

The Atlanta Riot

A DISCOURSE BY THE

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THE ATLANTA RIOT.

"Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once I was stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of rivers, in perils of robbers, in perils from my countrymen, in perils from the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren."—*2 Corinthians, 11: 24-26.*

The apostle Paul, in these words, sets forth the condition in which he found himself almost constantly. The term which he uses to describe this condition is the word peril. He tells us that he was in constant peril; that he was beset by dangers on all sides. The sources of the danger of which he speaks, as set forth here, are four-fold:

1. From natural causes. He was in perils of rivers; he was in perils in the sea.

2. From the criminally inclined. He was in perils of robbers.

3. From his own countrymen; from the men of his own race, the men with whom he was identified by blood.

4. From the Gentiles, from those who were not Jews.

The apostle was a travelling missionary; and so was constantly on the go. Sometimes in these missionary tours he had to travel by water; and so was exposed to all the dangers of the sea—to storms and tempests. One of these terrible storms in which the ship was lost, his travelling companion, Luke, has left a description of for us in the Acts of the Apostles.

Sometimes in his travels he had to journey along lonely passes and over barren mountain wastes, infested by robbers and other desperate characters: and so was liable to be treated as the man on his way from Jericho was, who was waylaid, robbed, and beaten almost to death.

Sometimes in the discharge of his duties, as the ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ, he ran up against the prejudices of his own countrymen. The course which he was pursuing, and which he felt that he must pursue in obedience to the dictates of his own conscience and the expressed command of Jesus Christ, whom he once persecuted, but in whose service he had now enlisted for life, excited in his countrymen the most violent opposition. They

were ready to kill him at the first opportunity, as they tried to do when he last visited Jerusalem. You remember that turbulent scene, as Luke describes it in Acts 21st chapter: "And all the city was moved, and the people ran together; and they laid hold on Paul, and dragged him out of the temple. And as they were seeking to kill him, tidings came to the chief captain of the band that all Jerusalem was in confusion." A little farther on in the description of what took place, we have also this record: "And they gave him audience unto this word; and they lifted up their voices and said, Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live."

Among the Gentiles he also found himself beset by dangers. At Philippi he and Silas were seized, cast into prison, and beaten with many stripes. At Ephesus, a riot was precipitated, during which the apostle had to conceal himself from the violence of the mob.

In view of the record which has come down to us, we can readily understand what the apostle means when he speaks of being in perils. He was in constant danger, bodily danger; liable at any time to be violently assaulted; to be maimed, or beaten to death. Whether he was on land or sea, in the city, or in the country; it was all the same. The same conditions surrounded him. Whichever way he went, whichever way he looked, the ghastly visage of danger stared him in the face. He was encompassed by perils.

And what was true of the apostle Paul is true to-day of our race in this country, especially in the southern section of it. We are in constant peril; no one is safe for a moment. We are liable at any time to be shot down, to be brutally murdered. Character, intelligence, wealth, count for nothing. The most intelligent, the most respectable, the most industrious, the most law-abiding are in just as great danger as the most ignorant, the most vicious, the most indolent, the most lawless. Sometimes the more progress that is made, the higher the type represented, the greater the peril. The feeling among certain elements of southern society, among the poor whites—the lower classes—is more pronounced, is more virulent in its opposition to the well-to-do, the self-respecting, the aggressive elements of the colored race than against the shiftless, non-progressive, self-satisfied, who are content to remain just as they are, who are without hope, without aspiration, without ambition. They are more tolerant of the one type, than of the other; they will take more from the one than they will from the other; they are not so easily offended by the one as by the other. And the reason for this is two-fold:

