

## Chapter 1

# *From Bristol to Nashville*

It was near the beginning of the twentieth century. The decade that Rayford W. Logan characterized as the nadir of American democracy was coming to a close. In Bristol, Virginia, near the Tennessee border, little Charles Spurgeon Johnson had accompanied his mother to the local drugstore for a soda. But he was to be disappointed. Jim Crow in all its ugliness surfaced that day in Bristol. Years later, when he was president of Fisk University and an international figure, Charles S. Johnson recalled that experience and similar ones in some detail.<sup>1</sup> One of his childhood treats was riding the trolley to town, helping his mother shop, and then stopping at the soda fountain for refreshments. On this particular day, the security of a child's world was shattered. The owner of the drugstore told his mother "he could not serve us any more at the counter." Johnson recalled that, in talking to his mother, the owner "had no defense against my mother's obvious dismay and sense of humiliating embarrassment. Nor could she explain to me with any more clarity what had happened and why it was happening. We simply went home in silence."<sup>2</sup> Of the reaction to the beginnings of segregation, Johnson would later say, "The Negroes could not believe their ears . . . ; but it was the beginning of a new self-consciousness that burned."<sup>3</sup> Johnson was only seven years old when legalized Jim Crow came to Virginia. Johnson's traumatic experience and public humiliation with Jim Crow during his early childhood would become the *raison d'être* of his career. At the soda fountain in Bristol, Virginia, Johnson was confronted in public with what W. E. B. Du Bois described so eloquently in his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk* as "the Veil that lay between . . . [African Americans] and the white world."<sup>4</sup> As Du Bois so ominously predicted, "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line."<sup>5</sup> Johnson would devote his life to working from beyond the veil with the goal of someday lifting it.

When Johnson's father, Charles Henry Johnson, was emancipated in Virginia, he, like many slaves, did not carry a surname.<sup>6</sup> The elder Johnson's brother, who was freed at the same time, took the name of Jones, but the

father of Charles Spurgeon decided upon Johnson. The slaveholder in whose home Charles Henry Johnson's mother had been a house slave took an interest in the youngster, and during the post-Civil War years educated him along with his white son. Once the home tutoring was done, both youths went off to Richmond. The white child went to Richmond College, and the black child enrolled at Richmond Institute (later part of Virginia Union). In 1883, the latter received the degree of Bachelor of Divinity.

For the next two years, Charles Henry Johnson traveled the Virginia hills working as an itinerant preacher. In about 1885, he married Winifred Branch from the mountain city of Lynchburg. For the next forty-three years, the couple struggled to "save" black workers in the raw railroad town of Bristol on the Virginia-Tennessee border.

But the young and energetic Baptist minister did not confine himself to the church quarters. Often, he carried the gospel directly into the railroad camps of "sin and riot." Nor did he restrict his ministry to blacks. On one occasion, he confronted a lynch mob in the streets of Bristol. In writing of the episode almost half a century later, Charles S. Johnson's colleague Edwin R. Embree recalled that the elder Johnson ". . . stood his ground so that the men had to shuffle around him to get past, while he cursed their evil, quoted Scripture against their violence, and prayed for their change of heart." Although the victim did not escape, it was the last lynching in Bristol in an era that witnessed nearly one hundred lynchings a year. Even white ministers were shamed into speaking out against the law of the rope. In the tradition of the black ministry, Johnson's father was called upon by his parishioners from time to time to be "spiritual advisor, legal and business counsel, guardian and banker, nurse and doctor, and social worker." Gradually, the rowdy railroad camp was turned into an "orderly and thriving community." Many years later, the local federal housing project for blacks in Bristol was named the Johnson Courts.

Despite the trauma of lynching and the rude incursion of Jim Crow at the local drugstore, Charles S. Johnson's early years were not filled with daily racial confrontation. As Johnson later recalled, "No one seemed to have been racially concerned . . . that our washerwoman was one of the 'poor whites' who lived at the bottom of an alley leading off from our street." In fact, the butcher in the white-owned meat market was a black deacon in his father's church. Of course, there were signs of what the twentieth century would bring. Located about a block from the red-light district in Bristol were black churches and the concentration of the black business district. And there were enclaves of black homes in the average-to-low-income section of town, with the greatest racial concentration among the poorest blacks. But at the same time, "occasionally a neat little Negro home might be found nestling in the humble pride between two

large and imposing dwellings of upper class whites. No one seemed to think seriously about putting them out. . . .”

