The quest for understanding

BY CHARLES H. BROWN, ‘33

Race prejudice, as most of our attitudes and opinions, is an acquired thing. The average white child has no more inclination to dislike a Negro than he has to dislike his own mother and father or any of the white people that he, in his limited range of experience, knows. Through careless remarks overhead and actions of adults toward Negroes, he gradually develops an antipathy, more or less strong, to people whose pigment differs from his own, though he may be frank and open-minded in other things.

My own experience has been of this sort. As a child, I often heard derogatory remarks spoken about the Negro. A nigger is a thief, a good-for-nothing. Give a nigger an inch and he'll take a mile. A nigger's all right in his place. Such remarks as these, and frequently much worse and not uncommonly profane ones, together with instances which the white people of my community showed their contempt of the Negro, developed in me the attitude generally held by the people I knew. Like many other people, there was no rancor in my race prejudice. I considered the Negro merely an inferior species, who, by unfortunate circumstances, has been brought from his native home to this country. Too late to get rid of him, we must tolerate him so long as he keeps his place.

This opinion was gradually broken down. An incident here, a statement there—gradually I underwent a succession of experiences that led me to regard my old viewpoint not only as false but extremely harmful; and I now have an outlook that I believe is desirable. I have had more immediate things to do—getting an education and making a living—which have caused me to fail in putting my altruistic inclinations to work for the promotion of a better understanding of the race situation in America.

I shall not attempt to give all the occurrences leading up to my right-about face in regard to the race situation in America, but I shall give several of them. They may illustrate a mode of attack, probably obvious, which can be taken into consideration by those who are seeking by means of education to create a better understanding between the white and the black races.

One of the first incidents that stands out vividly in my mind and that has been most effective in making me realize "man's inhumanity to man," especially the white man's inhumanity to the black man, happened when I was ten years old. With a small playmate of mine and a half dozen or so street loungers, I was watching a Negro drive a team of somewhat cantankerous mules up the street. The team was hitched to mine and a half dozen or so street loungers, I was watching a Negro drive a team of somewhat cantankerous mules up the street. The team was hitched to what was probably the most fantastic wagon ever constructed for practical purposes. Next to its state of utter disrepair, the most noticeable thing about it was its tongue which was about twice as long as it should have been for utility. The sight was amusing, but the tone of the situation was changed when the mules reared back and the wagon tongue shot up in the air, ripping loose the top of a touring car parked on the side of the street. The owner of the automobile, a short, muscular, heavy-set man, was talking to a man in front of a store. When he saw what had happened, he went up to the frightened and apologetic Negro and commanded him to get down on his hands and knees in the dust of the street. He then started to flay the Negro with a rope which he took from the wagon. None of the onlookers interfered with him.

This incident raised thoughts in my mind. I wondered why any person had the right to beat and humiliate another man for something that could not be avoided. I knew that had a white man been driving the wagon the result of the accident would have been otherwise. I could not reconcile the actions of the owner of the car and the subjection of the owner of the broken-down wagon with my ideas of right and wrong.

I have since had extreme cases of injustice to the Negro impressed upon my mind. I shall never forget the stricken, hunted looks of Negroes who fled to our town seeking refuge from the Tulsa race riot and massacre. I boil with indignation when I think of pictures which I have seen of innocent Negroes hanging tragically and pitifully from trees and the charred remains of bodies burned at the stake. I lose all respect for America, the land of the brave and the home of the free, when I read of Negroes frightened out of their homes by white mobs. A knowledge of the horrors, not to say the thousands of humiliations, inflicted upon the Negroes in America has led me to think differently of the race problem, to want to do something to improve conditions.

The recognition that for one race to be downtrodden, denied of almost every right and privilege, while another, chiefly because numerically superior, can grasp all the things that make life worth living.
who had been privileged to live near this beautiful character. I know of no one who can idealize Christian womanhood with more sincerity or more helpfully. The dignity of her life was contagious; unhurried, always poised, she had time for every plea, every demand. The community has never been able to find a substitute for her gentle ministrations."

