

The Tragedy of Harlem

WITHIN THE UPPER PART of Manhattan Island is another island completely surrounded by prejudices. Here live many people, ten thousand in one city block it is said, who because of the accident of birth are isolated from the other people who inhabit the rest of Manhattan Island.

Most of these people are poor, very poor. They are not poor by choice. They are poor because an opportunity to produce the things they want is denied them. Some people contend that these people are incapable of producing. That has never been proved and occasionally one of the inner-islanders by sheer will power overcomes the handicap imposed on them and shows superior ability.

They are permitted to work only at marginal jobs, that is, jobs which produce the least. That is why they are so poor. And since they are confined to a limited living area they are a herded people. When people are crowded, they bid against one another for the privilege of living space. They bid high because they must.

Consequently a larger share of their low wages goes to the owners of this island within an island, and these owners are mostly persons who inhabit the more comfortable spots on the outer island. In effect, the inner island is like a conquered country paying tribute to foreigners.

The residents of Harlem are so crowded that frequently they occupy the same space at different hours. A night worker rents the room for the day, a day worker for the night.

Such congestion is both irritating and demoralizing. It does not make for the cleanliness necessary for decent living. Yet these people, like all people, yearn for space in which to move about, for the privacy that gives one a sense of individual dignity. But, strive as they might, there seems no hope for anything better than the squalor and noise and inconvenience of being huddled together, frequently a family to a room. Hope, which is the spark of achievement, dies.

But it takes long frustration to condition one to hopeless living. Youth does not readily adjust itself to it. Youth looks for better things than those to which its conditioned progenitors bent their necks, and youth is inclined to test its strength against a blank wall environment. In desperation it breaks out in revolt.

That is what happened recently on the outskirts

of this inner-island. Under cover of darkness, in the secretiveness of the hiding places afforded by Central Park's winding roads, trees and hills, a number of these black boys burst the bonds of their frustration by attacking and robbing, even killing, some who, in mad ignorance, were identified with the world which ground them down. They did not think it out. They did not think at all. Beasts of our civilization are hardly more capable of intellectual discernment than are their four-footed counterparts. The latter are made wild by nature, the former by society and are far more bestial because they are human.

So the police were sent after these young black marauders. Among the fiercest caught was a boy of twelve. His forefathers were "freed" in 1863, but, if he ever heard of the Emancipation, it did not impress him and he felt an urge to re-free himself by the only means a wild beast knows. Now he will acquire the euphonious title of "juvenile delinquent," will be sent to a new environment provided by society, whence he will emerge in time a well-trained, cunning, ruthless beast of prey.

But the inner-island which made him what he is will breed more like him. For it is beleaguered by prejudice and will be so long as those in the outer island also find jobs too few to go around.