The marriage of Charles Henry Johnson and Winifred Branch brought six children into the world. Charles Spurgeon, born July 24, 1893, was the eldest. He was named after Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892), the great Baptist preacher. Robert, who was apparently the second child, died at an early age. Another son, Maurice, and three daughters completed the Johnson family. The three girls were named Sarah, Julia May, and Lillie Ida. Many years later, Julia May Johnson would earn her master’s degree at Fisk University in the department chaired by her brother.

In the early years of his life, Charles S. Johnson enjoyed the security of a religious middle-class home. There is little doubt that his formative years were greatly shaped by his stern but loving father. Almost half a century later, the son recalled that his father’s most “notable difference from the typical Negro minister” in southwestern Virginia near the end of the nineteenth century “was in the quality and security of his education.”<sup>7</sup> At an early age, the younger Johnson was exposed to the classics of Western literature, theology, and history. By the time he went off to high school, he had sampled, “though not necessarily always absorbing,” such works as *The Lives of the Saints*, the *Sermons* of Spurgeon, Greek mythology, and Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, along with Horatio Alger’s boys’ stories and “countless dime novels.”<sup>8</sup>

Johnson’s childhood can be characterized as stable and wholesome. He was shielded at home from the ugliest aspects of racial discrimination. But, as the oldest of six children, he had to do his share of work. At a young age, he shined shoes in “Mr. Davis’s barbershop.” A black barber in Bristol, Davis catered to white customers. Johnson’s sister Julia recalls that here the young man spent many hours listening to the customers talk.<sup>9</sup> He took a keen interest in humankind and society. The sociological skills of a neutral observer, a thorough recorder, and an insightful analyst were first developed in that uniquely American capacity of an “invisible man.” Later, as a student working in hotels and resorts, he saw “modes of white behavior so shockingly at variance with . . . [his] bringing up that what . . . [he] lost in respect for the white race was not wholly compensated for in observations of their prestige in other respects.”<sup>10</sup>

Bristol had no high schools, and at age fourteen young Charles followed in his father’s footsteps and went off to Richmond. He enrolled in high school at Wayland Academy, then a part of Virginia Union. He entered college with the class of 1913, and by carrying what was then called “over class” (extra courses), he graduated in 1916.<sup>11</sup> The entering college class of 1913 at Virginia Union numbered fourteen. Johnson’s classmate John M. Ellison remembers that the young man from Bristol was “active

in all activities . . . but [as one who] did very little socializing.” Johnson was a star member of the university quartet and sang a beautiful tenor. He combined a “jocular . . . sense of humor” with the concerns of a “serious student.” A football injury, which affected his kidney, ended his feats on the gridiron in high school, but he participated on the college tennis team. In addition to serving as manager of the football and baseball teams, Johnson was editor-in-chief of the college journal, president of the student council and a member of the Lyceum Club, participated in the glee club, and was active on the college debating team. During the summers, he worked as a watchman on one of the steamers running from New York to Providence. The job was not very demanding of his time, and he spent many free hours reading.

During the school year at Virginia Union, Johnson worked in the library three hours per day, six days a week. Ellison remembers that even when not working, Johnson usually spent his weekends in the library. The talk around campus among both faculty and students was that Johnson “knew more about the library than any other person on the campus.” Such intellectual dedication recommended him to faculty stalwarts George Mellen Prentiss King and Joshua Simpson. In view of Johnson’s later career, the association with King is especially interesting. Prior to coming to Richmond, King had served as principal at Wayland Seminary in the District of Columbia.<sup>12</sup> During the academic year 1878–79, one of his students was Booker T. Washington. Although Washington’s reasons for leaving Wayland after only a year are lost in obscurity, he later noted King’s influence. When Wayland Seminary combined with Richmond Institute to form Virginia Union in 1899, King stayed on to teach into his eightieth year. In recalling his teacher, Johnson would remember King for his “confident expectations, and . . . his ability to sense the smallest stirring of comprehension and point them [his students] toward a great and unclosed world.”<sup>13</sup>

While the white King helped shape Johnson’s thoughts during his years at Virginia Union, it was a black man, Joshua Simpson, “a professor with special emphasis on Greek,” who had the greatest impact upon the young man from Bristol. In reflecting upon their student days together at Virginia Union, Johnson’s classmate Ellison recalls that “Dr. Joshua B. Simpson . . . was a stern disciplinarian stressing accuracy in speech and in writing.” In discussing the influence of the Greek professor, Johnson once wrote of Simpson, “[W]ith all his surface austerity, [he] came closest to understanding the art and meaning of human relations, and it was in his classes that the deepest and most real questions about people and the meaning of life came to articulation.” Especially important to Johnson, who stuttered as a child and whose slowness of speech continued until his

later years at Fisk, was the fact that “no question was ever considered too clumsy or silly to be treated with dignity and respect.”<sup>14</sup>

