ALSO BY PAULA J. GIDDINGS

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# IDA

## *A Sword Among Lions*

IDA B. WELLS AND THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST LYNCHING

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CHAPTER SEVEN

# Exodus

There may be many hardships suffered by those who have gone to Oklahoma . . . but there is no sacrifice too great for freedom.

—Langston City Herald

[The Memphis lynching] was our first lesson in white supremacy.

—*Ida B. Wells*

By the time Ida got back to Memphis, Calvin McDowell, Henry Stewart, and Tommie Moss had been buried. Order, the city's dailies assured, had been restored. But as events would soon show, the lull in the black community was more a measure of stunned disbelief than anything else. Yes, there had been bellicose threats; yes, racial hostility had reached disenfranchising heights; yes, there was increasing violence in other parts of the South and the state, but mob violence within Memphis where blacks had held office until just a few years before was not thought possible. As late as 1890, the editor of the Jackson, Tennessee–based *Christian Index* had (perhaps with Ida's encouragement) touted Memphis's advantages to advance the idea of relocating the publication there: its large, industrious black population, municipal reforms, abundant paper mills; and the achievements of the black business class, including a black-owned printing press. Despite the accumulating threats and tensions in Memphis, few had believed that it would come to this: a mob loosed upon the city; the roundup and arrests of dozens of black citizens; and the murder of three men, especially these three men, and especially Tommie Moss. The "shock" of the colored people was "beyond description," Ida wrote in her autobiography.[1]



Sitting at her desk in the *Free Speech* office, where she and Tommie had had so many conversations, Ida struggled to get beyond her own paralyzing sense of disbelief in order to write an editorial about the lynching. At first, she was daunted by her responsibility as a journalist at such a moment, and feared that finding the right words would fail her. But she had to say something and finally the first sentence that led the rest spilled out. "The City of Memphis," Wells wrote,

> has demonstrated that neither character nor standing avails the Negro if he dares to protect himself against the white man or become his rival. There is nothing we can do about the lynching now, as we are outnumbered and without arms. The white mob could help itself to ammunition without pay, but the order was rigidly enforced against the selling of guns to Negroes. There is therefore only one thing left that we can do; save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a fair trial in the courts, but takes us out and murders us in cold blood when accused by white persons.[2]

The editorial, resonating with the martyred Moss's dying words for blacks to turn their faces to the West, struck an immediate chord. No sooner had it been published than thousands of black Memphians readied themselves to leave Memphis for the newly opened Oklahoma Territory. The nation's first antilynching movement had begun.

WHILE EMIGRATION HAD never been used as a protest against a specific act, leaving the South had a historical and providential meaning for African Americans and for Tennesseans in particular. In the 1870s, the Nashville-born Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, convinced that blacks would never be allowed to acquire farmland in Tennessee, led a movement in

which seven thousand black Tennesseans left for Kansas. The same period also saw an estimated twenty thousand blacks from Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas who left the South. Those who participated in the millenarian movement were called "Exodusters" because of their stated desire to leave the "Egypt" of the South for the "Canaan" of the West.[3]

After the 1886 Carrollton Massacre, the Colored Press Association had urged blacks to leave the South; and T. Thomas Fortune had included aid to emigrants on the agenda of the Afro-American League. By 1889, the question of black emigration had risen anew with the opening of the Oklahoma Territory's Cherokee Cession—made up of portions of the Iowa, Sac, Fox, Comanche, Cheyenne, and Apache reservations—for settlement. African Americans were further encouraged by the establishment of the all-black towns in the Territory, including by 1890, Langston City—located twelve miles outside of the Oklahoma Territory's capital of Gutherie. In April of that year, seventeen hundred blacks from Atlanta left for that destination; subsequently, settlers and scouting parties for groups of blacks from Arkansas and Mississippi began making their way west. By 1891, blacks were reportedly arriving in Oklahoma on "almost every train" to the Territory's seven African American settlements. In the fall of that year—a time when cotton prices were low and the million-member Colored Farmer's Alliance was calling for a strike of black cotton-workers to protest their "starvation wages"—emigration promoters provided cheap, round-trip railway excursions for Tennesseeans to see the Territory firsthand. So many blacks, mainly farmers and sharecroppers from Shelby County, took up the offer that the Memphis dailies speculated nervously about the potential of thousands of blacks leaving the plantations on the edge of the cotton-picking season. Although most appeared to have returned, a new opportunity presented itself in April of 1892, when an additional five-hundred-mile strip of Cheyenne and Arapaho lands were to be opened in Oklahoma's Cimarron Valley.[4]

The scheduled opening made some see the Memphis murders as a sign. The *Indianapolis Freeman* was convinced that just before Moss's death, he had "caught a prophetic glimpse of the future in which the Negro race, weary of proscriptions and barbaric treatment in the South, migrated to the West, where, under kinder and more progressive conditions, it finally rises to the full height of a complete citizenship."[5]

By March 20, so many blacks were leaving Memphis that a hastily called meeting was held on that date at Zion Hall. The meeting was led by



the "better element of the colored people," in the words of the *Memphis Commercial,* to protest the exodus. The "better element of colored people" included property-holders and ministers who had a stake in trying to maintain the status quo—or at least some equilibrium in the city. Lymus Wallace, who owned a large dray business, had lost nearly all of his draymen—most of whom were in debt to him from $25 to $50. The furniture dealer Moses Strickland (a friend of Ida's from whom she purchased her own furniture) reported to the group that he had bought out twenty of his competitors who were bound for Oklahoma. Cash Mosby, a railway agent, was reported by the *New York Times* to have sent his family to Cincinnati and was putting his property up for sale—at a loss. Others, including a lawyer and another man employed in government service who were trying to dispense of their properties worth $15,000 and a house worth $500 that earned $30 in monthly rents, were trying to do the same. The *Commercial* added that the black men planned another meeting to "consider the hasty removal of the colored people on account of the late mobbing. Speeches will be made by colored leaders advising calmness, prudence and patience." Signing the call, among others, were Josiah Settle and the Reverends Countee, Imes, Brinkley, and Waters.[6]

"Patience," of course, was the last thing Ida wanted. While representative Negroes were calling for calm, the grand jury was in the process of deciding that the lynching was at the "hands of persons unknown," and had begun indicting the thirty-one blacks suspected of taking part in the shootout that garnered them sentences from five to fifteen years. "The good colored citizens of Memphis, who have been interested in and worked for the prosperity and success of the city; who stood by the white people when the plague of '78 and '79 threatened to sweep the town from the face of the earth," demand "that the murderers of Calvin McDowell, Will Stewart, and Tom Moss be brought to justice," Ida wrote in her next editorial, which stressed a common, not divided, interest among blacks. "We ask this in the name of God and in the name of the law we have always obeyed and upheld and intend to uphold and obey in the future."[7]

Again Wells appeared to tap into and draw out the sentiments of the larger black community in Memphis. The next meeting at Zion Hall, on March 24, reportedly attended by a thousand blacks, adopted a resolution that condemned the lynching and expressed the belief that "no earnest steps were taken by the authorities to apprehend the lynchers." Blacks were also urged to emigrate to Oklahoma because there was no possibility of

getting justice in the Memphis courts. Two days later, on the same day as Isaiah Johnson was indicted for assault with intent to commit murder of Deputy Bob Harold, the *Langston City Herald*, a black weekly, added its own voice of encouragement to would-be migrants. Why invest any money in a city where their lives were constantly in danger? it asked. Why not come to Oklahoma, "where you can develop whatever manhood or womanhood you possess. Here you can be all that God intended you to be . . ."?[8]

On March 27, the *Nashville Daily American* described the three thousand black well-wishers in Memphis who had assembled on the Mississippi levee to see off 649 men, women, and children in thirty wagons—along with their dogs, mules, oxen, and all the household and personal goods they could carry. Ironically, their trip would be made easier by the recent completion of Memphis's greatest engineering feat to date: the 7,400-foot "Great Bridge," said to be the longest in the world and built at a cost of three million dollars with steel provided by the Carnegie Steel Company of Pittsburgh. After crossing the bridge that connected Memphis to the Arkansas banks, the migrants planned take the steamer *Alice* to Mound City. From there they would begin a twenty-mile-a-day overland route by wagon and by foot for the six-week journey to Oklahoma. "This was only the advance guard," the paper solemnly noted. "Fully 1000 more will leave on Monday by rail and still others will follow. Arrangements have been made for 1600 to 1800 emigrants, which covers the exodus of to-day and tomorrow."[9]

Ida recalled the scene in her autobiography and captured the drama, pathos, and humor of it in an anecdote about a tattered old man who had been trying to get his yellow hound to follow him on the boat. Exasperated, the man finally said, in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear: "Come on here—what you want to stay back for, you want the white folks to lynch you too?" There was little question that Memphians had made the decision to leave, in large part, to demonstrate their solidarity in heeding the words of protest in the *Free Speech*. While "we think we lost good citizens in that lynching," one of the men on the levee observed, "and that innocent blood was lawlessly spilled . . . it needed something like that to bring our people together." This "trouble," offered another, "has accomplished more than all the preaching and teaching could have done in fifty years."[10]

By then it had become evident that the hegira west had taken on a life of its own, and that it was supported by blacks across class lines. The black businessman Robert Church gave $10,000 to the Central Oklahoma Emigration Society, which claimed to have four thousand Memphis blacks organized to go west. The railway agent, Cash Mosby, and Ida's *Free Speech* partner, J. L. Fleming, were appointed to hold funds now being raised by black churches to assist those who needed funds to leave Memphis. Ida recounted the poignant stories about the relief effort. In her autobiography, she told of two women, both visibly pregnant, who had become trapped by the seasonal floods in Arkansas and were urged to return to Memphis. But the women were determined to complete the journey, saying that "they were willing to take their chances in the wilderness rather than come back to Memphis." The emigration fund raised four hundred dollars so that they could take the train west.[11]



The *Free Speech* continued to keep the heat on. It published a story that a deputy said to have died by other means was actually killed by Calvin McDowell during the struggle at the Chesapeake & Ohio railyards. The accusation was an attempt to show that the deputies themselves had been the ringleaders of the mob murder—a suspicion so widely held that even the *Nashville Daily American* noted it. In fact, Ida, as she wrote in her autobiography, was convinced that every prominent white man in the city had known in advance of the plan to kill the men on March 9, and that the criminal court judge, DuBose, had himself been among the lynchers.[12]