Miss Ruth Moore, instructor in piano, recalled her student days in King Hall. "I lived there in 1917-18 and '19," Miss Moore said. "During the war they had the Students' Army Training Corps here. The 'war-line' over which the boys were not allowed to cross without permission from the military heads ran along Duffy in front of King Hall. "We had two dances a year then and the boys would have to get permission from the military heads to cross the street and come to the dances."

"I'll never forget the night some of the men got permission...and some of them were there anyway. During the dance a few couples went down to the Varsity...Oh! My land, yes, it was the Corner then. There wasn't any place else to go; it was the only shop we had. Well, they went down in couples and coming back the guard stopped some of them, sent the men back to the barracks and let the girls go home alone."

"One of the funniest things that happened, it was funny to us then, was the time a Spanish professor paid a friendly call and, backing out of the house in polite continental fashion, landed on the lawn."

The way the two houses were put together caused any one who was not familiar with the entrance to think there were steps where there weren't, Miss Moore explained. Even professors are likely to err once in awhile.

It was hoped that a similar house might be built for men, but as time went on, more sorority houses and dormitories were built and eventually King Hall was given over to men. It was so occupied up to the time of its razing this spring. "Original plans were to build a quadrangle," Mr. Lindloff said. "The concrete structure was to have been one unit of it."

Others were to be added later until the four groups of connected buildings with a court in the center made a complete quadrangle. Due to lack of funds this project has been temporarily abandoned and with the gift from un-designated legacies in the east, either a student center or a church could be built. Mr. Lindloff explained.

Since Mr. Lindloff's arrival in 1930, more seating space in the little St. John's Episcopal church was provided, but even that did not accommodate the congregation. Thereupon plans were worked out by Charles A. Popkin, Tulsa, architect; Rev. Thomas Cassidy, bishop of the Oklahoma Episcopal churches, and Mr. Lindloff for the new St. John's Episcopal church which will be ready for occupation when school opens in September. J. H. Fredrickson, Oklahoma City, is the contractor.

The junior church composed of children from about four to fourteen years old has increased fifty percent since Lindloff has been here. They shall continue to meet in the little chapel. The Student Forum, a group of university students, which Mr. Lindloff introduced this year shall have a meeting place provided and it is hoped that a student center might be added to the church in the near future.

King Hall memories of student life remain although the building itself has given place to a greater need that the work might move forward.

\[\text{\textbf{THE QUEST FOR UNDERSTANDING}}\]

\[\text{(continued from page 316)}\]

\[\text{(continued from page 308)}\]

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different to the necessity for granting the Negro a new freedom to be made in their moral duty to assist in the solution of the race problem? Why cannot ignorant, prejudiced persons be made, by education, to see the light of truth?

I think there is no reason why these things cannot be done, and I believe that if those who have succeeded in their quest for understanding should attempt in their own little sphere of influence, to exert themselves, even only a little, they could gradually change the thought of the whole nation, just as a pebble dropped in a still pool of water sends out ripples that reach the farthest edges of the pool. It seems to me that the students in our colleges and universities should be the leaders in this movement for the adjustment of race difficulties. If not by college students, then by whom? The race problem in America has rocked along for many years, chiefly because of lack of well-directed effort by those who should be interested in setting right what is wrong. The solution of the difficulty lies in intelligence. How long must it be said that American could not use intelligence in the solution of one of the most vital problems? I consider this an urgent challenge to the young men and women of our colleges. 

A characteristic of Stevenson that has been the special delight of my rediscovery of him is the remarkable, chameleon-like changeability of his opinions and moods. And surely, as he says: "To hold the same views at forty as we held at twenty is to have been stupified for a score of years, and take rank not as a prophet, but as an unteachable brat, well birched and none the wiser." In his dedications (to which Thomas Stevenson, his father, turned when all other books failed him) he is conscious and thankful that his thinking has been capable of mutations; in one he says: "It is good to have been young in youth and, as years go on, to grow older . . . to travel deliberately through one's ages is to get the heart out of a liberal education. Times change, opinions vary to their opposite, and still this world appears a possible, you can never write another dedication that can give the same pleasure to the vanished world."

A PLAN FOR IMPROVING FRATERNITY SCHOLARSHIP (continued from page 302)