Not only did Johnson graduate from Virginia Union ahead of schedule, but he was chosen to give the valedictory speech.<sup>15</sup> When he informed his New England teacher that the topic for his oration at graduation would deal with “certain conflicts in philosophic thinking,” his project was vetoed. The young Virginia Union student did not accept the decision of his teacher gracefully, but rather appealed directly to the president of the institution, George Rice Hovey. After what has been described by Edwin R. Embree as “dogged debate,” Johnson was overruled. Finally, in an attempt to express his indignation, he chose for his valedictory “the dullest subject he could think of: conservation of natural resources.” Ironically, the speech led to an interest in that subject that he would later develop at Fisk University.

During his last year at Virginia Union, Johnson had an experience that left a lasting impact upon him.<sup>16</sup> While engaged in a project for the Richmond Welfare Association to “investigate needy applicants for Christmas Baskets,” he stumbled into an old rundown shack and “found a girl alone, on a pile of rags, groaning in labor.” His attempts to persuade a doctor to help failed, but he was able to locate a midwife who “saw the girl through.” Next, he set out to secure more long-term care for the mother and infant. He was stunned to learn that her family refused even to speak with the young woman. Other families in the area had a similar reaction, as did community institutions. Some rejected her because she was black; others because she had “sinned.” In the middle of his endeavor, the young woman disappeared. As his colleague Embree was later to write of the episode, Johnson was “never able to get out of his mind that Christmas tragedy, nor to cease pondering the anger of people at human catastrophe while they calmly accept conditions that cause it.” Almost three decades later, Johnson still had a vivid memory of the Christmas of 1916 when he wrote, “Out of this practical experience . . . came a lasting insight and conviction. It was simply that . . . no man can be justly judged until you have looked at the world through his eyes.” Johnson later wrote, “[F]rom this experience came the core of all that I can recognize as a social philosophy.”

In 1916, Johnson left Richmond to do graduate work at the University of Chicago. Reportedly, Johnson arrived in Chicago with only \$1.95 in his pocket. He immediately sought any kind of employment available. The third “prosperous and kindly looking man he met” led him to a small family hotel on Dorchester Avenue. In less than an hour, Johnson had begun “to earn his board and keep.” By waiting on tables and doing assorted jobs, he received the first wages that would result in his earning “every dollar of his expenses at the University just as he had in school and college.”

During the mid-twentieth century, the University of Chicago's faculty included some of the most prestigious sociologists in the nation. Apparently, Johnson's first experience was working under Albion W. Small, author of the college textbook he had used at Virginia Union. Small, who gave ponderous lectures, acted in a dignified manner, and sported a trim beard, fit the image that the Virginia Union graduate had of a university professor. But soon, Johnson was to find a different mentor, Robert E. Park. Their relationship would last until Park's death in 1944. Over the years, Park would serve as teacher, counselor, and colleague. In the process, Johnson's many contributions to sociology and to the nation came to bear Park's imprint.

The Great War interrupted the student's work during his second year at the University of Chicago, and he enlisted early in 1918. As a regimental sergeant major in the 103rd Pioneer Infantry, he saw action in the Meuse-Argonne offensive and was under fire for twenty-two consecutive days. However, he later recalled, "much of the time in the war zone was whiled away rescuing and preserving the exposed books in shattered libraries of war torn French towns."<sup>17</sup>

In 1919, Johnson returned to Chicago to continue his work under Park. But he would soon find himself amidst one of the worst racial confrontations in American history. Eugene Williams, a black youth, was viciously stoned to death on July 27 while attempting to swim in Lake Michigan. Williams's death was the spark that ignited the Chicago riot of 1919. According to Martin Bulmer, this incident was the event that led Charles Johnson to a deeper interest in "interpreting 'colored people to whites and white people to Negroes.'"<sup>18</sup> Although Johnson attempted for a time to resume his studies, much of his activity for the next three years centered on the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, which was created to investigate the riot's causes. In 1922, the work of the Chicago commission was published as *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot*. By this time, Johnson had gained a national reputation in the field of race relations. He received offers to do studies in other areas where the Great Migration was making an impact, such as Baltimore, Trenton, Buffalo, and Los Angeles.<sup>19</sup> Eventually, he accepted a position with the National Urban League and, in 1921, went to New York as director of the Department of Research and Investigations. For the next seven years, Johnson directed the economic and sociological research of the Urban League. The last five and one-half years of this period were spent editing *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*. It was in this environment that he helped spawn the Harlem-Renaissance of the 1920s. As editor, Johnson frequently published short stories and poems and often dedicated an entire issue to black enlightened culture. In addition, he sponsored literary contests on a monthly basis.