THE RESPONSE OF the black press to the Memphis events, which began to appear in late March, was unprecedented. No other event in recent years, including Carrollton, evoked such comment—or fury. The circumstances of the lynching, the rising militance, the consciousness raised by the Afro-American League, and the palpable protest led by Wells with her wide readership and unadulterated race-first position made the Memphis murders reverberate through both religious and secular black publications as no others had before it. The AME's *Star of Zion* warned that if the crime continued to go unpunished, "thoughtful law-abiding, and obedient colored citizens cannot become responsible for the action of the race in the face of such diabolism." The *Christian Index* no longer thought Memphis so progressive and questioned the "orderly" image of the city by calling the lynchers "a frenzied mob" that was "worse than the savage who slays his hundreds and knows no God to call upon for forgiveness." The black

Democrat C. H. J. Taylor, editor of the *Kansas American Citizen*, implored white Memphians to find the responsible "human fiends" and to thus prove that "God is not dead; that religion is not a mockery, and that all of your churches should not be burned to the ground."[13]

The lesson of the Memphis events, raged Ferdinand L. Barnett in the *Chicago Conservator*, was that "the American flag is not a protection to citizens at home, but a dirty, dishonored rag." The crime was an "unspeakable disgrace," he continued. "The people gave us one John Brown," said Barnett, alluding to the white abolitionist who seized the U.S. arsenal at Harper's Ferry and killed six proslavery men. "If we must have another let him be flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood." Barnett's editorial in the *Conservator*, a paper known for its influential readership among blacks and progressive whites, was so alarming that the *Memphis Commercial* republished it as a warning that the black editor was calling for blacks to "take up arms against the government." Surprised that such a man could be considered an important leader, the paper suggested that he should be brought to the attention of the police.[14]

On March 30, a clearly concerned *Appeal-Avalanche* announced that the city's court commissioners had concluded that the lynching had been "ill-advised" and set aside a year's allowance for Betty Moss, Tommie's widow. The decision was an ironic one. When Thomas Cassels had led the passage of Tennessee's antilynching law in 1881, the part in the bill that sought compensation for families and victims of mob violence had failed to pass. But now, the explanation given by the commissioners for their decision was that Moss had owned several pieces of real estate and considerable personal property.

It was an extraordinary concession, but if its purpose was to put the genie back into the bottle, it failed to do so. The *Cleveland Gazette* still thought Memphis a "barbarous" city and emblematic of the "appalling dark and ominous cloud that is hanging over this nation and makes more visible the seething volcano over which the southern people sleep." Blacks kept leaving for Oklahoma, and national protests began to emerge not only in the North but the South as well. In April, the *Indianapolis Freeman* reported that one thousand blacks assembled at the Bethel AME Church in Atlanta to "consider the recent Southern outrages upon their race." When Bishop W. J. Gaines (whom Ida had earlier criticized in the *Christian Index*) asked the audience to join him in singing "America," they refused. Taking up Ferdinand Barnett's call, they sang "John Brown's Body" instead. In the same month, Barnett and Fortune, among others, attended a mass antilynching meeting in New York City. Two thousand blacks met in Cooper Union, the famous hall located in lower Manhattan, to hear speeches and protests about the Memphis lynching as well as other recent atrocities in the South. The *New York Times* called it the largest assemblage of blacks ever held in that city to date. However, Wells, who sat on the dais but did not speak, could not have spent much time in the city. Back home, the Memphis dailies, in anticipation of the April 19 opening of the Cimarron Valley for settlement, began publishing discouraging articles about conditions in Oklahoma. Wells immediately made plans to go to the Territory to see and report on them for herself.[15]



It is conceivable that Ida was somewhat surprised by the depth and spontaneity of the response she had triggered with her editorial. Of course, she was pleased by the show of determination and initiative in the community, but she also had to be concerned about those who had appeared to make a precipitous decision to leave Memphis for the advertised "promised land" in Oklahoma. While the *Langston City Herald* published glowing articles about Oklahoma's fertile tablelands and a dreamed-of life without white oppression, there were also caveats being published in other black papers. Just that February, the *Indianapolis Freeman* had starkly described a group of black migrants who were being forced to return to their homes in Dennison, Texas. "Many of the poor creatures were obliged to walk nearly two hundred miles," said the paper. "They stated that they stood chances for homes, but were crowded out by the white boomers. Great destitution prevails among the colored people . . . in Oklahoma," the dispatch concluded."[16]

Before the lynchings, the *Free Speech* itself might have unwittingly added to a less than happy ending for a group of earlier migrants. In January of 1892, it had been criticized by the *Langston City Herald* for running an ad by Isaac Norris—a former legislator and Ida's cousin-in-law who was now an "emigrationist"—that promised new arrivals free mule teams that migrants could use to help raise a crop. The *Herald* charged Norris with false advertising to collect railway commissions by attracting blacks who might not otherwise come and who often needed aid from the nascent territorial governments. Whether or not Norris was guilty is not known. But the charge reflected the larger issue of unsophisticated blacks being taken advantage of by fee-hungry agents. Earlier that year, the *Herald* reported that a group of seventy-five Memphians paid a railway agent three dollars

apiece to attain a piece of paper that fraudulently promised them their train fare would be paid by government officials.[17]

The fact was that objective and full reporting about Oklahoma was virtually nonexistent. Much of the information was anecdotal or came from the emigration or anti-emigration societies that emerged in the period and were driven by competing ideological, racial, and/or economic interests. Even white press reports, as Wells had earlier gleaned, could vary in accordance to the planter or urban interests they represented. On the other side was the well-oiled public relations machine of the Oklahoma Immigration Society that was the force behind the founding of Langston City. Edwin McCabe, the natty former auditor of Kansas whom Ida had seen on her 1886 western trip, was the best-known figure connected with the Society. Since then he had lost reelection for the position in the state and moved to Oklahoma where he unsuccessfully pressed for appointment as territorial governor, but he did gain a position in the Logan County treasurer's office there. The other primary figures behind the Society were William Eagleson, a black newspaper editor, and Charles Robbins, a white land speculator.[18] They had created a sophisticated plan for the city that included a projected university, to be endowed, in part, by wealthy whites, for which the major promoter was John Langston (after whom the city was named)—the former consul general to Haiti and president of Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute—who in 1890 had been elected to the House of Representatives, representing Virginia.[19] The Oklahoma enterprise, the *New York Age* noted, was directed by "level-headed men, black and white." But however sincere they were in providing the first "systematic effort," as Fortune wrote, "to create a new State where blacks could predominate and hold decisive political power," the Society also desperately needed blacks to settle 320 acres, divided neatly into lots, which had to be sold.[20]

Ida knew, as she wrote, that black Memphians would believe what she told them and that it was incumbent upon her to go to Oklahoma. She secured train passes for herself, Norris, and cousin Stella to go to the Territory where, through the *Free Speech*, she would report back to her community "exactly what I saw and of the chance they had of developing manhood and womanhood in this new territory."[21]

At such a historical moment, Wells, with her influence and readership, could have a tremendous impact on the Oklahoma movement; and by all appearances she was treated accordingly. She arrived to find that appointments had been set up for her with the territorial governor and various state



officers. A "gallant young lawyer" was secured to squire her around. Wells also visited the office of the *Langston City Herald*, where the paper's editors took pains to be complimentary. Ida, the editors said, had demonstrated "more real interest in the race than all but C. H. J. Taylor," editor of the *Kansas City American Citizen*. Moreover, she was "affable," "clear-headed" and "prepossessing in her personal appearance."[22]

In all, Ida spent three weeks there where she visited Gutherie, Oklahoma City, and Langston, among other places in the Territory. While no comprehensive record of her weekly reports exists, comments about them by the *Langston City Herald* and other black papers indicate that, true to what she had promised, she told her readers exactly what she saw—both what was good and what was lacking in the developments. With her perspective, she would have shared the sense of pride in Langston City that Edwin McCabe expressed when he pronounced that "Langston City is a Negro City and we are proud of that fact." Ida probably saw what a visitor had described the year before: a thriving town, where "streets were laid out . . . colored carpenters were busy erecting new houses" and where there was "not a white man to be seen anywhere around." In less than two years after it was established, Langston City had more than two hundred residents, a wholesale grocery store and six retail ones, a drug store, a post office, and a public school, as well as lunch counters, meat markets, barbershops, and three hotels. Dwellings were scattered throughout the 320 acres of titled lots for sale—titles stipulating that they could never pass to a white man. Eight months before Wells's visit, Langston City had held its first elections and now had in place three councilmen, a treasurer, and a justice of the peace, a number of whom were probably among the state officers Ida visited in the two-story brick building offices in Gutherie, the territorial capital.[23]

Gutherie itself had between seven hundred and twelve hundred settlers—both blacks and whites—and was a popular destination for Memphians. As a reporter noted, among the new settlers were those who had come without adequate means, "expecting to find Utopia," but he added that "the greater number came prepared to stay, bringing their surplus cash along and depositing the same in the Gutherie banks (which by 1893 had received $15,000 from "colored depositors"). Recent elections in Gutherie had resulted in blacks winning positions on the school board and city council and as justice of the peace and constable. Ida also traveled to Oklahoma City and Kingfisher, the latter of which was close to Langston City

and another prime destination for Memphians who were awaiting the April opening of the new territories.[24]

But there was another side to this positive picture. Settlement promoters were clear in their preference for migrants who had skills and means; those who did not have them could fare badly. The latter included black farmers who had sold what they had in livestock, and even tools, to make the journey, only to encounter severe weather that prevented them from growing a crop. Those who had nothing to fall back on were often forced into crowded shelters that were usually unsanitary and insecure. Others lived in tents, or their wagons, or made do with crude log-cabin dugouts, the backs of which were lodged into dirt mounds to protect them from winds unimpeded by the vacant ocean of flat tableland.[25]

As the days grew closer to the April 19 opening, it also became clear that black settlements were not going to be uncontested. Not only whites but Fox Indians were opposed to the idea of "Africanizing Oklahoma," and threats of violence and intimidation tactics were aimed at blacks in both Langston City and Kingfisher. But the situation, as was true with the Oklahoma settlements in general, was emblematic of both the good news and bad about the movement. The good news in this instance was that blacks were free to defend themselves. In Kingfisher, for example, the threats were met by black men who organized a Winchester rifle band and threatened to burn down the whole city if any one of their number was harmed. No one was. "The colored men in Oklahoma mean business," concluded a writer who subsequently visited the town. They had an "exalted idea of their own rights and liberties and they dare to maintain them. . . . I found in nearly every cabin visited a modern Winchester oiled and ready for use."[26] The image left an indelible impression on Ida's mind.

