

The Awakening

My dislike for the South dates back to the day when my sixth grade teacher told his class that "nuthin' but mules and niggers is fit to work." That incident planted in me a prejudice which I have never quite overcome. "Damned Yankee," one called me in the South, and had I been more proficient in the use of colloquial English, ^{gladly} I should have reciprocated the compliment, with pleasure.

The germ of my prejudice was indignation against the injustices with which Negroes are treated in the South. Had that indignation remained pure, and unadulterated with egotism, intolerance could never have taken so firm a grip on my mind as it did. With alarming speed, a negative attitude toward life was converting me into a sophist and a hypocrite. For many months I considered myself a saint among sinners.

I fancied that I had valid reasons for my prejudice. I scorned the injustice and untruthfulness, the bigotry and the narrow-mindedness, which, in my eyes, were dominant in Southern thought. My life became the expression of superiority. Instead of ignoring Jim Crow laws, as I should have done had humility rather than self-assertion guided my actions, I took every occasion to show my disdain for them. In busses and trains I seated myself beside

colored people whenever I could. My face glowed with a mixture of pride and scorn when ~~when~~ others shook their heads at my behavior. In retrospect, I think that I must have considered myself little less than the incarnation of the Magna Carta. I was the voice crying in the wilderness, the representative of the tolerance and justice I expected to find in the North.

One year in Pennsylvania sufficed to destroy my illusions that hate and bigotry were restricted to the South. Where I had hoped to find ~~freedom~~ ideas unstained with prejudice, I discovered a narrow-mindedness closely related to the one I had so long despised. I found that the fervor which ~~the~~ Virginians lavish on their hate for the Negro, Philadelphians distribute variously among the Irish, the Catholics, the Jews, ^{and} those "damned lying Southerners," ^{group} carefully exempting any ~~category~~ that ^Pby a quirk of fate had appeared in their respective family trees. The longer I stayed in Philadelphia, the more my illusions faded. Having hoped to escape an intellectual atmosphere that was suffocating me, I was disappointed to find myself in another whirlpool of intolerance even more involved than the first.

If my stay in Philadelphia did nothing else for me, it gave me a more mature and unbiased outlook upon life. The fire of prejudiced passion burned itself out. I have done my best to replace its flickering flame with a steadier, brighter light, whose rays may give me a better understanding of mankind and of myself.

Perhaps a change in my attitude toward people was the first manifestation of an enlightened mind. Having recognized the fallibility of human judgement, I became more lenient in my criticism of others. A readiness to see another's viewpoint entered my thinking. I ~~became~~ ^{thought} more critical ^{about my own faults} with myself, and I saw that ^{having} ~~having~~ ^{ed} poisoned my idealism with prejudice, ^I ^{been} had brought ~~me~~ to the brink of hypocrisy. May I never repeat my mistake.

This last ¶ is so unnecessary and displays so much less of the dignity and humility of the rest that I refused to read it (theoretically) and have graded you on the rest.

A