1. It is the result of envy, born of hatred. It hurts this class

of whites to see the Negro prospering. They don't want him to succeed; they don't want him to get along. Somehow, they seem to feel that it detracts from them: that if this higher class of Negroes were out of the way, it would be better for them. The unprogressive Negro, the Negro that is content with present conditions, they are not concerned about, they have nothing to fear from that class; but it is the rising Negro, the Negro that is forging to the front; who sees a future before him, and who is alive, wide-awake to the possibilities of the future—that he looks with especial disfavor upon; and the reason for this is because he sees in that type of Negro a rival, a competitor in the struggle of life. And, in regarding him as a competitor, he is not mistaken. He is the type of Negro that he will have to reckon with in the fierce battle of life. He is in the struggle and he is there to win. He is bound to get his share of the plums. The hatred, the opposition of this class of whites is not going to dampen his ardor or discourage him in the least. He has begun to forge ahead, and he is going to continue to forge ahead. You can't stop the progress of a people; you can't keep a people from rising by hating them, by exhibiting toward them an envious and malicious spirit, if they themselves are in earnest; if they themselves are determined to go forward; if their minds are firmly made up to succeed. And this I believe is true of our race,—if not of all,—of a sufficient number, at least, to guarantee the result. Onward! is our watchword; and more and more is that thought taking possession of the masses of our people; more and more are we waking up to the thought that we have got to work out our own destiny in this country. And out of that thought or conviction is coming, more and more activity from within the race. As long as we feel that we must depend upon others; as long as we feel that we must look to others and not to ourselves, there will be more or less stagnation within the race. It is only as we come to feel, and to feel deep down in the bottom of our hearts that we “must sink or swim; live or die; survive or perish,” through our own exertions, that the latent powers within the race itself will be awakened, and the forces necessary to lift it, to carry it forward, be generated. It is only as the race becomes *self-reliant* that it will grow strong; that it will become self-respecting; and that it will command respect from others. And because the race is becoming more and more self-reliant; because the evidences are multiplying every year of greater activity from within, we have nothing to fear from the envious and malicious spirit of the lower classes of whites in the south, in keeping us from rising, from taking an honorable place in the procession of those who are moving forward, in the onward march of progress.

2. Another reason why a certain class of whites in the South, why, I may say, a very large proportion of the southern whites, are less tolerant of the aggressive, progressive, intelligent, thrifty, well-to-do Negro, than of the other class, is because it is the intelligent, progressive Negro who gives the lie to their theory of the Negro's inferiority. God made the Negro inferior, they say, God made him to be a servant; to be a beast of burden; a hewer of wood and a drawer of water. Some have gone so far as to deny his humanity, as to declare that he hasn't a soul. And while they are proclaiming his inferiority, while they are believing, or pretending to believe in his inferiority, right in their midst, all about them, the Negro is demonstrating his capacity, by proofs as strong as words of holy writ, to take his place along side of his detractors in all the avenues of life, where he has had the opportunity. This hopelessly inferior race, this lowest type of humanity, if he be really human, strange to say is found doing, and doing just as well, what the highest type is doing. In business, in scholarship, in all the higher activities he has been tried, not a great many, perhaps, but a sufficient number to determine the capacity of the race. He is succeeding in business; in the professions; he is measuring up to the requirements of all the great universities of the land; and in the field of athletics, where discipline and nerve, and the highest skill of a certain kind are necessary, he is not a whit behind his white competitor. I do not believe in prize fighting and yet I was gratified the other day to read what referee George Siler had to say about Gans, the colored champion. "It is generally conceded," he said, "that Booker T. Washington has done much good and will do much for the colored race for its uplifting, its education, for making its members citizens in a true sense of the word; but with all that, in the entire course of his life work he never did one-tenth to place the black man in the front rank as a gentleman than has been done by Joe Gans. He has shown forbearance; he has shown courtesy; and in the ring on Monday he displayed chivalry which is not unworthy of being classed with the superlative notions of the gentlemen of the middle ages who wore spring suits of boiler plate and tilted at everything in sight for the defence of some fair lady. He failed to take advantage of technicalities; he aided his fallen foe and was assaulted even while his glove still maintained his friendly grasp on that of his adversary. He fought a good fight when crippled, and although fouled more than once, refrained from taking the advantage which the rules gave him."