"MISS WELLS WE take it, does not take kindly to Oklahoma," concluded the *Langston City Herald,* indicating that Wells's *Free Speech* columns were less than the unconditional endorsements the paper sought. She "struck us as being a decided exception to the rule of ladies of our race in that she has evidently enjoyed opportunities and has not failed to embrace them," the Oklahoma paper sneered. "We take it that in the effete east, where wealth and luxury obtains among our people, she must be quite a toast, but fear she expects too much of those who inhabit the 'wild and woolly west.'"



"Will the editor of the *Langston City Herald* please soak his head and keep cool?" Ida responded good-naturedly in the *Free Speech.* "As the season gets warmer we'll try to accommodate the *Free Speech* and the country," the Oklahomans responded.[27]

The *Langston Herald* editors were wrong about Ida, and her final assessment about the Territory. Unbeknownst to her hosts and despite her love of Shakespeare and department stores, she had already determined to leave Memphis and seriously considered moving to Oklahoma and bringing the *Free Speech* there. Even before the Moss lynching, the New City had no doubt lost much of its luster; after it, she sensed that she was on borrowed time. In any case, Ida possessed a kind of gritty determination and a black nationalist vision that trumped other considerations. This was evident in an article published in the *AME Church Review* some months later about another emigration movement: this one led by the AME bishop Henry McNeal Turner, who was urging African Americans to settle in Liberia. In the journal, Ida disputed T. Thomas Fortune's view that the "intelligent class" of blacks would never go to Africa. Wells thought Fortune underestimated both the ambition of African Americans and their desire to escape oppression. Why should they not return to the land of the forefathers? Ida asked, noting Africa's fertility and freedom from "Anglo-Saxon" dominance. Was not "the vision of the Puritans just as daunting, their obstacles just as difficult, as those facing African-Americans?"[28]

As Ida wrote in her autobiography, she had approached her partner J. L. Fleming about relocating to the Territory, but Oklahoma might have been a bit too daunting for him. Ida did not have the money to buy out his interest in the paper and began to weigh the possibilities of going to Philadelphia or New York; cities, presumably, that Fleming was willing to consider. But whatever opportunities Ida had seen in Oklahoma for herself and her paper, she appeared to not have soft-pedaled the harsh conditions. She also told her readers to take time to consider the move to Oklahoma and mentioned some alternative places where migrants might settle. As the *Detroit Plaindealer* summed it up, "The *Free Speech* is advertising Afro-Americans to leave Memphis, but also advise people first to get ready, and provide themselves with means to obtain a home elsewhere"—possible destinations like New Mexico, Colorado, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming. And implicitly warning blacks that they should be aware of propaganda, Wells called for the establishment of a bureau to provide reliable, objective information for migrants. Toward that

end, she proposed that representatives from Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, Georgia, and North and South Carolina meet in Memphis to further discuss the issue on June 16. It was a date, as future events would show, that must have burned on the minds of white Memphians.[29]

It is evident that Ida's reports were intended to make Memphians think responsibly about leaving the city, not to discourage the migration—and there were no signs that it slowed. "The motto of every Negro living in and around Memphis is: 'Turn your faces to the West,' the last words of poor Tom Moss," observed the *Detroit Plaindealer*, four days before the April 19 opening. "And they are turning there by the hundreds. About 300 left Saturday."[30]

In anticipation of the April 19 opening, thousands of homesteaders were poised to make claims along the five-hundred-mile boundary of the Cheyenne and Arapaho lands, among them black Memphians hoping to take advantage of "the last chance for a free home" as boosters put it. The sandbars of the Cimarron River were filled with families of future homesteaders waiting to see the huge bonfire that signaled the official opening of the land at twelve noon. There was not a mile, a reporter noted, where there were not from one to a dozen camps of prospective settlers who represented all nationalities, races, and sects. "The waiting throng was today augmented by the arrival of 500 negroes from Memphis," observed the *Memphis Commercial*, which had sent a reporter there. "They have gone to the camp at the negro settlement north of Kingfisher and are tonight holding religious services and thanking the Lord for having brought them safely to the promised land." In Gutherie, migrants expressed their gratitude in another way. Three of its streets were named Moss, Stewart, and McDowell.[31]

The Memphis hegira continued through the spring and fall when a number of pastors and their congregations left the city en masse. William F. Morgan of the Union Avenue Baptist Church was the most efficient. He was reported by the *Langston City Herald* to have arrived in Gutherie on a Friday; purchased land on Saturday; and by the following Sunday had erected a church "all finished and paid for" where services were held for three hundred people. Morgan, the *Langston City Herald* added, planned to return to Memphis to arrange the removal of his congregation who "are to come as a colony." Both *Living Way* reverends, R. N. Countee and W. A. Brinkley, who had been at the earlier meeting that had counseled patience



evidently lost theirs. Countee moved to Witchita, Kansas; Brinkley sold his Washington Street Baptist Church to the local Jewish community and moved his congregation to Stockton, California. Before his departure, Brinkley had some particular choice words about the city, saying that he was leaving in order to help "depopulate this hell [Memphis] created for colored people." Following his statement, the pastor was attacked by some ruffians, and he himself was threatened with lynching. As reported in the *Detroit Plaindealer*, Brinkley riposted: "This [lynching] may be done easily; you have only to get up some charge against me, whether it be true or not, and put me in jail, and come next morning at 3:30 and get me out. The papers will be ready with the news by morning. But one consoling thing to me, which may be discouraging to the would-be lynchers, is that when I am lynched my soul will not go down to hell, where the souls of the lynchers will soon be." Ida issued her own rejoinder to the minister. "Only those upon whom judgment is passed are sent to hell for punishment," she wrote in the *Free Speech*. "Here we are punished and murdered without judgment."[32]

IDA RETURNED TO Memphis in late April or early May to find that the loss of so many blacks—she later estimated the number as six thousand within the year or nearly 20 percent of the African American population—was having its effect. "Business was at a standstill," Wells wrote gleefully in her autobiography, for the "Negro was famous then, as now, for spending his money for fine clothes, furniture, jewelry, and pianos and other musical instruments, to say nothing of good things to eat." Blacks purchased many items, especially the musical instruments, on installment plans, and so many of them were left unpaid for in the music shops that they could not find storage for them. The number of women who had left was evidenced by the complaints of white housewives who found a "hitherto unknown scarcity of help," Ida further noted. Fearing that any money paid to domestic servants would be used for the trip west, whites "resorted to the expedient of paying their servants only half the wages due them at the end of the week."[33]

Soon after her return, Ida became aware of yet another, and unexpected, weapon in her arsenal when she was visited by the superintendent and treasurer of the City Railway Company in her Beale Street office. She was surprised, she wrote in the autobiography, when the two white men

beseeched her to use her influence to get blacks to ride the trolley cars. The men believed that African Americans were not riding them because they were afraid of the electricity, and the resulting loss of revenue endangered the company and their jobs. "So your livelihood depends on black patronage?" Ida asked mischievously, enjoying the rush of red rising to their faces. But she was also biding time with her comment. This was something she hadn't picked up on, though she would never admit it to her visitors. Blacks had been riding the electrified trolleys before the events of March 9; why were they stopping? The white men kept talking. They reminded her that the company had an investment of thousands of dollars in electrifying the cars, that pains had been taken to employ black laborers for the work of relaying and grading the streets used on the trolley lines, and that the company had a policy of treating black riders courteously.[34]

The comment about the treatment of blacks probably reflected the men's awareness of what was happening in other cities, particularly Indianapolis, where blacks felt that they were being mistreated on public transportation. Earlier that year, in February of 1892, African Americans had begun to boycott the trolley cars, protesting that no African Americans were employed to drive them and that black riders, including "respectable" and "aged" colored ladies burdened with bundles," were disrespected by the same whites who were breaking "their necks to assist prostitutes," snarled the *Freeman*. The Indianapolis weekly had made a special appeal to black women to save their money by boycotting the cars—and for good reason. Civic action on city trolleys when black women were mistreated on them had historical precedent. In 1866, the California entrepreneur and former slave Mary Pleasant had sued the San Francisco Trolley Company when she was refused a seat on the vehicle; the abolitionist Sojourner Truth successfully subdued a conductor in Washington, D.C., who tried to physically evict her from a trolley; the newspaper publisher Mary Ann Shadd Carey had reportedly given such a firelike gaze to a conductor determined to pass her by that he found himself mysteriously compelled to stop and pick her up. By the late nineteenth century, the numbers of blacks in the cities gave them additional power to boycott urban transportation, and Indianapolis was the most publicized example of their exercising it.[35]

The men told Ida that if blacks in Memphis encountered any "discourtesy," she should let them know. While they were talking, the explanation for blacks not riding the cars in Memphis suddenly dawned on Wells. Right



after the lynching she had told the community to save their "nickels and dimes," to go to Oklahoma. The fare of the trolley was a nickel; a dime, if one needed a transfer. It was a lot of money for the average laborer earning a dollar or a dollar and a half per day. Blacks were saving their money to go to Oklahoma! Ida asked the men if they had noticed that blacks had stopped riding right after the lynching. The question turned what they had thought a fear of electricity into an act of civil disobedience. "But the streetcar company had nothing to do with the lynching," the men protested. "It is owned by northern capitalists." And "run by southern lynchers," Wells retorted. "We have learned that every white man of any standing in town knew of the plan and consented to lynching of our boys," Ida told them, adding she believed that the criminal court judge, Julius DuBose, was one of the murderers. "Tom Moss," Ida continued, "was as fine a man that ever walked the streets of Memphis . . . yet he was murdered with no more consideration than if he had been a dog, because he as a man defended his property from attack." She insisted, "The colored people feel that every white man in Memphis who consented to his death is as guilty as those who fired the guns which took his life, and they want to get away from this town."[36]