At the same time that Johnson's career was advancing, he was also nurturing one of the most important relationships of his personal life. This would come to fruition in 1920 when he married Marie Antoinette Burgette. Like her future husband, the young Marie Antoinette Burgette was reared in a secure middle-class family. As a caterer, her father provided the family with a comfortable home. Johnson's future wife, who in later years was known among her critics as well as her friends as an elegant and gracious hostess, learned early in life to be at ease in the sophisticated world. When she was a child, it was not unusual for her to accompany her father to a party he was catering and to sit on the staircase and observe what, for a child, must have been the enchanted world of society. As she grew older, her father's contacts allowed her to become the protégée of a number of wealthy patrons in the Milwaukee area. Soon, she would receive conservatory and private training in violin, piano, commerce, drama, and speech. For a time, she attended the Wisconsin Conservatory of Speech and Fine Arts. Her family position and her influential white patrons secured her admission to the Milwaukee Library Training School, and subsequently, she became the first black to work in the public library system in Milwaukee. For about a year, she attended Hunter College in New York.

Soon, Marie Antoinette Burgette turned to teaching at a girls' school in Harvey, Illinois, near Chicago. It is not clear how long she remained in teaching, but apparently it was not long before she moved to the field of social work with South Side Division of Community Service of Chicago. Again, the record is not always clear on the details of the meeting and courtship of Marie Burgette and Charles Johnson, but some inferences can be drawn. Edwin R. Embree records that Johnson first heard of the lady whom he would marry when he was making one of his early studies in Milwaukee.<sup>20</sup> At that time, she was away teaching, apparently in Harvey, Illinois. When Johnson got back to Chicago, he looked her up under the pretext that she might have some ideas to offer him on the Milwaukee study. Tradition has it that he was expecting a "dull evening with a stuckup young highbrow." She proceeded to use her experience in social work and personal knowledge of Milwaukee to devastate his report. While he was recovering his intellectual composure, she said, "Let's go dance." She was no more impressed with his dancing than his report, but the relationship continued. Meanwhile, the shy, scholarly Johnson continued to be "baffled by her assurance," and fascinated by her combination of brains and glamour. Johnson was a man who enjoyed the company of an intellectual equal, which he found in Marie Burgette. Their relationship would grow deeper emotionally as well as intellectually over the years, as evidenced by the content of their personal correspondence.

When Johnson returned from the war, he found Marie Burgette “in the midst of war camp community service and the teaching of dancing.” Whenever possible, he arranged his schedule so he could be with her as she directed a “riot of scantily clad teenage girls in their first play.” She, in turn, “struggled over his reports and tried, in vain, to check his statistical charts.” By autumn of his first year back, they began to talk seriously of marriage.<sup>21</sup> But the ever vivacious and beautiful Marie Burgette was popular among the young men, and Johnson found himself competing with at least one and probably two other rival suitors. Johnson triumphed, and on Saturday, November 6, 1920, Charles S. Johnson and Marie Antoinette Burgette were married.

Allowing for the problems that confront any marriage, the union of Charles S. Johnson and Marie Burgette seems to have been strong. They gave the world five children. Charles Spurgeon, Robert Burgette, and Patricia Marie were born during the first four years the Johnsons were in New York. The twins Jeh-Vincent and Jane Winifred were born in Nashville in 1931. The baby girl Jane died less than a week after birth. It is an interesting historical footnote that Robert, the second son who has since passed, took Ouida Fay Buckley, Booker T. Washington’s granddaughter, as his second wife in 1964.

On the eve of the Great Depression, Johnson left New York to return home to the South. At Fisk University, he established a nationally known Department of Social Sciences and an internationally known Department of Race Relations. Here, he pioneered the first Race Relations Institutes in the South. During these years, Johnson established himself as a giant in many fields.<sup>22</sup> As a sociologist, he published widely. In the field of rural sociology, his seminal works include *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934) and *Growing Up in the Black Belt* (1938). His works in race relations are voluminous. Using the survey method, combined with the case study approach, he made impressive use of the human document. For example, one need only look at *The Negro in Chicago* (1922), *Patterns of Negro Segregation* (1943), *To Stem This Tide* (1943), and *Into the Main Stream* (1947) to see how thoroughly Johnson dissected the racial problems of the times. Johnson’s use of economic and statistical data is exemplified in *The Negro in American Civilization* (1930), *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy* (1935), *The Negro College Graduate* (1938), and *Statistical Atlas of Southern Counties* (1941).

