THE NEGRO: THE SOUTHERNER'S PROBLEM

BY

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FIRST PAPER

SLAVERY AND THE OLD RELATION BETWEEN THE SOUTHERN WHITES AND BLACKS

ILLUSTRATED BY HENRY McCARTER (FRONTISPIECE)

I

AMONG the chief problems which have vexed the country for the last century and threaten to give yet more trouble in the future, is what is usually termed "The Negro Question." To the South, it has been for nearly forty years the chief public question, overshadowing all others, and withdrawing her from due participation in the direction and benefit of the National Government. It has kept alive sectional feeling; has inflamed partizanship; distorted party policies; barred complete reconciliation; cost hundreds of millions of money, and hundreds if not thousands of lives, and stands ever ready, like Banquo's Ghost, to burst forth even at the feast.

For the last few years it has appeared to be in process of being settled, and settled along the lines which the more conservative element of the white race at the South has deemed for the permanent good of both races, a view in which the best informed element at the North apparently acquiesced. The States which the greater part of the most ignorant element of the Negro race inhabited had substantially eliminated this element from the participation in political government, but had provided qualifications for suffrage which would admit to participation therein any element of the race sufficiently educated to meet what might appear a reasonable requirement. Meantime, the whites were taxing themselves heavily and were doing all in their power to give the entire race the education which would enable them to meet this requirement.

Those whites who know the race best and hold the most far-reaching conception of the subject maintain that this disfranchisement was necessary, and, even of the Negro race, those who are wisest and hold the highest ideal for their people acquiesced in this — at least, to the extent of recognizing that the Negroes at large needed a more substantial foundation for full citizenship than they had yet attained — and were preaching and teaching the imperative necessity of the race's applying its chief energies to building itself up industrially.

The South, indeed, after years of struggle, considered that the question which had confronted it and largely affected its policy for more than a third of a century was sufficiently settled for the whites to divide once more on the great economic questions on which hang the welfare and progress of the people. Suddenly, however, there has been a recrudescence of the whole question, and it might appear to those who base their opinion wholly on the public prints as though nothing had been accomplished towards its definite settlement in the last generation.

Only the other day, the President extended a casual social invitation to the

most distinguished educator of the colored race : one who is possibly esteemed at the South the wisest and sanest man of color in the country, and who has, perhaps, done more than any other to carry out the ideas that the Southern well-wishers of his race believe to be the soundest and most promising of good results. And the effect was so unexpected and so far-reaching that it astonished and perplexed the whole country. On the other hand, this educator, speaking in Boston to his race in a reasonable manner on matters as to which he is a high authority, was insulted by an element, the leaders of which were not the ignorant members of his race, but rather the more enlightened : college-bred men and editors, and a riot took place in the church in which he spoke, in which red pepper and razors were used quite as if the occasion had been a "craps-game" in a Southern Negro settlement. The riot was quelled by the police ; but, had it been in a small town, murder might easily have been done.

In view of these facts, it is apparent that the matter is more complicated than appears at first thought, and must be dealt with carefully.

One great trouble is the different way in which the body of the people at the North and at the South regard this problem. We have presented to us the singular fact that two sections of the same race, with the same manners and customs, the same traits of character, the same history and, until within a time so recent that the divergence is within the memory of living men, the same historical relation to the Negro race, should regard so vital a question from such opposite points ; the one esteeming the question to be merely as to the legal equality of the races, and the other passionately holding it to be a matter that goes to the very foundation of race-integrity. What adds to the anomaly is the pregnant fact that the future of these two sections must hereafter run on together ; their interests become ever more and more identified, and if the one is right in holding that its position is founded on a racial instinct, the other, in opposing it, is fighting against a position which it must eventually assume. Yet, their views have up to the present been so divergent, they have, indeed, been so diametrically opposed to each other, that if one is right, the other must be radically wrong.

Another difficulty in the way of a sound solution of the problem is the blind bigotry of the doctrinaire which infects so many worthy persons. An estimable gentleman from Boston, of quite national reputation, observed a short time ago that it was singular that the Southerners who had lived all their lives among the Negroes should understand them so little, while they of the North who knew them so slightly should yet comprehend them so fully. He spoke seriously and this was without doubt his sincere belief. This would be amusing enough were it not productive of such unhappy consequences. It represents the conviction of a considerable element. Because they have been thrown at times with a few well-behaved, self-respecting Negroes, or have had in their employ well-trained colored servants, they think they know the whole subject better than those who, having lived all their life in touch with its most vital problems, have come to feel in every fiber of their being the deep significance of its manifestations. Such a spirit is the most depressing augury that confronts those who sincerely wish to settle the question on sound principles.