Wells wrote up the interview with the two men for the next issue of the *Free Speech*, and on the following Sunday she visited several black churches, encouraging congregants to continue boycotting the trolleys. They did so long enough to set an example that, as the *Cleveland Gazette* observed, "should be patterned after by the race all over the country toward the business interests that refuse to them equal justice." The "answer of the *Free Speech* should be the watchword of every man who cannot claim protection of the law," echoed the *Plaindealer*. "We are saving our money to go where we can have freedom." Although it is not known how long the civil action continued, a full year later the *Cleveland Gazette* observed that "both the Arkansas planters and the Memphis, Tenn. street car superintendent are complaining."[37]

During that year, Ida had kept her editorial guns fully loaded. On the political front, she linked the shortcomings of the Republican administration with the Moss lynching when she castigated President Benjamin Harrison for refusing to meet with a New York delegation about lynching after publicly threatening war with Chile over the death of two American sailors at the hands of a Chilean mob. While "The gunboat Concord . . . was sent post haste to Chile to avenge the taking of the life of a drunken sailor,"

Wells wrote in her searing prose, "three Negroes murdered here March 9th were as loyal American citizens as ever drew the breath of life and were as much entitled to protection. But—they were Negroes." Wells, mindful of the Oklahomans' Winchester rifles, concluded. "Until the Negro learns to protect himself, he may always expect to be without protection."[38]

Wells reiterated the point of protection—or lack of it—from, again, black politicians, particularly in an election year. "Where are our leaders when the race is being burnt, shot and hanged?" the *Free Speech* taunted. "Holding good fat offices and saying not a word—just as they were when the Civil Rights bill was repealed and the Blair Educational and Federal Election bills were defeated . . . however much the Negro is abused and outraged—'our leaders' make no demands on the country to protect us, nor come forward with any practical plan for changing the condition of affairs." No doubt thinking of the likes of John Langston, Blanche K. Bruce, and P. B. S. Pinchback, all maneuvering in a presidential election year, Wells concluded, "A few big offices and the control of a little Federal patronage is not sufficient recompense for the lives lost, the blood shed, and the rights denied the race." As usual, Bruce, the current recorder of deeds, a patronage position in Washington, and now fighting openly with Ida's old friend James Hill over control of Republican election delegates, was a particular target. Wells wrote that word had it that Bruce had been sent south by Republican president Benjamin Harrison, who, like his predecessors, was trying to widen white support, "to pull delegates in line." "They say affairs in the south are alright, save a little dissatisfaction here and there which Bruce will make all right." Wells complained that Bruce "has never uttered a protest, sought to arouse public sentiment against such outrages nor exerted himself for his people at any time save when he wanted their votes to save his job."[39]

Wells emphasized that affairs were not all right in the South, including in Blanche Bruce's home of Mississippi. Ida reprinted in her column a letter she received from a Mrs. Eva P. Green, who lived and owned property with her husband in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, the town that her friend Isaiah Montgomery had founded. After an altercation with a white man, Mr. Green was forced to flee into the woods, his wife wrote, and soon after was followed by other men, women, and children in the community because they did not have "the protection which the law ought to give." Mrs. Green wrote, "I am told Miss editor, that the only way to save our community



from destruction is that Mr. Green must make an apology . . . he must now sacrifice his manhood and honor to appease the wrath of the white man." The writer concluded, "we have a nice home, but, alas, we are not free." Mrs. Green had decided like so many others to cast her lot elsewhere. "Please send me the name of a reliable man out west," she asked Ida.[40]

Wells also continued to hammer away at the racist justice system in Memphis. She wrote, for example, of a black man who was sentenced to eight years in the state prison for stealing a box of cigars, four bottles of whiskey, and two steaks, worth about seven dollars. The arithmetic, said Wells, came out to one year for every eighty-seven and a half cents he stole. Criminal court judge Julius DuBose came under fire when Wells learned that his fourteen-year-old son had drowned. "They say the Judge's grief over his loss was terrible," Wells wrote in the *Free speech*. "So was that of the families of the murdered men to whom Judge DuBose refused bond, and left an easy prey to the mob. . . . No sympathy was felt for the orphan sisters of Calvin McDowell, for the wife of Tom Moss who will shortly become a mother; nor for the 18 months old babe who daily hugs and kisses her father's inanimate clothing."[41]

BY 1892, THE year Ida turned thirty, she had taken possession of her power as a journalist and had learned to put it to effective political use. She was trusted and had the ability to inspire her readers. She had brought modern methods of protest to bear in a New South that was so dependent on its extended markets and the civic image that sustained them. Ida had come up with a strategy for a mass movement that crossed class lines in the black community and, in the process, gave courage and purpose to African Americans to take the initiative in finding a better life for themselves and generations to come. She had mastered the art of tapping preexisting sentiment in the black community, then shaping and directing it, to meet the challenges of a new age. Now she had to decide for herself where the next phase of her own life would take her.

Well before the lynching on March 9, Ida had planned to go to Philadelphia in late May. She had been urged by Bishop Henry McNeal Turner to attend the AME general conference that was taking place there; and Frances Ellen Harper, the poet and temperance leader, who had stayed with Ida when she visited Memphis the winter before, invited Wells to stay

with her during the confab. The trip would also give Wells the opportunity to assess the possibilities of relocating the *Free Speech* in the city. Afterward, Ida had scheduled a stop in New York to meet with T. Thomas Fortune, who had earlier written Ida in the hopes that she would give New York "a lookover" before finally deciding where to settle.[42]

Just before she left Memphis, Ida wrote one of her shorter editorials, which was to appear in the May 21 edition of the *Free Speech.* It was meant to be a rejoinder to a vicious article in the *Memphis Commercial* written by its editor Edward Ward Carmack. A rabid prohibitionist, who had been writing anti-black vitriol in the *Nashville Daily American*, Carmack had come to Memphis to replace J. L. Keating in early 1892. In May, the *Commercial* had commented on the lynching of "three negro scoundrels," as he called them, accused of raping a white woman in Anniston, Alabama.

His intent, as he admitted in the editorial, was to head off the anticipated criticism by the North about the lynchings as another indication of "southern barbarism." But Carmack, in one of the most extended explanations of the relationship between the rise of lynching and the alleged rise of rape committed by blacks, made the case that African Americans were not only increasingly violating white women, they were doing so in a more pernicious way than in the past. Black men were committing rape not out of sudden "fits of passion," he wrote, but as premeditated attacks in which they waited for the opportunity to attack women when they were left "without a protector." This new phase of sexual violence was terrorizing "thinly settled country communities," averred the paper, where no "man can leave his family at night without the dread that some roving Negro ruffian is watching and waiting for this opportunity." Only the swift retribution of extra-legal violence could check the "horrible and bestial propensities" of black men, Carmack argued; and moreover otherwise rational, law-abiding white men should be excused for the lapse in the rule of law. There "is nothing which so fills the soul with horror, loathing and fury as the outraging of a white woman by a Negro," Carmack opined. Even more alarming was the *Commercial*'s observation that although lynching may have an immediate deterring effect in the communities where they occurred, its long-term impact was questionable, for blacks set aside even the fear of death to consummate their "devilish purpose" and gratify their "bestial desires." "The Negro as a political factor can be controlled," the *Commercial* somberly concluded, "but neither



laws nor lynchings can subdue his lusts. Sooner or later it will force a crisis. We do not know what form it will come."[43]

Although Wells did not have the time to write an extended response to the editorial, she felt that she could not leave the city without commenting on it. In the wake of the Memphis murders, she herself had begun to investigate lynchings—or more precisely, the motive of rape which was so often given as the excuse. After all, the Memphis lynching had nothing to do with such charges, and Ida had begun to question the veracity of the charge. She hadn't always done so. As Ida, who in many ways shared the honor codes of the culture—in her diary she had once condoned the murder of a man by a brother of the young woman the victim had slandered—admitted in her autobiography: "Like many another person who had read of lynching in the South, I had accepted the idea meant to be conveyed—that although lynching was irregular and contrary to law and order, unreasoning anger over the terrible crime of rape led to the lynching; that perhaps the brute deserved death anyhow and the mob was justified in taking his life."[44]

But after the Memphis lynching, she began visiting the scenes of lynchings where she interviewed eyewitnesses or families of the victims. In Tunica, Mississippi, for example, she followed up on an Associated Press account of a "big burly brute" who was lynched for purportedly raping the seven-year-old daughter of the sheriff. Wells sought out the girl and discovered that she wasn't seven but seventeen and had been discovered in the black man's cabin. The father, Ida concluded, had led the lynch mob to save the reputation of his daughter. Visiting the scene of another lynching, Wells went so far as to get a sworn statement from the mother of the victim: a young man whom Ida described as a "handsome young mulatto," who had gone so far as to leave his employ in an effort to resist the advances of "the beautiful daughter" of his boss. But he had finally succumbed and when the father discovered the liaison, the mulatto was charged with rape and lynched. "It seemed horrible to me that death in its most terrible form should be meted out to the Negro who was weak enough to take chances when accepting the invitations of these white women," Wells wrote in her autobiography. It occurred to Ida that lynching apologists like Carmack were motivated by both salvaging the white South's image and portraying blacks in a way as to take away any support for the race from the North. "That the entire race should be branded as

moral monsters and despoilers of white womanhood and childhood was bound to rob us of all the friends we had," Wells wrote, "and silence any protests that they may make for us."[45]

Hurriedly, with plans to write more when she returned to Memphis, Ida wrote in the *Free Speech:* "Eight Negroes lynched since last issue of the *Free Speech,* one at Little Rock, Ark., last Saturday morning where the citizens broke (?) into the penitentiary and got their man; three near Anniston, Ala., one near New Orleans; and three at Clarksville, Ga., the last three for killing a white man, and five on the same old racket—the new alarm about raping white women. The same programme [*sic*] of hanging, then shooting bullets into the lifeless bodies was carried out to the letter. If Southern white men are not careful," she concluded, "they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women."[46] Her editorial written, she headed for Philadelphia.