In the Boston *Sunday Post* is also this statement: "The victory of Gans brings up an interesting question. Is not the Negro a greater fighter than the white man? There are certainly good

grounds for coming to that conclusion when one recalls the name of Peter Jackson, the Australian heavy-weight, the only fighter whom John Sullivan ever feared; George Dixon, whose equal has not yet been found among the bantam and featherweights; Joe Walcott, who still stands pre-eminent as the welter weight champion; and now Joe Gans, the light-weight champion without a peer. There are four champions in four classes, and they were almost contemporaries. Add to that great quartette a few of the present near champions—Jack Johnson, the cleverest of all big men; Young Peter Jackson, Sam Langford and others, and then remember that all the white champions are steadfastly refusing to box with Negroes. It looks as if the black man had something on the white man in the ring.”

Wherever the Negro has been fairly tested he has made an honorable record for himself; has demonstrated his capacity to do what other races have done. All over the southland are unmistakable evidences of his progress; unmistakable evidences of his capacity to do what other men have done. And yet, in spite of the record which he is making, the daily, hourly proof that he is offering of his ability to succeed, the old theory of his inferiority is still maintained, is still insisted upon; is still accepted as true. Instead of revising their theory in view of the facts, instead of rejoicing in the ever-growing evidence of the black man's progress and aiding in every possible way to hasten his development, the fact that he is forging to the front seems only to intensify the feeling against him. And one reason for this, as I have already said, is because it gives the lie to the white man's theory. It is worse than puerile to talk about the inferiority of the Negro in view of what he has done, is still doing, and of the promise which he gives of still larger things in the future. Every man who has given the matter any thought, who has taken the pains to inform himself, to get hold of the facts, knows that the Negro is going forward, that he is making progress, commendable progress, along many lines. And in no part of the country is there greater evidence of this fact than in the southern section of our country. And yet there isn't a member of this race in all that southland who isn't in daily peril, who may not at any moment be violently assaulted, who has any rights which white men are bound to respect. To have a dark face is to become a target for abuse, for insult; is to give every white man the right to maltreat you, to kick and cuff you, and spit upon you. And if you resent it, if you dare to protest, to intimate that you have some rights that you would like to have them respect, the mob spirit is instantly evoked, and your brains are knocked out, or you are shot to death or burned at the stake. That is the condition of things all over

the South. There is no part of it, no section of it, however remote, of which this is not true. Everywhere the black man is beset by perils. He doesn't know what a day may bring forth; he doesn't know what day he may be shot down, or some member of his family, or some friend or acquaintance murdered. We have just had an exhibition, a most shocking exhibition of the constant peril in which this race is forced to live, in the unprovoked, brutal and dastardly assaults that were made upon members of it in Atlanta, Ga. Assaults not upon the guilty, not upon the criminal classes, but upon all Negroes indiscriminately. The country was horrified; the whole civilized world stood aghast; and yet what took place in Atlanta may take place in any southern city at any time; the spirit that pervaded Atlanta—the murderous, blood-thirsty, Negro-hating spirit—is the spirit that pervades the entire South; it needs only the occasion to call it forth. Paul was in perils of rivers, in perils of robbers, in perils of his own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles—the Negro in the South is in peril of the white man. And it isn't an imaginary, it is a real peril, as the actual daily experiences of this race all over the South will testify. This is one reason why so many are getting away from the South. We are inclined to blame them, at times, but dare we under the circumstances? If we were situated as they are, what would we do? What would any man do who felt that he could not surrender his manhood, and yet who was unwilling to sacrifice his life, to expose himself to the bullets of white assassins and murderers?

Now, I know what will be said, what is being said: The Negro has brought all this on himself; he has induced this condition of things; this peril that surrounds him is of his own making. It is a lie! The Negro race is not responsible for this condition of things. This is what John Temple Graves and others of his ilk have said in reference to the Atlanta massacre. Several assaults, it is alleged, were made on white women by Negroes, four or five in one week. Grant it. In what sense were the colored people of Atlanta responsible for those assaults? Were they parties to them? Did they know the assailants? Did they know that these assaults were to be made? Was it with their knowledge, with their approval? Did they connive at them? Did they give aid and succor to the assailants? No! Not even such whited sepulchres as John Temple Graves, Hoke Smith and Clark Howells, who did everything in their power to fan the flames of race hatred, believed anything of the kind. The Negroes of Atlanta, as a class, had no more responsibility for those assaults than the whites as a class had. The fact that the assailants were black, furnished no justification or excuse, for assailing the other mem-

