognizes the man for what he is and for what he want to be, a black leader of black people.

I had attended one meeting in Liberty Hall and had seen the gaudy pageant without having heard Mr. Garvey speak; I had talked with a bumptious employee of the UNIA and I had passed many doors, in the dingy building occupied by *The Negro World* and the Black Star Line, bearing such inscriptions as High Chancellor and High Commissioner General, before I had an interview with the promoter of it all. Until I met Mr. Garvey, I was a bit supercilious. I found him surprisingly unassuming, even modest, with a very rare use of the perpendicular pronoun. His bearing is that of the educated West Indian Negro, who, neither pathetically humbled nor pathetically arrogated by the burden of prejudice in the United States, meets the white man on his own ground. He is a forceful speaker, with a sincerity in his voice that is convincing. His sentences are short, concise; his words few-syllabled and, for the most part, definite.

When I asked him to explain his plan for the American Negro in regard to Jim Crow cars, disfranchisement, lynching, he answered by explaining the general program of the Universal Negro Improvement Association: Negroes are universally oppressed. Negroes the world over are the victims of prejudice and injustice. Under every government they are unfairly treated, yet are expected to give the same loyalty as other citizens. Here in America during the recent war Negroes contributed money, industrial service, and physical military service, believing they were helping to make the world safe for a democracy in which they would have a part. Now that the war is over, they are hurled back into the old time status. The Universal Negro Improvement Association believes that petitions and prayers will never help. It believes that Jim Crow cars, disfranchisement, lynching, and burning will prevail so long as Negroes have no united power, no united voice, no economic background to support that voice. Its program is to unite 400 million Negroes into one solid political body. As Africa is the native habitat of the Negro, from which he was stolen originally, the UNIA has as its ultimate object the redemption of Africa, where a government of the Negroes, by the Negroes, for the Negroes may be set up. "It may be a matter of centuries," said Mr. Garvey, "before our design can be accomplished, but that is the direction in which we are working."

The present plan for reconquering Africa is by commercial and industrial methods. The Black Star Line has now two passenger and freight vessels operating, more or less regularly, between Africa and the West Indies, and North and South America, and is negotiating for

the purchase of the third, the largest of the three. The Association is soliciting subscriptions to a \$2 million loan, at 5 percent problematic interest, for the building of schools, factories, and churches in Liberia. On the amount already subscribed a contingent has been sent to Liberia to begin the work. For the present, the efforts of the Association will be confined to Liberia alone; eventually it is hoped to make similar beginnings in other parts of Africa. Mr. Garvey has a plan for the initiation and development of a civil service in which intelligent young men and women in America will be trained for the work in Liberia, and for organization work throughout the world.

Through his speeches Mr. Garvey seems to be quite openly preparing his subjects for actual combat, he was laconic when I mentioned the military side of the question: "We do not intend to start anything. We are organizing — that's all." In both his speeches and his interviews, he has maintained that he has no enmity for the white peoples. He merely asks for Negroes to have the same rights and privileges that Caucasians possess. He wants no help from white people in this venture; he scorns organizations of colored people which invite and accept aid from white people. "The Negro race," he said, "must keep to itself socially and politically, while mixing with other races commercially."

I asked Mr. Garvey whether he explained the great popularity of the UNIA in the West Indies by the fact that he himself is a West Indian and well known in the islands. He admitted that that fact might have some degree of influence, but explained the greater part of the enthusiasm by the condition and environment of the West Indian Negroes. They are more universally educated, more sophisticated politically than the American Negroes. They can understand more readily what a government of their own would mean to them. The American Negro, on the other hand must be trained to see the advantage in a racial economic and political background.