WELLS WOULD HAVE been impressed by many features of the eastern city. Philadelphia had a population of about a million persons—nearly forty thousand of whom were black—and a particularly rich history of resistance, business enterprise, publishing, and institution-building among its small African American elite. Black Philadelphians faced similar prejudices—including de facto segregation—social dislocations, and low-wage employment familiar to African Americans throughout the country. But at least the Pennsylvania Supreme Court continued to abide by the antidiscrimination statutes of the 1875 federal Civil Rights Act, and in 1881 forbade discrimination in the assignment of pupils to its public schools. One of the city's schools, the Institute for Colored Youth, founded by the Quakers who had an estimable presence in Philadelphia, was nationally known for its normal department from which graduates were sought to teach throughout the country. The city was also the birthplace of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, established by Richard Allen in 1791, and it was the present home of the AME's *Christian Recorder,* which had been published there since the mid-1850s. In addition to the writers associated with the denomination's paper, there were perhaps a dozen secular journalists who had opportunities to write black religious and social news in local white-owned papers, from which a number went on to write for out-of-town publications or for the most successful black newspaper in the



city, the *Philadelphia Weekly Tribune,* which began publishing in 1884.[47] Ida knew several of the city's journalists, notably Frances Ellen Harper and Gertrude Mossell, and had probably gleaned that there was more than ample room for another publication.

If Wells looked favorably upon the prospects that Philadelphia offered, she was less impressed by the AME conference itself. Few meetings are filled with more verbiage than ecclesiastical ones, and Ida was not impressed. "Conventions, and talk and prayer alone are not what are needed right now," she editorialized about the conference. "An offer of a home for several families in different localities, a purse to help destitute ones who wish to go would do more real good than all the conventions in Christiandom. . . . The railroad fare of delegates of this convention would help wonderfully," she quipped.[48]

Nevertheless, Ida did enjoy meeting the "big guns," as she called them, who were there. Attending were the AME bishops Turner and Daniel A. Payne, the latter one of the few, besides Turner, whom Ida thought worthy of the title. Payne was soon to become the first black president of Wilberforce University, the land for which he purchased for $10,000. Wells no doubt also enjoyed her stay with Frances Ellen Harper, who had first become nationally known in 1854 with the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects,* which had sold fifty thousand copies by 1878.[49] Harper, in her late sixties, was much older than Ida, but the two writers had a background in common. Like Wells, Harper had been orphaned at an early age and forced to take care of herself as a young teenager. At the time Wells was visiting, Harper was readying the publication of *Iola Leroy,* one of the earliest novels published by an African American—and the kind of book Ida had once dreamed of writing. Whether Harper was in any way inspired by Ida, whose pen name was the same as the novel's protagonist, is not known. But Iola Leroy's desire to write "a good, strong book," which could "do something of lasting service to the race," must have resonated with Ida.[50]

Wells met, too, Harper's good friend William Still, now in his seventies, whose Philadelphia home had been a "stop" on the slave escape route known as the Underground Railroad. Still had published an important account of the Railroad, and he and Ida might have compared notes about his own experience concerning the protest against the segregation of Philadelphia's streetcars in the 1870s. Ida also "sat at the feet," as she put it in a rare attribution, of the Quaker teacher, missionary, and Oberlin graduate, Fanny Jackson Coppin. Coppin, then in her late fifties, had been born a slave and

had had her freedom later purchased by an aunt. As a young woman she had worked as a domestic in the home of George Henry Calvert, great-grandson of Lord Baltimore, the founder of Maryland. In 1869, she had been appointed principal of the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia, becoming the first black woman in the nation to head an institution of higher education. In 1881, at the age of forty-four, the puckish-faced teacher had married Levi Coppin, an AME minister (later a bishop) fifteen years her junior, and a "conductor" of the Underground Railroad. At the time Ida saw the couple, Levi was the editor of the *AME Church Review.* On Ida's last morning there, the twenty-sixth, she breakfasted with the Coppins, and afterward, took a train north to meet T. Thomas Fortune.[51]

"Well, we've been a long time getting you to New York," the rumpled New York editor remarked when he greeted her. "But now that you are here I am afraid that you'll have to stay." At first, Ida did not understand what he was talking about. But soon she learned that she would not be able to return to Memphis and that in the bat of an eye, she had become an exile from the city of the three murdered men—and the South—neither of which she would see again for thirty years.[52]

CHAPTER EIGHT

# "The Truth About Lynching"

Having destroyed my paper, had a price put on my life, and been made an exile from home for hinting at the truth, I felt that I owed it to myself and to my race to tell the whole truth now that I was where I could do so freely.

—*Ida B. Wells*

Miss Ida B. Wells has added her vigorous pen to the pugnacious quill-quivers of the *New York Age.* If those sneaking, cowardly, Negro-hating Memphis copperheads think they have gained anything by this arrangement, they are welcome to it.

—Detroit Plaindealer

All hell had broken out in Memphis, Ida learned from the Associated Press report shown to her by T. Thomas Fortune. After her May 21 editorial questioning the rape charge and the repuration of white women, the Memphis dailies had stirred up the city with provocative words of their own. "Those negroes who are attempting to make the lynching of individuals of their race a means for arousing the worst passions of their kind are playing with a dangerous sentiment," the *Memphis Commercial* had

warned. The "fact that a black scoundrel is allowed to live and utter such loathsome and repulsive calumnies is evidence as to the wonderful patience of Southern whites." On the same day, the *Memphis Scimitar* (which had also recently fallen into Democratic hands) countered that "patience was not a virtue" under the circumstances. At first, assuming that J. L. Fleming, Ida's partner, had written the editorial, it opined that it was the "duty" of white men to "tie the wretch who utters such calumnies to a stake at the intersection of Main and Madison Streets and brand him in the forehead with a hot iron and perform upon him a surgical operation with a pair of tailor's shears."[1]

The menacing editorials were followed up by a meeting of "leading citizens," as Ida pointedly described them, who gathered at the city's Cotton Exchange Building where "threats of lynching were freely indulged." But the agitated men finally settled on appointing a committee to find Fleming. Ida's partner, fortunately, had been forewarned by an unnamed white Republican and had fled the city with all of his organs intact. However, the men did find Taylor Nightingale, who had chosen a bad time to be back in Memphis. Apparently unaware that he was no longer associated with the *Free Speech,* the white men whipped him with a pistol and then forced the minister at gun point to sign a letter denouncing the editorial as a slander against white women. Ida, upon hearing about the proud minister's capitulation—which also included informing his assailants that *she* owned the paper—was disappointed in Nightingale, but she also admitted that she did not know what she would have done at the point of a pistol.[2]

From New York, Ida telegrammed her attorney, B. F. Booth, to inquire about Fleming's safety and to give him Fortune's home address in Brooklyn where she could be contacted. Fleming was fine, she was told, but furiously angry with her. Ida sympathized her with distraught partner, who, for the second time in four years, was forced to abandon his possessions and livelihood; it was not clear if his hostility was due to more than his having to endure the wrath of white Memphians while she was away back east. Fleming's later comments about her revealed that he was wary of provocative rhetoric, and one wonders if they argued over the editorial. In any case, his remaining in Memphis after May twenty-first indicated that he had not expected such an explosive reaction to the editorial—and neither had Wells.[3]

And yet Ida had not been unaware of the danger. "I had bought a pistol the first thing after Tom Moss was lynched, because I expected some cowardly retaliation from the lynchers," she wrote in her autobiography. "I felt that one had better die fighting against injustice than to die like a dog or a rat in a trap. I had already determined to sell my life as dearly as possible if attacked. I felt if I could take one lyncher with me, this would even up the score a bit." But Ida had expected a confrontation long before May; and, with all that she had written before, she had not anticipated such a reaction to this particular editorial. Of course, she had been aware of what had happened to Jesse Duke in Alabama after he had written about colored Romeos and white Juliets four years before, but Ida had reason to believe that Memphians were more sophisticated about the vagaries of white womanhood.



After all, the "toughest city on the river" had a long history of "fallen" white women, prostitution, and female arrests, among both blacks and whites, for so-called public offenses. There had also been several examples, written up in the white Memphis press, of white women of standing who had absconded with black men without action being taken against them or the black community. As recently as 1888, T. D. Jackson, described by the *Memphis Daily Avalanche* as a "light-skinned" policeman of "stalwart physique" and president of the local black Republican club, was reported to have made a "lecherous" advance toward one white woman; cast verbal "indignities" at another whom he had caught in a "compromising situation"; and was in a relationship with a third who was married but "completely in his power" and a "victim" of his lust. But it was clear that the point of the article, written during the election campaign that year, was not so much to express indignation about white women and black men as to discredit the Republican Party and taxing district president, David Hadden, who had appointed Jackson.[4]

It was not until years after the *Avalanche*'s exposé that Jackson himself felt it incumbent to leave Memphis for Oklahoma, joining Taylor Nightingale (who took up the barber's trade to support himself while awaiting the opportunity to head a church) in another wave of migration after the destruction of the *Free Speech.*[5]

But clearly something had changed. Ida was receiving telegrams from Memphis informing her that her home was being watched, blacks in the community were being asked about her whereabouts, and men were posted at the train station awaiting her return. There was talk of lynching Ida in front of the courthouse and "making her face bleed." Neither Ida nor others had the slightest doubt that her being a woman would inure her from violence. The

"brutal instincts of the average Memphis white man would not hesitate to assassinate a woman," Ferdinand Barnett later editorialized in the *Chicago Conservator.* Barnett's advisory also apparently applied to above-average white women. A "leading white lady," Ida learned, was heard to remark that she had been opposed to the lynching of the three men but nevertheless wished that there was some way that Wells could be returned and lynched.[6]