bers of the race who had nothing to do with them, and no knowledge of them. It is only a subterfuge, a lying device, behind which to hide their hatred of all Negroes. According to their own statement, the probabilities are that of all those who were brutally murdered not one guilty person suffered. They were all innocent, so far as we know, and so far as those who murdered them knew. The guilt or innocence of the victims played no part in the bloody tragedy. It was race hatred pure and simple. One Negro answered as well as another the demand of the mob.

Now, I am not *blaming* white men; I am not blaming men of any race for being concerned about the protection of their women from assaults by brutes of any kind, be they white or black; I am not blaming white men for feeling indignant, wrought up, for being stirred to the very depths of their being, in view of such assaults. They would be less than men if they did not feel strongly about the matter. Such assaults cannot be too severely condemned; they are unspeakably infamous; and ought to be put down with a strong hand. *I am not blaming* white men for rising up and saying, This thing must stop. But I am blaming them—

1. Because *their* concern is only for the protection of white women, while they care nothing about the protection of black women. It isn't the virtue of womanhood that they are anxious to protect, but of white womanhood. Black women might be assaulted every day in the year without giving them the slightest concern; without exciting in them the least indignation. The poor black woman's virtue counts for nothing with them.

2. I am blaming them for taking the law in their own hands. Criminal assault is an offense for which the State has provided an adequate penalty. And the State *alone* is charged with the enforcement of the law. Great criminals and small criminals alike are to be tried by the properly constituted authority, and if found guilty, punished. It is not the province of any man, or set of men, who may feel aggrieved, to take the law in their own hands. In the case of assaults, as in the case of all other crimes, the *law* must be allowed to take its course. Those charged with enforcing it must be upheld. Everybody else must keep their hands off. Over against private revenge, against the individual attempting to right his own wrongs, stands this great idea of government.

3. I am blaming them for not discriminating between those who commit assaults upon white women and those who do not. Four or five such assaults were made in and about Atlanta in one week, we are told, and therefore, Negroes indiscriminately must be shot down; Negroes indiscriminately were shot down. If the

assailants themselves had been apprehended, the mob would have had no right to touch a hair of their heads—that was the function of the civil authorities—but when it attempts to deal with innocent men and women, to hunt them down like wild beasts with murderous intent, simply because of their race identity with the assailants, how much more to be condemned is such conduct.

I regret to say there is a disposition, and a growing disposition, on the part of a great many white people, North as well as South, to blame the Negro race because of its criminal class. I, as a member of that race, utterly repudiate any responsibility for Negro criminals. What have I to do with the criminal Negro? What have you to do with him? What have hundreds and thousands and millions of our people all over the country to do with him, except to extend him a helping hand in trying to reform him, to lift him up, to make him a better man. But the fact that he is a criminal, what right has that to affect my standing in this community as an upright, straightforward, honorable citizen? What right has it to affect your standing in this community? What right has it to affect the standing of the same class of colored citizens in other communities? Because there are criminals among us, is that a reason why *we* should be *classed* as criminals? Why *we* should be *treated* as criminals? As an individual I claim the right to be judged by what I am; not by what somebody else is. This is the right which every white man claims, the right which is accorded to white men, why not to black men? Why should one criminal Negro, or a dozen, or a hundred, or a thousand of them, make all Negroes criminal? Why is the Negro race to be judged by its criminal class, and the white race not? The standing of no white man, or set of white men, is affected in any community by the fact that there are white criminals in that community. It is only where people of color are concerned that that rule is applied. I for one protest against it. It is wrong; totally, absolutely wrong. It has no foundation in reason, common sense or justice. I am no criminal; and I do not belong to a criminal race; and I will never rest content under any such aspersion. I utterly repudiate the imputation: I repudiate it for myself; I repudiate for you, who are here; I repudiate it for all the self-respecting people of color all over this country. So far as the criminal Negro is concerned, it is the duty of the State to deal with him as with other criminals of other races. So far as the Negro who is not a criminal is concerned—the Negro who is trying to make something of himself—it is the duty of the State it is the duty of society, it is the duty of the community where he lives to recognize that fact, and to treat him accordingly. In no sense is he to be classed with his criminal brother in black. It is unjust

to do so. It is to destroy in him every incentive to high endeavor.

