

## "A South of Union and Freedom"

June 1953

**I**N 1866, in a speech delivered in New York City, Georgia's great Ben Hill began a speech thusly: "There was a South of slavery and secession—that South is dead. There is a South of Union and Freedom—that South, thank God, is living, breathing, growing every hour." That was the first "New South" speech. And Ben Hill was right. The New South, beginning to live, breathe and grow in 1866, has progressed slowly—like all things growing in a soil made poor by war and ruin. But it has kept growing—every hour.

Some months ago in Augusta, Ga., where the race question has been unworthily agitated by individuals hoping to prosper from it, a Negro university man was elected to the school board. He was from a ward largely Negro in population.

Recently, five North Carolina cities and towns elected Negroes to their city councils. In Wilson (population 21,010), in Chapel Hill (population 9,177), in Gastonia (population 23,069) and in the city of Durham (population 71,311), Negroes were elected to office for the first time since Reconstruction Days.

Atlantans awoke Thursday morning to find they had elected the able, qualified president of Atlanta University, Dr. Rufus Clement, to the city's school board. He, too, is the first Negro to be elected on a city-wide basis since Reconstruction Days. The fact that two other Negroes were elected to the City Executive Committee on a ward basis went almost unnoted.

When Atlanta examined the vote tabulations, its wonder grew. Dr. Clement had carried 40 of the 58 precincts. (There are really 59, but the latter is the City Hall where the absentee ballots are counted.) He won a majority of the white wards. And of the 18 lost, he had failed to carry nine by margins of 22 and less. And, even more important, Atlanta seemed proud, if surprised, at having done the job. Thousands had voted for Dr. Clement because they thought he deserved it, and because they believed the more than 25,000 Negro children in the city's schools deserved representation. But none had expected him to win.

The old die-hard KKK element was angry and bitter. They were especially upset because the sky hadn't fallen, the government hadn't capitulated and the graves had not given up their dead. Things went right along and Atlanta seemed, in general, pleased with itself for having done a fair and honest thing within the orderly framework of democracy.

Atlanta, Georgia, and the South could look at themselves and say, after thinking it over, that without doubt there would be backslidings, emotional outbursts, maybe even some violence sparked by the violent, but that what Ben Hill said in 1866 still goes—there *is* a South of Union and Freedom—and that South, thank God, *is* living, *is* breathing, growing *every* hour.