And here all incongruity between Marcus Garvey, the man, in a calm palm beach suit, and Marcus Garvey, Provisional President of Africa, in a hectic green and red robe, disappeared. Marcus Garvey is out to win his American Negro for the Universal Negro Improvement Association. He knows what bait to use: resounding titles, imperial robes, and a religious ritual. In his dove-tailing of religion and politics, particularly, one sees his skill most clearly. The sessions of the UNIA are opened with a hymn and a prayer and closed with a benediction. Mr. Garvey's speeches are dotted with references to the Bible

and to the American Negro's devotion to religion. He uses the Bible, too, to stir up fighting blood and to pull the wool from the Negro's eyes, if one may judge from a quotation in *The Negro World*: "Negroes, heretofore have been accustomed to use the Bible only in solving their problems and, in consequence, have failed, but from now on they will use, in conjunction with the Bible, the material forces and weapons used by the white man in gaining and maintaining his supremacy, in fighting his way to the top."

On "Black Star Night" Mr. Garvey's method of appeal for investment in the steamship line showed that he understands human nature, when it is a matter of getting money, as well as he understands racial traits. He began his appeal by the use of those tricks made familiar to us in the Liberty Loan campaign, such as "five more subscribers before the next number on the program" and "five more who want to hear the band play." His primary address, however, was to the racial consciousness of the audience: "Do you want Africa redeemed? Do you want the Negro respected? Do you want to do your duty by your race? Then buy shares." His second plea was directed at individual self-interest: "Do you want to solve the unemployment situation for Negroes? Do you want jobs as officers and managers instead of cooks and potwashers? Then buy shares." Lastly he reverted to cash return: "This is a little talk on the profitability of speculative investments for the benefit of the hard-headed business men who are not emotionally responsive to race appeals." He read a list of figures which show that amounts ranging from \$40,000 to \$200,000 have been realized on original investments of \$100 in such stock as the Bell Telephone, National Cash Register, Underwood Typewriter, and the like. His statements were punctured by gasps from the audience, but one wondered whether the gasps came from the hard-headed business men or from the emotionally inclined, whose early enthusiasm for race regeneration was being strengthened by the sober second thought to alluring individual profits! The hard-headed business men know that these unbelievable returns which Mr. Garvey cited came from speculative ventures, but speculative ventures which had control of monopoly product through patent right, or otherwise, whereas the Black Star Line is entering competitive shipping at a time when shipping is not an especially lucrative business. They know that the Black Star Line must fight its way unaided by monopoly combination, powerful financial connections, or government subsidy.

There is, however, on tangible asset which the steamship line does possess, the possibility of capitalizing race consciousness. Delegates from Africa affirm that the natives are withholding produce, awaiting the coming of ships owned and operated by men of their own color. It may be that Negro shippers of the United States, West Indies, South America, and Africa will rally to the support of the Black Star Line, foregoing all considerations but that of race for the time being. As a debit against this undoubted asset will be the almost assured boycott of the line by white shippers. Probably the gains of race consciousness will offset the losses, but the point is that even a mildly profitable oceanic trade, say 5 percent net to the stockholders, will not be achieved within a short enough time to appeal to the hard-headed business men. In fact, the promise of cash return on Black Star stock may be the undoing of the entire movement.

To judge from the present temper of the members of the UNIA, ruin due to such a cause would be pathetic. Mr. Garvey and his officials have openly acknowledged that thus far the undertaking has not paid and in defense have pointed to the common fallibility of man, including J.P. Morgan. Their supporters have accepted their defense and reassured them of their confidence and their faith. Or, as one woman delegate from Pittsburgh philosophically expressed it in a stirring speech before the convention: "Even if Garvey should run away with all the money, we'd rather he did it than to have some white man lose it for us."

It would seem from all observations that Mr. Garvey *has* won the American Negro, at least the members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, to the support of his idea. They look upon the Black Star Line and the African Communities League in the way Mr. Garvey would have them look on it — as agents of racial regeneration rather than as agents of monetary return. It would seem that the wise policy for the directors would be to stop talking about fabulous returns and to admit the impossibility of dividends for a long time to come. Otherwise the clamor of disappointed investors may stifle the voice of an awakening people.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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