And now let me come to the point that I have particularly in mind. What shall we say to our brethren in the South, in view of their environments—in view of the perils that constantly beset them? There are three things, I think, we ought to say to them:

1. Don't be discouraged. Continue to do your utmost to develop yourselves along all lines—material, intellectual, moral, spiritual. Continue to buy farms; continue to go into business; continue to work at your trades; continue to send your children to school; continue to sustain your churches, and to insist upon filling them with clean, pure men. Whatever your hands find to do, that is just and pure and lovely, and of good report, do with your might. Do your level best to make the most of yourselves, and of your children. Leave no stone unturned; be alive, wide awake; let no opportunity pass, unimproved. Work, work, hard persistent work, day in and day out, week in and week out, during all the months and years, is the course that must be pursued; is the course that you have been pursuing. Continue to pursue it; continue to apply yourselves earnestly, faithfully in all the avenues of honorable endeavor, in which you are engaged. You have done well; and all the evidences indicate that each decade will find you still farther up the scale of progress. We rejoice with you, in all the efforts that you have made, and are still making to develop yourselves, to improve your condition. The struggle is a hard one, and it is going to be a long one; but success is bound to crown your efforts. You cannot fail as long as you are determined to succeed.

2. Be discreet; be cautious; be very careful of what you say and do. Jesus, in sending his disciples forth, said to them, you will remember: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." What He meant was, that they were to keep steadily in mind the fact that they were in the midst of wolves, among those who would be only too glad of the slightest pretext to ill-treat them, to violently assail them; and therefore they were to be wise, prudent, careful not to give unnecessary offence; not to expose themselves to unnecessary danger. This is the principle upon which the apostle Paul always acted in his contact with men of various races and conditions; and it is one which is important for us, as a race, to lay to heart. I do not mean by this that we are to surrender a single principle; that we are to efface ourselves; that we are to sacrifice our manhood—our self-respect—by no means. Our manhood, our self-respect must be maintained at all times, under all circumstances; but at the same time we must

be cautions; we must not needlessly expose ourselves to danger. The wisdom of the serpent did not always save the apostles from violence, from brutal assault; and it won't always save us; but it is the course, nevertheless, to be pursued. On the whole it decreases friction; it lessens the evil. It gives a better opportunity for things to adjust themselves, a better opportunity for us to hold our own, while we are strengthening ourselves from within. The *wisdom* of the *serpent* is what our people *need* all over the southland, if they are to come out of the struggle in which they are engaged with the least harm to themselves; and are to work from the point of greatest advantage to themselves.

3. Be prepared to defend yourselves, if necessary. I know the meaning of these words. I have carefully weighed them; and, before God, I believe in the message which they contain. To every black man throughout the whole southland, I say, and say deliberately, Be prepared to defend yourself if necessary.

By this I do not mean that black men should go around with chips on their shoulders seeking a quarrel, seeking to foment strife and dissension. That is the last thing that they should think of doing, that they should permit themselves to engage in. If they are wise they will cultivate the spirit of peace, peace, peace. Their aim always should be to avoid strife. But if, through no fault of theirs, if, without any just provocation on their part, they are assaulted with murderous intent by individuals or by mobs, they should be prepared to defend themselves. The only defense which a black man in the South has against the mob is the defense which he throws around himself. He has no protection from the civil authorities. What did the civil authorities amount to in the bloody riot at Atlanta? Although the city was in the clutches of a set of fiends, hunting and shooting down Negroes indiscriminately, the Governor was asleep in his bed, and no one thought of waking him until the mob had spent its fury. And the Mayor, we are told, pleaded with the mob; and the mob took it only as a joke, knowing too well where the sympathy of the authorities usually is. Pleading with a mob! Who ever heard of pleading with a mob! There is only one effective way of dealing with a mob and that is to shoot it to death; to meet it in the same spirit of violence in which it comes. But there is no disposition on the part of the civil authorities in the South to meet it in that spirit when it is organized for the purpose of lynching Negroes. And therefore Negroes must be prepared to defend themselves. The men who usually compose mobs are nothing but a set of cowards; they are ready to join in murderous assaults because they think that they can do it with impunity, without incurring any danger. The duty of the Negro, therefore, in seek-