Although her informants were begging her not to come home, Ida did not immediately dismiss the idea of going back to Memphis—if only to save what she could of the *Free Speech.* Every "dollar I had in the world was invested" in the paper, she recalled, and of late, it had, for the first time, begun paying for itself. But Ida finally made the decision to remain in New York after learning that black men were organizing to protect her in the event of her return. The men were probably members of the Tennessee Rifles, the group that both Moss and McDowell had belonged to. The militia group had disbanded after its weapons had been confiscated in the wake of the Curve riot, but it may have reassembled to protect Ida. Wells knew that the prospective face-off "would mean more bloodshed, more widows and orphans," and though she did not mention it in her writings, Ida must have also been concerned about her sister Lily, still in Memphis.[7]

Still in New York on May 27, Ida learned that Memphis's same "leading citizens" had entered the vacated offices of the *Free Speech,* destroyed the type and furnishings, and left a note behind saying that anyone attempting to publish the paper again would be punished by death. What was left was placed in the hands of the sheriff, and the outfit was sold to satisfy creditors. As Ida lamented upon hearing the news, what had taken years to build through "numberless sacrifices" had been destroyed—"as if had never been."[8]

But Ida's words long outlived the printing press of the *Free Speech.* Many black weeklies, including hers, were published on Saturdays, and by the twenty-eighth a number of them had their own response to Ida's editorial. "Sixty colored men were lynched in as many consecutive days by the white South is a disgrace to this nation," opined the *Star of Zion,* which urged that blacks continue to leave Memphis. From Chicago, the home of the Haymarket Riot, Frederick Douglass, who was visiting there and who had recently resigned his diplomatic post as minister resident and consul general to the Republic of Haiti and chargé d'affaires for the Dominican Republic, averred that "If the southern outrages on the colored race continue, the Negro will become a chemist. Other men besides anarchists can be goaded into the throwing and making of bombs."[9]



In the same period, twelve hundred blacks met in Columbus, Ohio, to protest the recent outrages in the South. They called for African Americans across the country to set aside May 31 as a day of prayer, fasting, and resolve to agitate and organize for mutual protection. The published petition was signed by an unprecedented array of more than a hundred leaders who had diverse political views, including Booker T. Washington, Albion Tourgée, Isaiah Montgomery, T. Thomas Fortune, and Frances Ellen Harper. Smaller demonstrations took place as well. A student at Atlanta University, James Weldon Johnson, who later became a noted novelist, successful diplomat, and leading NAACP official, won the prize oration at the school for a speech that advocated that blacks acquire education and wealth but that they not submit to oppression. "Half of the suffering of the race would be eradicated," he averred, if Negroes fought lynching by physical resistance.[10]

White progressives were also becoming more opinionated about lynching. The *Cleveland Gazette* reprinted one of Albion Tourgée's "Bystander" columns from the *Chicago Daily Inter-Ocean,* which noted that among the 121 lynchings the year before, seven colored men had been burned alive in the South; one of them was flayed to death and another had been mutilated, then disjointed and tortured for two hours before his death. The Ohio-born Tourgée had been a Union soldier and later a judge in the North Carolina State Supreme Court during Reconstruction. By the 1890s, he was a well-known writer, the leading representative of progressive whites on the race question, and influential in reform, religious, and Republican circles. In that same pivotal month of May, Tourgée had helped to persuade a general conference of Northern Methodists to call upon the press, the church, and the government to use "all legitimate authority and influence to put an end to the injustice and wrong" committed against blacks, who were being victimized by "violence, mob law, lynching and other outrages against humanity." Soon after the Methodist pronouncement, the Congregationalists and Northern Presbyterians also passed resolutions to condemn lynching. Tourgée also had a hand in persuading the Republican convention in Minneapolis to protest lynching, and President Harrison subsequently resolved to prohibit the practice in the new territories.[11]

The focus on lynching that spring had also affected another bastion of white progressivism, the *Independent,* an influential Congregationalist

journal out of New York. The weekly had earlier editorialized that lynchings were decreasing as the education and achievements of blacks in the South had been rising, but now questioned the assumption and opined that blacks could not be expected to "always refrain from protecting themselves. Who would?" The editorial was entitled "Barbarism."[12]

The torrent of criticism put the white southern clergy, in particular, on the defensive. Oscar Fitzgerald, the Southern Methodist bishop who had earlier called blacks an obstacle to Christian reform, responded that he thought it was "notable" that "in all of the spasms of indignation against the Southern people . . . no word of sympathy has been spoken for the women victims." Fitzgerald's charge drew a riposte from the *Independent* that the bishop had relied on the occurrences of rape for his argument, but that according to the *Chicago Tribune*, only a third of the 728 blacks lynched in the last eight years were accused of the crime. Others had been lynched for other offenses, including miscegenation, burglary, quarrels with white men, and murder.[13]

Such protests by white liberal opinion-makers were encouraging, but their criticism tended to hinge on the breakdown of law and order and on questions about the ability of the South to reform itself. Few indicated any regard or defense of the race as a race in a period when spurious assessments of blacks had the imprimatur of elite, northern universities and academic organizations. No lesser an authority than Daniel G. Brinton—a Yale graduate, University of Pennsylvania professor, and the soon-to-be president of both the International Congress of Anthropology and the American Association for the Advancement of Science—had opined in 1890 that African Americans had regressed to being "midway between the Orang-utang and the European white." The "scientific fact" led the Brown University sociologist Lester Ward to conclude that blacks were impelled by the "imperious voice of nature" to rape white women and thus "raise his race to a little higher level." No wonder, as Brinton concluded, white women had no "holier duty" than to maintain the purity of the white race—and men, of course, had no higher duty than to protect them.[14]

African Americans may not have believed the most trenchant conclusions of social scientists, but too many were still convinced that lynching was a class rather than a race issue. As late as 1892, the *Christian Index*, which had condemned lynching and for which Ida had written, was nevertheless convinced that it was the "scum of both races which meet, drink, gamble and propagate corruption . . . the negro is always kindly



treated by the intelligent white people but meets his bitterest enemy among the lower classes of the race."[15]

MEMPHIS'S "INTELLIGENT WHITE people" called a meeting in June to stem the new unrest caused by the destruction of Ida's paper. This time both blacks and whites came together for the purpose of restoring interracial "harmony and friendly feeling," according to the *Commercial*. Sixty of the "most prominent citizens in town and nearly an equal number of negroes attended," the paper reported with editor Carmack's penchant for racial insult.[16]

Many of the black Memphians who were at the meeting were men whom Ida knew well. They included the teachers Granville G. Marcus (whom she had once dated) and James Lott, whom she had lived near when she was staying at Mrs. Powell's place; C. A. Thompson, Ida's oration tutor, was also there, as was her former school principal, Benjamin Sampson. Also present were the lawyers who had represented her, Thomas Cassels and B. F. Booth, the latter of whom had arranged the sale of her Holly Springs home and who appeared to be her main source of information while she was in New York.

The spokesman for the group was Ida's once beloved minister, Benjamin Imes, who had earlier written an editorial in the *Langston City Herald* that pled for blacks to condemn lawlessness and rape by both blacks and whites alike, to appeal to justice in language that reflected the "the highest reason, the sense of honor, the love of country," and for blacks to remember that "the white man knows that there is a common welfare of the races." The editorial, entitled "Reason vs Violence," ran in the *Langston City Herald* on May 28, the day after Wells's paper was destroyed.[17]

Imes read a position paper before the attendees of the June meeting in Memphis. In it he applauded the fact that the gathering indicated that the "long and painful silence" of representative white men had come to an end. He assured them that Ida's editorial did not represent the view of the "respectable" Negroes in Memphis who should not be tar-brushed by Ida's provocations. Just as "not all Irishman were responsible for the death of Lord Cavendish" and "not all Germans were anarchists," Imes said in one of his most colorful lines, the black community at large should not be blamed for the "recent offensive utterances of the *Free Speech*." In his reasonable manner, the minister went on to criticize mob law, but also

stated his "abhorrence" of that "basest of crimes, so continuously repeated of late: the attack by violence of womanly virtue and safety." But reminding the group of the "unassailable" record of black carriage drivers, house servants, and porters "who are constantly in the service of white ladies and their families," he pointed out that the perpetrators of rape belonged to "the very lowest and most vicious element of the negro race." They should not be confused with the blacks of good character, many of whom were continuing to leave Memphis. The last statement was confirmed by a white participant who grievously recited how "an old negress" in his household, whom his children called "mammy," had recently fled to Oklahoma.[18]

But Reverend J. C. Waters of Collins Chapel, one of Moss's eulogists, offered the less temperate observation that the attacks on black womanhood were also unwarranted. If they continue, he said, "let us go away and take our immoral women with us. Our wives and daughters are as dear to us as those of the white people." Waters continued to make another point that cut to the chase. The "good people of the community might band themselves together in 'a law and order league' for the detection and oppression of criminals of both races. Certainly the colored people cannot always live on the edge of a volcano as they do now," he concluded. The suggestion was dismissed, but it may have been the origins of a subsequent, white-only law-and-order league (which ironically later pushed for Judge DuBose's indictment on corruption charges).

The response of the whites, however, tested the limits of reconciliation by making it clear what was required to maintain harmonious race relations. General Luke Wright, a former Confederate soldier, son of a former state Supreme Court judge, and a corporate lawyer who co-owned the *Commercial,* concurred with Imes's point that each race should condemn its own evildoers, but also reminded black representatives that their people must accept the fact that whites were the dominant race in Memphis, and that "colored people should submit gracefully to the situation." In return, whites would "assume the responsibility to see that no colored shall be ill treated," he generously added."[19]

The infamous Judge DuBose, however, added the caveat that the Curve incident had demonstrated that too many "respectable" blacks refused to cooperate with authorities. "I know that all the people in the community were not implicated in shooting down the officers," he said, "but at the same time I do not want the better element of the colored race to sympathize with those lawless people of their race." DuBose's views reflected that of an earlier June 4 editorial in the *Scimitar* in which he said it was "truly unfortunate" that "well-bred Negroes had to pay . . . the penalty of the offenses committed by the baser sort, but this is the way of the world."[20] Even for Imes, DuBose had gone too far with that one. Blacks were not supporting criminals but were "shocked" when the daily papers upheld the lynchers, he said.



