

# WHAT IS AN AMERICAN?

TO Jean la Touche in his *Ballad for Americans* he is "Just an Irish-Negro-Jewish-Italian, French-and-English-Spanish-Russian, Chinese-Polish-Dutch-Hungarian, Scottish-Swedish-Finish-Canadian, Greek and Turk and Czech and double-check AMERICAN!"

Heard from New Zealand before Pearl Harbour, this sounded well enough and made good propaganda for American democracy. Hearing it in Salt Lake after three months there I thought the case over-simplified; and when I last heard it in June it sounded nothing more than a gallant vision of an integrated people without reference to the actual situation.

Somewhere in the experience of every American is the corner drug store with its ice-cream sundaes at the counter, the current song hit over the juke-box, the liquor cheek-by-jowl with the patent medicines, the easy informality, the local gags, and the sense of national crisis or well-being. On Main Street or across the railroad-tracks, in Harlem or Chinatown, the pattern is the same. But Americans living diversely in these places sharing many similar experiences neither regard each other with equal respect nor allow each other equal freedom.

It was not long before I knew all the terms of disdain and contempt levelled at each group by the other. There was Polack for the Poles, Hunky for the Hungarians, Wop for the Italians. People who dressed with infinite care from Jewish department stores used less finesses as they sprinkled their vocabulary with Kike and Jew-boy; American women wore Mexican jewellery with great pride while California crowded Mexican children into segregated schools; women worked alongside Nisei Japanese resenting their freedom from internment without bothering to discover that they were the wives and daughters of Japanese-Americans fighting with great distinction in Italy.

## Negroes and Jews

Americans, I found, fell into certain fixed levels of social prestige and opportunity. There was none of that indiscriminate order of Jean la Touche. First came the people of German, English, French, and Scandinavian descent and after them the Irish and Italians, the Greeks, the Armenians, the Orientals, the Mexicans—and trailing last, shunned by all the rest, the Negro. Running like a cross-section over the entire social structure of the nation are the Jews, not entirely absorbed, not yet the victims of rampant anti-Semitism, resented and never quite accepted.

Eenie meenie minie mo,  
Catch a nigger by the toe  
If he hollers make him pay  
Fifty dollars every day.

Not a chant of the Ku Klux Klan, but just the small children of the neighbourhood playing outside the house. "Last man down's a nigger-baby"—and this time the children are playing indoors with their aunts and uncles at a family party. Three of these children were at Nursery School with Negro

teachers whom they dearly loved. And none of those parents, hearing either group of children at play, thought to remove the offensive word from their patter.

## "The Misfortune of America"

It is true that I arrived in America knowing more about the Negro question than about keeping house, more



MARIAN ANDERSON  
*Hotel Managers Have Prejudices.*

about lynchings in the South than about barbecues on lawns in the West. It is the misfortune of America that all the world can fasten its eyes on Greenville, South Carolina, and watch the trial of 30 white lynchers and yet have very little opportunity to know how a good American home functions, how kind and generous, how honest and genuine the average American is. But these same Americans have very little time for private introspection and still less for probing their national problems without prejudice and fear.

If I saw barbecues instead of lynchings I still did not go around unaware of the Negro population silent and subservient. The boot-blacks, the waiters, the cleaning-maids in the theatres and stores, the porters on the trains all go about their business with care and a courtesy that the white population pays for in tips rather than with equal courtesy and respect.

The best jazz is played in night clubs by Negro bands and white people pay any price to hear it. When Marian Anderson sings in Portland the largest hotel will not give her a room, but the manager of the hotel sits in the best seat in the theatre. For his unchallenged superiority as an artist Paul Robeson may eat at a restaurant which otherwise bears a sign which all Negroes recognise as a device to exclude them.

## A Personal Solution

"Negro problem? What Negro problem?" they say in Salt Lake City. Then I discovered that for the sins of Ham, the Negro has been cursed to remain among the sons of darkness for ever and for that reason he cannot hold office in the Mormon Church. For the same reason he had nowhere to swim when on leave from camp in those hot Utah summers. Having excluded him from the Mormon swimming-baths it did not seem important to the city fathers to

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BEATRICE ASHTON.

do anything further about it. There was nowhere Negroes could eat on leave; there was no permanent Negro population of any size to absorb them. There was still no "problem."

Somewhere I had to find a personal solution of the matter. It isn't possible to make friends with just any Negro in any situation and thereby shelve your guilt by proving your compassion. They would prove stubborn and very uncooperative guinea-pigs.

Fifteen thousand Negroes had poured into Portland for the shipyards and they had gone north to stay. They are crowded into a small area near the river, segregated in one housing project and restricted to the fringe of the Veterans' Housing Project at Vanport. All the old wives' tales from the south preceded them north and while I saw for myself that they were quiet and dignified on the streets, I was assured that they did not know what to do with their money and were a rampant danger to the rest of us.

Would you meet a Negro socially? There is the acid test for a Caucasian who feels that something more than

(continued on next page)



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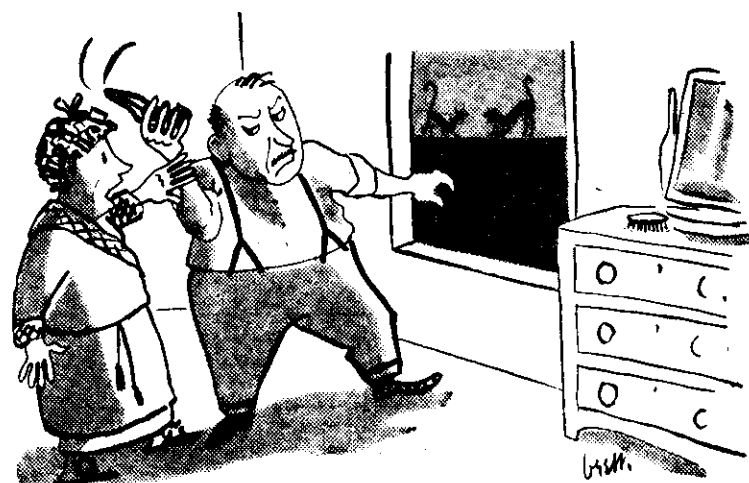
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