ing to protect himself from such violent outbreaks, is to make it as perilous as possible for the mob. When the mob understands, and understands from actual experience, that there are blows to take as well as blows to give, it will not be so quick to organize. The only thing which these cowards respect who organize mobs is *force, brute force*. The only thing which makes them think twice before acting, is the fear of being injured, of being hurt. If the civil authorities will not deal with mobs as they ought to be dealt with, then it is the duty of the Negro, in seeking to protect himself from these organized assaults upon his life, to do what he can to remedy the evil. There is but one way, as I have already said, to deal with a mob; and that is to shoot it to death; to riddle it with bullets or dynamite it. And the Negro will be doing himself and the whole South a service by being prepared to make it as perilous as possible for the mob.

Now, do not misunderstand me. Bear in mind the point which I am discussing. I am not urging colored men in the South to make war on white men. I am simply saying it is their duty to be prepared to defend themselves against such organized and murderous assaults as were made upon them in Atlanta.

These are the thoughts that have been running in my mind for the last ten days; these are the things that I have felt like saying to our brethren in the south. Don't be discouraged. Continue to do your utmost to develop yourselves along all lines, material, intellectual, moral, spiritual. Be discreet, be cautious, be very careful of what you say or do. Keep the peace: do all you can to preserve it: but at the same time be prepared to defend yourselves if necessary. This, I think, is good advice. It is the advice that ought to be given them. I don't think any one can take any just exception to it. I believe it is sound, through and through; that it is in harmony with the dictates of nature, and of morality, and of religion. If the Negro is not prepared to defend himself, he will be without defense. He will die as the fool dieth.

Let us hope that this reign of terror in the South will not always last. That a change will come and come soon for the better. God hasten the time in this land when the spirit of fraternity, of brotherhood, shall prevail everywhere; when men of all races and colors shall mingle freely together, without bitterness or hatred toward each other. May this land of ours, blessed as it is in so many ways, be an example to all the nations of the earth in justice, in humanity, in all the elements that go to make up a truly Christian civilization. The black man is here to stay; and the white man is here to stay; and there is no reason why they shouldn't live in peace and amity, if they will *both do right*; if they will *both fear God*, and keep his commandments; if they will

both set up the golden rule, and settle all of their differences in the spirit of him who came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and give himself for others. Let us all pray that this spirit may descend upon us all, black and white alike. The prayer of old Governor Hampton, on his death-bed, was: "God bless all my people, black and white alike." And that is the spirit that is needed; that is the prayer that will bring peace, lasting peace.

"When Russia was in one of her great wars the suffering of the soldiers had been long and bitter and they were waiting for the end of the strife. One day a messenger in great excitement ran among the tents of the army shouting: Peace! Peace! The sentinel on guard asked: '*Who says peace?*' and the sick soldier turned on his hospital mattress and asked: '*Who says peace?*' and all up and down the encampment of Russians went the question: '*Who says peace?*' The messenger responded: 'The Czar says peace! That was enough. That meant going home. That meant the war was over. No more wounds and no more long marches.'"

And so, when the Czar in this country, when public sentiment—black public sentiment, and white public sentiment, public sentiment among the best of both races, shall say peace, there *will* be peace. Our duty, therefore, is to set ourselves earnestly to **work** to make such a sentiment. We can all lend a hand; we can all do something; we can make the *effort*, at least. And if the same thing is going on among the whites, soon there will be no more bloody massacres; there will be no more race conflicts.