Among the responses recorded that week to the meeting was an obsequious letter written by Benjamin K. Sampson. In it, the black educator expressed the gratitude of the colored people to the whites who "so nobly represented the best people of our Southland." A thousand "grateful hearts will bless you for your own words of encouragement and counsel in directing the spirit of that meeting," he assured. "It has always been my firm belief that the colored people have many warm friends among the intelligent Christian white people in the South," he continued, singling out those especially in Memphis. "We feel the weight of our present responsibility resting upon us to encourage harmony and good will, and to prove ourselves well deserving to our white friends." On June 12—four days before Ida had called for a regional conference in Memphis to discuss emigration—the *Appeal-Avalanche* published a resolution drawn up by the group that called the triple lynching "a flagrant offense" against law, and against "civilization and humanity" that "should not be excused."[21] However, there was no apology given for the destruction of the *Free Speech,* or any promise to prosecute the murderers.

By then, the black weeklies had caught up to the news about the *Free Speech*'s destruction. "Had such a thing happened in absolute Russia," commented the *Indianapolis Freeman,* "where free speech and free opinion are conditions to be dreamed of, very little surprise could be expressed, but in free America, where is the palliation to be found?" The *Detroit Plaindealer* called Ida, "Iola, the dauntless" for standing up for the race; the *American Citizen* said that she was "brave." The *Indianapolis Freeman* cited Ida's devotion to her people—though it worried that too much praise was being heaped on "one single little woman."[22]

Ida, of course, did not see her role in such diminutive or singular terms, and she viewed the resolution, hatched between black and white elites in Memphis, as a travesty against the race that could not remain unchallenged. She couldn't have been happy that the *Independent* commented approvingly about the resolution—though it also noted that whites took

great pains to demonstrate their superiority. Benjamin Sampson's servile capitulation must have been especially maddening. But whether Ida knew it or not, the Kortrecht principal was under tremendous pressure. He was being "persecuted" as he wrote in a private memorandum attached to the biographical circulars requested by Oberlin, his alma mater, from its alumnae. "Persecuted because one of my pupils without my consent or knowledge made a speech against lynching . . . Persecuted because I organized the People's Grocery which was destroyed . . . by a mob."[23]

FOLLOWING THE EVENTS from her vantage point in New York, a new thought occurred to Ida. As she explained in her autobiography, when she had first learned about the reactions to her editorial, she had thought that she had underestimated the degree to which white southerners, Memphians included, were willing to go in their "chivalrous defense of white womanhood." But now, she began to see the situation differently. Chivalry, she concluded, was not the spark that had conflagrated into the destruction of her paper. The real provocation, she wrote, was that "For the first time in their lives the white people of Memphis had seen earnest, united action by Negroes which upset economic and business conditions. They had thought the excitement would die down; that Negroes would forget and become, as before, the wealth producers of the South—the hewers of wood and drawers of water, the servants of white men," she continued. "But the excitement kept up, the colored people continued to leave, business remained at a standstill, and there was still a dearth of servants to cook their meals and wash their clothes and keep their homes in order, to nurse their babies and wait on their tables, to build their houses and do all classes of laborious work. . . . In casting about for the cause of all this restlessness and dissatisfaction the leaders concluded that the *Free Speech* was the disturbing factor. They were right," Ida concluded. "They felt that the only way to restore 'harmony between the races' was to get rid of the *Free Speech*. Yet they had to do it in such a way as not to arouse further antagonism in the Negroes themselves who were left in town, whom they wished to placate."[24] In other words, her editorial about white women was merely used as an excuse to put into action what had been long planned. Now Ida prepared to set the record right with an editorial in the *New York Age*.

Because the paper had a significant white as well as black readership, the historical moment dictated that she write not a simple protest but the first



comprehensive study of the practice that spoke to its true motives, meaning, and how it reflected not the moral failings of blacks but that of a culture gripped by white supremacy. Moreover, her narrative would have to challenge current race theory and undermine class assumptions in a way that was attentive to the era's emphasis on scientific observation, logic, and documented fact. And if Ida was to succeed in mobilizing both white progressives and blacks to action, her words had to have the power of the classical singers that she so admired: words that appealed to the heart as well as the mind.

As she saw it, there was a core element that had the power to unravel the race analysis of whites and the class analysis of blacks. Both conspired to justify the myth of the black rapist that, as Wells wrote, "closed the heart, stifled the conscience, warped the judgment and hushed the voice of press and pulpit on the subject of lynch law."[25] For Ida, teasing out the implications of the often denied or hidden reality of consensual relationships between black men and white women supplied that element. It at once challenged the "bestiality" of the race, the necessity to chivalrously defend the purity of pure white womanhood against blacks of all classes, and the representation of the New South as articulated by its apologists.

On June 25, the *New York Age* carried a seven-column article on its front page with the banner headline: "The Truth About Lynching." It was signed, "Exiled."[26]

Wells began by throwing down an unmistakable gauntlet. "Mr. [Jesse] Duke, before leaving Montgomery, signed a card disclaiming any intention of slandering Southern white women," Wells wrote, referring to the editor who had written about white Juliets and colored Romeos four years before. "The editor of the *Free Speech* has no disclaimer to enter, but asserts that there are many white women in the South who would marry colored men if such an act would not place them at once beyond the pale of society and within the clutches of the law. The miscegenation laws of the South only operate against the legitimate union of the races; they leave the white man free to seduce all the colored girls he can, but it is death to the colored man who yields to the force and advances of a similar attraction in white women. White men lynch the offending Afro-American, not because he is a despoiler of virtue, but because he succumbs to the smiles of white women."[27]

Wells backed up her assertions by giving specific examples that were widely known and routinely published in the white press. Provocatively

beginning with examples from Memphis in a section called "The Black and White of It," she recounted the story about the wife of a leading Memphis physician, who was of "good social standing" and who, in the winter of 1885–86, left her husband and children to run away with her black coachman. More recently, soon after Fleming had been run out of town "by the guardians of the honor of Southern white women," as Ida snarled, a young girl who lived on Poplar Street was discovered to be in love with "a handsome mulatto." The girl stole her father's money to send the young man out of harm's way. The girl had since joined him in Chicago, Wells told her readers.[28]

Wells also included the story about Sarah Clark, who loved a black man and lived openly with him. When she was charged with miscegenation, she avoided the penitentiary by swearing that she was not a white woman and was thus allowed to continue her relationship undisturbed. Who was black and who was white, in other words, was determined by social circumstance, not biology.

A similar conclusion could be reached in Wells's narrative about a Mrs. Marshall of Natchez, Mississippi, who Ida identified as the "*creme de la creme* of society." Marshall employed a married black coachman for several years and gave birth to a suspiciously dark child, but one still light enough to attribute the color to a brunette ancestor. But a second child was unmistakably black and upon the "diagnosis," the coachman took his family west, never to return. Mrs. Marshall, too, was sent away in "deep disgrace."[29]

Such women were the Juliets in Ida's editorial, but there also were Delilahs. For example, there was the case of Mrs. Underwood, a minister's wife, who accused a black man of forcing his way into her house and raping her while the husband was away at a Prohibition Party meeting. The black man, who was married and named William Offet, denied the rape charge in court, saying that he had had a reciprocal and long-standing sexual relationship with the woman. But Mrs. Underwood's white female credibility trumped his, and Offet was sent to the penitentiary for fifteen years. Eventually, however, the guilt got the best of the prohibitionist's wife, and she confessed that the black man was telling the truth. When asked why she had lied, she gave no less than three reasons: she was afraid that the neighbors had seen her, that she might have contracted a venereal disease, or that she might have become pregnant. There were thousands of such explanations throughout the South, Wells assured her readers.[30]

Finally, there were the more gruesome scenarios like that of Ed Coy, who was "burned alive" in Texarkana, Texas, in January of 1892—the subject of the investigation by Albion Tourgée and the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*. The white woman who had sealed his fate was discovered to be the wife of a "drunkard," and her own reputation was a dubious one. Moreover, it was publicly known and reported that she had been intimate with the black man for at least a year. Nevertheless, Coy was captured and soon found his oil-soaked body bound to a tree. Just before he was set alight, he asked his lover if she could burn him after they had "been sweethearts" for so long. The answer, evidently, was affirmative.[31]



The story of Coy's immolation also highlighted the fact that lynching was not just a function of the chivalrous protection of southern belles—the scenario often depicted in the southern white press. The circle had come to include the "Honah" of all white women, "the *demi-monde* included," Ida sniffed. And yet, the word of such women still had the power of life and death over men. Wells also told the story of the Memphian and furniture dealer Moses Strickland who was threatened with lynching when he was discovered in the room of a white woman. The only reason he wasn't murdered, Wells explained, was because the white woman told his would-be assassins that he was there to hang curtains in her room.[32]

And who were the men not only permitting but excusing, authorizing, and even participating in these lynchings? They were the South's alleged "best men"—the class deemed by the North and South to be left to their own designs in running the South's business and race relations. Reiterating T. Thomas Fortune's earlier observations, Wells pointed out that the source of the threats to her own life and the destruction of the *Free Speech* had been Memphis's "leading citizens," who had gathered in "their leading business center" not the "lawless element upon which the deviltry of the South is usually saddled." Ida also noted that the chivalrous protectors who had murdered Ed Coy and had been *tut-tutting* about white females were themselves "reputed fathers of mulatto children." Such men were "notorious" for their "preference for Afro-American women," Wells pronounced, and they were not honorable at all; they were violators of black women and, moreover, were no longer content to stand back to let the mob do its work—they were the mob.[33]

Wells made the miscegenation at the hands of whites not simply a complaint but evidence that it was part and parcel of the larger race issue that was also informed by gender and sexuality. As such, it had to be engaged as a "vital phase of the 'race question'" that should instigate an

"earnest inquiry as to the best methods by which religion, science, law and political power may be employed to excuse injustice, barbarity, and crime done to people because of race and color." There can be no possible belief," she concluded, "that these people were inspired by a consuming zeal to vindicate God's law against miscegenationists."[34]

Wells made white women and black men more than mere abstractions in her editorial, and she did the same for black women who, in her recital, became full and fully entitled subjects. It was they who were the real victims of lust. Wells wrote about the case of a black woman in Baltimore, who was gang-raped by three white "ruffians" when she was out walking with her black escort. In some ways, the role of black men in this particular incident, as Wells recited it, was emblematic. The escort was held by one of the white men and was presumably forced to helplessly witness the assault of his companion. Nevertheless, the white men, who had had a black attorney defending them, were exonerated.[35]

