

Introduction of Dr. Blyden Jackson*

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Several months ago Gene Lanier invited me to deliver the introduction for the guest speaker to this, the fourth and final general session of the 39th Biennial Conference of the North Carolina Library Association. Sometime shortly after he spoke to me in this regard, I began to think about how I ought to meet the responsibility which I had accepted.

Each of us, after several years in this profession, has likely had several introductory experiences such as that we are sharing now. Those of you who have found it necessary, at some time or other, to do what I am undertaking now, realize all too well that when you are first learning how, the "how-to-do-it" manuals and texts on public speaking provide assistance of a much needed mechanical nature, but in the final analysis they generally fail to provide what is really needed. This is, of course, the crucial thing about an introduction — what is really needed. To determine this, one must I believe, look at

the circumstances surrounding the event itself, and then one must take a long and introspective look at the identity of the speaker and his relation to the circumstances.

Whether or not this is the soundest approach may be moot, but to me it seems satisfactory, and it is the one I shall follow in my introduction of our guest speaker this morning. I firmly believe it is the approach called for on the present significant occasion.

Sometime in the early 1950's the character of our association began to change in response to social developments which were going on around it. I recall vaguely that it was about 1954 when the North Carolina Negro Library Association was absorbed into what had previously for many years been the all white North Carolina Library Association. Sometime after that, library associations all over the Southeast began to see similar absorptions, mergers, or whatever name they went by.

In response to pressures and to simple common sense, although sometimes not in equal measure, Black men and women

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began to be elected or appointed to offices within these associations, but generally this took place on the white man's terms, which said in effect, that tokenism would be the unwritten law, to which a corollary was that first officers would always be white. Now before I may be accused of not knowing whereof I speak, allow me to say that I grew up in North Carolina, observed this process, and know it to be the less-than-beautiful truth. I do not condemn us for it, though I might were we to allow it to continue. I am sorry it took place, or may yet continue to occur in some states. However, I am proud to stand before you this morning and say that I believe that after nearly twenty years, we as an association are growing wiser.

The road to where our association is today has not been smooth and even. Despite this, we may have made history as one of the first, if not the first southern state library association, to anticipate a Black president in two years. No, the road has not been smooth, and we need look only briefly outside of our association at society at large to find events that helped to bring us to where we are today. For most of us, these are stamped indelibly in our minds. January 1, 1863 — the Emancipation Proclamation; 101 years later — the Supreme Court decision on school desegregation; 1961 — the Greensboro sit-ins; 1963 — the Freedom March on Washington; 1968 — the death of a great American in Memphis, Tennessee. These are just a few, very few.

All of these things, however glorious or however tragic, have, in their own mysterious, tragic, or wonderful consequences, led the North Carolina Library Association to grow toward the enlightened

and socially mature professional community that it is becoming. For many the demise of tokenism in our association is late in coming; for some it comes too late. But I believe that as a collective spirit we are now nearer the mountaintop than ever before in our history, and in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., to whom I referred moments ago, we are, if not totally, then perhaps nearly so — free at last. We can only hope and work diligently to make it so.

Precognitively some in our organization anticipated the milestone that marks this biennial conference. In celebration of it, the desire was expressed to have with us today a speaker who embodies all the qualities which we as black and white brothers and sisters admire and aspire to. Among these I list pride, dignity, repute, achievement, intelligence, integrity, learning, and an enlightened attitude toward his fellowman.

Our speaker's name is Blyden Jackson, and he is a proud, Black, immigrant North Carolinian. It is significant that he is Black, but if you notice only this last fact, you will be missing my point, or I will have made it poorly. For what I have been trying to say to you is that the color of a man's skin does not matter anymore, nor should it ever have mattered. What is important and always has been, though our shackled minds may have kept us from seeing it, is who a man is. He is a man.

Blyden Jackson has come here today to teach us, a thing which he has been doing for nearly 40 years, since he began his career in the Louisville Public Schools in 1934.

He was born in Paducah, Kentucky in 1910. He celebrated his 63rd birthday about two weeks ago. He attended Wilber-

force University, and was graduated at age 20 with an A.B. He also holds a Masters degree as well as a Ph.D. which he received in 1952.

He has served on the faculties of Fisk University in Nashville, and Southern University in Baton Rouge, where he became dean of the graduate school in 1962. He joined the Department of English at UNC-Chapel Hill a few years ago. His research and teaching interests are in the field of Black literature.

I first heard him lecture at Bennett College in 1970 when he spoke on the subject of pride — Black pride. Needless to tell you, but as you will see for yourself momentarily, he leaves his mark wherever he goes.

In 1899 a book by a North Carolinian was published under the title *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*. It was written by a Black man, Charles W. Chesnutt, first principal of the Black Normal School in Fayetteville, which became Fayetteville State University. It was an avant garde novel, dealing as it did at the turn of the century with miscegenation. More than treating of just this subject however, it was, like most

of Chesnutt's works, a much broader social statement. In it, while reading one day years ago, I found a passage which expresses a philosophy of my own — one with which I would like us to welcome Blyden Jackson this morning, because for me at least, and hopefully for us all his gracious presence here today gives testimony to the fulfillment of Chesnutt's noble dream which I quote:

"Sometime, we are told, when the cycle of years has rolled around, there is to be another golden age, when all men will dwell together in love and harmony, when peace and righteousness shall prevail for a thousand years. God speed the day, and let not the shining thread of hope become so enmeshed in the web of circumstance that we lose sight of it; but give us here and there, and now and then, some little foretaste of this golden age, that we may more patiently and hopefully wait its coming."

Dr. Blyden Jackson we welcome you this morning in the belief and hope that the long wait is coming to an end.

Dr. Jackson.

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