In 1947, Johnson was inaugurated as president of Fisk University. Given his national stature and administrative background, he seemed like a natural choice to lead the Nashville institution. However, many of the alumni, and W. E. B. Du Bois in particular, staged an all-out protest to stop his selection for the position. Johnson’s strong ties to the nation’s leading

philanthropists were seen as a reason to mistrust him. Regardless, the necessity of raising money won out over ideology, and Johnson took over the reins as acting president in 1946. In this role, he was able to realize one of his goals—creating a center for black scholarship. By providing a nurturing environment for talented black students, he passed on to a new generation his legacy of “activism through scholarship.” The Basic College early entry program is perhaps the best example of Johnson’s overall philosophy pertaining to students and student learning. Unsure of the possibility of integrated black education in the South, Johnson created the Basic College to give promising black students the opportunity to learn in a nurturing, stimulating environment. Students were taught in cohesive learning groups and benefited from the presence of artistic, literary, and political figures that Johnson invited to the Fisk campus. In spite of his accomplishments, Johnson’s ten years as president were sometimes rocky. In particular, a Red Scare incident in 1954 would pit his civil rights goals against the civil liberties of one of his faculty members.

As a service intellectual and world citizen, Johnson’s role was varied and impressive. In 1930, he was appointed by the State Department as the American member of the International Commission of the League of Nations to investigate slavery and enforced labor in Liberia. The work he did on this commission would be published posthumously as *Bitter Canaan*, one of his most controversial works. In 1931, he received the William E. Harmon gold medal for “distinguished achievement among Negroes in the field of science.” During the next two and one-half decades, he served on a number of governmental commissions. During the Depression, he wrote the volume on Negro housing for President Herbert C. Hoover’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership. During the New Deal, he served President Roosevelt as a member of the Committee on Farm Tenancy. At the end of World War II, Johnson accompanied General Douglas MacArthur as a member of the American mission of twenty educators to Japan. Later, he served President Truman as one of ten United States delegates for the first United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) session in Paris. As mid-century approached, he served as a delegate to the Conference on Indian American Relations in New Delhi in 1949. Finally, he served President Dwight D. Eisenhower in many ways, including membership on the President’s Board of Foreign Scholarships under the Fulbright-Hays Act.

Perhaps Johnson was most successful as an entrepreneur in race relations. He was able to use his influence on the various boards and foundations in hopes of ameliorating racism and poverty in America. For years, he was associated with the Julius Rosenwald Fund, serving as trustee from 1934 to 1948 and as codirector of the race relations program from 1943 to

1948. From 1944 to 1950, he was director of the Race Relations Division of the American Missionary Association of the Congregational and Christian Churches of America. And in 1948, he was a delegate to the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam, Holland.

Johnson's international reputation was best acknowledged in the fall of 1955, when he was invited by the Social Sciences Section of UNESCO to participate in, and later to chair, a conference of world experts on race relations. Following this honor, on the invitation of the American-Scandinavian Foundation and the Universities of Stockholm, Oslo, and Copenhagen, he made a lecture tour of the Scandinavian countries.

Johnson paid great personal dues for his continuing involvement in the struggle for freedom. His contemporaries recall his suffering through interminable conferences in his multiple roles as scholar, service intellectual, and entrepreneur of race relations.<sup>23</sup> As the years moved on, the migraine headaches that developed early in his career worsened. By the mid-1950s, this wise, but shy, almost aloof, figure was nearing the end. The Fatima cigarettes that he chain-smoked amplified his quiet nervousness. The pressures on him came to a head on October 27, 1956, when he died of a heart attack. Although he had had a full and brilliant career, he did not live to see the fruition of the freedom movement or the black liberation movement. But this man, born during the nadir of American democracy and race relations, had, along with his generation, laid the groundwork upon which the Martin Luther Kings, Malcolm Xs, Fannie Lou Hamers, and others would lead the way.

Despite the fact that Johnson's professional training and early practical experience in race relations were in the urban North, he chose to address race problems in the South. In this way, he differentiated himself from Du Bois and other black intellectuals. He was not a radical, but a diplomat who, through his collaborations, realized many of the ideas of thinkers more radical than himself. From the education of a "Talented Tenth" to the establishment of a center for black social science to the funding of Harlem Renaissance artists, Johnson's accomplishments paved the way for the advancement of African Americans later in the century.