To further make her point, Wells made a new linkage between lynching and rape by writing of an incident in Nashville where a black man, guilty only of visiting a white woman, was taken out of jail with "the police and militia" standing by and dragged down the street where the mob plunged knives into him at every step. Finally, the man, named Grizzard, was swung out on a bridge, and as he tried to climb up the stanchions his hands were cut to pieces. At the time, when these "civilized whites were announcing their determination 'to protect their wives and daughters,'" Wells wrote, a white man was in the same jail for raping eight-year-old Maggie Reese, a "little Afro-American girl" who suffered injuries that "ruined her for life." The white perpetrator served six months and later became a detective in the city.[36]

Ida also recited cases of the lynching of black women, including that of Eliza Woods, the hanging of a fifteen-year-old girl in Louisiana, and the mob murder of another black woman in Hollendale, Mississippi. Wells, using her own syntax for emphasis, also gave the example of the "legal?" hanging of thirteen-year-old Mildrey Brown of South Carolina. The young girl was convicted, on circumstantial evidence, of poisoning an infant of the family for whom she worked. If Brown had been white, Wells contended, she would not have been so punished—even if it had been proven "unmistakably" that she was guilty. Within this context, Ida took on the southern Methodist bishop Oscar Fitzgerald, who had chided the *Independent* and northern critics for expressing too little sympathy for the [white] female



victims of the "unspeakable crime." "What about the black female victims of the crime?" Ida asked, challenging the limit of the bishop's chivalry by leading her readers to assume rather than question the social entitlement of black women.[37]

Two other sections of her editorial, "The Malicious and Untruthful White Press" and "The South's Position," made the point that whites themselves saw through the thick mists of a long-gone chivalry and knew the truth about the goings-on in the South. For one thing, there was on record public admissions about the fear that whites, not blacks, were the ones sinking into "criminal depravity." Wells quoted A. S. Colyar in the *Nashville American* on this point. Coylar was its one-time publisher, the leader of the municipal reform movement in Nashville and the director and general counsel of the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company, which leased convicts from the state.[38] Seemingly unaware of his own complicity in the state of affairs in the South, he worried about the ever-more frequent appearance of the mob that goes "into town where everybody knows them [and] sometimes under the gaze of the governor, in the presence of the courts, in the presence of the sheriff and his deputies, in the presence of the entire police force, take out the prisoner, take his life, often with fiendish glee, and often with acts of cruelty and barbarism which impress the reader with a degeneracy rapidly approaching savage life." That "degeneracy," Colyar further complained, was enabled by the fact that the crime was often committed with impunity. "The State, in its majesty, through its organized life, makes but one record, but one note, and that a criminal falsehood, 'was hung by persons to the jury unknown,'" he concluded. Unchecked, Ida confirmed, the "mob spirit" was growing, and it was not confined to the rural backwaters of the South. "It has left the out-of-the-way places where ignorance prevails" and "stakes in broad daylight in large cities, the centers of civilization, and is encouraged by the 'leading citizens' and the press."[39]

Careful not to claim that no black man was guilty of rape, Ida instead was making the case that the South was using the charge against black men to hide its own deficiencies, particularly from the eyes of the suspicious and investor-laden North. In another section of her editorial, entitled the "New Cry," she sought to explain the phenomenon. First, she made an important distinction between what had driven racial violence during the Reconstruction era and what was happening at the turn of the century. Lynching in the New South was not on the same continuum that saw the

emergence of the Ku Klux Klan and the racial violence of the earlier postwar years. The latter was a direct response to northern Reconstruction made possible by the enfranchisement of black men. To rectify the Radical Republican domination of the South, even "honest white men," as Wells put it, "conceded" the necessity to intimidate black voters—many of them "ignorant" newly freed slaves. When, in the midst of the struggle, the federal government abandoned blacks to the "tender mercies" of the South, "thoughtful Afro-Americans urged the race to sacrifice political rights for the sake of peace" and in the "honest belief that the race should fit itself for government." But it was the white South, which for all of its external reforms, could not change its hateful, violent ways. "To palliate this record (which grows worse as the Afro-American grows more intelligent) and excuse some of the most heinous crimes that ever stained the history of a country," Wells asserted, "the South is shielding itself behind the plausible screen of defending the honor of its women."[40]

It was a relatively simple point with complex implications about authority, credibility, motive, and the very legitimacy of the New South's cultural representation of both blacks and itself. The sense of chivalry behind the rationales for lynching, Wells was claiming, might have been sincere, but it was inauthentic in a modern age. Moreover, apologists, like Oscar Fitzgerald, and especially the white southern press knew it to be so. In other words, the late-nineteenth-century rise of the "black beast," as later commentators concluded, might have been the product of a tortured imagination and the need to control blacks, served to ease the aching sexual tensions and moral contradictions of the industrial age, kept restless white women too fearful and obedient to their protectors to wander into the public sphere, and helped to bring whites of opposing class interests into a one-party political system. But for Wells, the vicious stereotype in the southern press—the primary publicists for the New South—was largely constructed for the consumption of the North. For, as whites knew, beneath the humming mills, signs of material progress, and insistence about the superiority of Anglo-Saxon civilization, the New South wasn't new at all; it was the Old South, replete with its past promiscuities of thought, action, greed, and hatred.

Wells next looked at lynching from the perspective of logic and documented evidence. Charges of rape, she reasoned, just didn't comport with the statistics, a methodology that belonged to the modern age and that should have plied its way through the misconstructions and lies. Both the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Independent* had published lynching statistics



that, as she reiterated, showed the rise in lynching, as well as a breakdown of the 728 lynchings of the last eight years, in which only "*one-third* [of the victims] had even been *charged* with rape, to say nothing of those who were innocent of the charge."[41]

Finally, although much of Ida's own argument was aimed at opinion-makers in the North, some of her most compelling words were directed to the black community. In the final section of her editorial "Self-Help," she added new meaning to the idea that the "Afro-American can only do for himself what no one else can do for him." Ida's purpose here was to challenge the traditional attitudes of blacks who (now unlike her) still believed in the old formula that racial uplift, social harmony, and individual achievement alone would inexorably lead to the restoration of their rights. Their single-minded devotion to "general education and financial strength" were worthy goals, but they were not agents of change. For in the white supremacist world she had described, no good deed went unpunished.[42]

Indeed, the old social contract reached with progressive paternalists with its idea of mutual obligations was dead, she insisted. For the more blacks advanced, the more they were subjected to "legal(?) disenfranchisement, Jim Crow laws, and violence." And despite all that had been achieved, "No other news goes out to the world save that which stamps us as a race of cut-throats, robbers, and lustful wild beasts." Blacks had to work proactively to engender a "healthier public sentiment," and a supported independent black press was the "best instrument" for truth. The "people must know before they can act," Ida wrote, and citing a number of instances in which blacks met their deaths because of flimsy evidence, she called for the race to provide resources for the investigative and fact-finding missions.[43] In other words, what had to be won in the late nineteenth century was a modern-era public relations war, not just a moral one.

Self-help also meant an activist strategy that no longer depended solely on elites, but looked toward an intraclass insurgency in which the laboring class of blacks was central. "To Northern capital and Afro-American labor the South owes its rehabilitation," she continued. "If labor is withdrawn, capital will not remain. The Afro-American is thus the backbone of the South," Ida concluded, and a "thorough knowledge and judicious exercise of this power in lynching localities could many times effect a bloodless revolution." Calling for civil disobedience, Wells went on to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Oklahoma emigration by black Memphians, the Memphis trolley car strike, and a similar action among black Kentuckians

who stayed off the trains in the wake of the passage of a separate car law there. Wells estimated that the railway companies in the latter state lost one million dollars in revenue. The "white man's dollar is his god," Ida averred, and the "appeal to the white man's pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience."[44]

But if civil disobedience was not enough, Wells made no hesitation to call for armed self-defense, for "nothing was to be further gained by sacrifice of manhood and self respect," she wrote. Citing examples from Oklahoma, she noted that the only times blacks avoided scheduled lynchings was when they were armed and prepared to protect themselves. "The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home," she said, "and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give. When the white man who is always the aggressor knows he runs as great a risk biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life." On the other hand, the "more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged, lynched."[45]

"THE TRUTH ABOUT Lynching" sought to leave the old Victorian beliefs behind, in which the characteristics of race, class, and gender were fixed by immutable laws. In her universe, it was white women who were sexualized, black women victimized; it was white men who were feral and barbaric, black men, successful and sentimental. But her juxtaposition added up to more than a petulant inversion of racial roles and characteristics. When Wells counseled blacks that wealth and social advancement were not agents of change in themselves, she was laying the groundwork for protest movements in a post-Victorian world where conflict had its place, where progress was not inevitable without political protest and action, and where language, not natural law, defined the meaning of race.

In order for Wells to follow the logic of lynching to its ultimate conclusions, she herself had had to take a deliberate flight from the radical innocence that was at the heart of Victorian thought. "It is with no pleasure I have dipped my hands in the corruption here exposed," she told her readers.[46] Ida replaced the language of gentility with reality and dispensed with the "false delicacy" of "the "unspeakable crime." She was one of the few



women reformers who actually used the word *rape*, and had learned to do so without apology.

Wells understood the radical implications of her message and was prepared to endure the consequences even if, as she said, "the heavens might fall." But she had made up her mind that her campaign, wherever it took her, was her calling and that she would see it through. It was the determination of a woman who was indeed "dauntless," as the black press characterized her. It was also the determination of a woman whose campaign against lynching fit perfectly with her own leadership aspirations and emotional makeup. As a southerner-in-exile, she possessed an authority that gave her words more weight than those of northern leaders. The "outrage" of lynching matched her inner storm; and the blood-libel horror of the crime gave Wells a wide berth of expression for her moral indignation and anger. Ida's crusade to tell the truth about lynching gave her the means to reorder the world and her and the race's place within it. Once defamed herself, now she would expose the lies that "sullied" the race's name and restore it. Somebody "must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning," wrote Wells, who had found the vehicle of her destiny, "and it seems to have fallen on me to do so."[47]