With a Negro population which has increased in the last forty years from four and a half millions to nine millions, of whom eight millions inhabit the South and four and a half millions inhabit the six Southern Atlantic and Gulf States, where in large sections they outnumber the whites two and three to one, and in some parishes ten and twenty to one,* with this population owning less than 4 per cent. of the property and furnishing from 85 to 93 per cent. of the total number of criminals ; with the two races drifting further and further apart, race-feeling growing, and with ravishing and lynching spreading like a pestilence over the country, it is time that all sensible men should endeavor as far as possible to dispel preconceived theories and look at the subject frankly and rationally.

It must appear to all except the doctrinaire and those to whose eyes, seared by the red-hot passions of the War and the yet more angry passions of the Reconstruction Period, no ray of light can ever come, that it is of vital importance that

* The Negro population in 1860 was, in the Slave States, 4,215,614 ; in the other States it was 226,216, a total of 4,441,830. In 1900 the Negro population in the Southern States and the District of Columbia was 8,081,270.

a sound solution of the problem should be reached. It behooves all who discuss it to do so in the most dispassionate and catholic spirit possible. The time has alike passed for dealing with the matter either in a spirit of passion or of cock-sure conceit. Well meaning theorists, and what Hawthorne termed, "those steel machines of the Devil's own make, philanthropists," have with the best intentions made a mess of the matter. And after nearly forty years, in which money, brains, philanthropy, and unceasing effort have been poured out lavishly, the most that we have gotten out of it is the experience that forty years have given, and a sad experience it is. The best-informed, the most clear-sighted and straight-thinking men of the North, admit sadly that the experiment of Negro suffrage, entered into with so much enthusiasm and sustained at so frightful a cost, has proved a failure, as those who alone knew the Negro when the experiment was undertaken prophesied it must, in the nature of things, prove. Only those who, having eyes, see not, and ears, but will not hear, still shut their senses and, refusing to take in the plain evidences before them, babble of out-worn measures — measures that never had a shred of economic truth for their foundation, and, based upon passion, have brought only disaster to the whites and little benefit to those whom they were intended to uplift.

Two principles may be laid down to which, perhaps, all will assent. First, it is absolutely essential that a correct understanding of the question should be had; and, secondly, the only proper settlement of it is one that shall be founded on justice and wisdom — a justice which shall embrace all concerned.

II

It is important that, at the very outset, we should start with proper bearings. Therefore, though it would hardly appear necessary to advert to the historical side of the question, yet so much ignorance is displayed about it in the discussion that goes on, that, perhaps, the statement of a few simple historical facts will serve to throw light on the subject and start us aright.

Until a recent period, slavery existed as an institution almost all over the world. Christianity, while it modified its status, recognized it, and, up to the time of its abolition, those who defended it drew their strongest arguments from the sacred writings. Pious Puritans sent their ships to ply along the middle passage, and deemed that they were doing God and man a service to transport benighted savages to serve an enlightened and Christian people. Pious and philanthropic churchmen bought these slaves as they might have bought any other chattels.

The abolition of slavery came about gradually, and was due rather to economic than to moral reasons. When, in 1790, slavery was abolished, by a more or less gradual system, in the Northern States, it was chiefly because of economic conditions. There were at that time less than 42,000 slaves in all the Northern States, and the system was not profitable there; whereas there were over 700,000 slaves in the Southern States, and it appeared that the system there was profitable. But the balance had not then been struck.

Though a respectable party of the representatives of the Southern States advocated its abolition at that time, it was retained because of economic conditions. From these facts, which are elementary, one cannot avoid the conclusion that whatever difference existed between the relation of the races in various sections was due to economic causes rather than to moral or religious feeling. In fact, during the Colonial period, so far from slavery having any moral aspect to the great body of the people, it was regarded as a beneficent institution. The Quakers, a sect who, having known oppression themselves, knew how to feel for the oppressed, and a small proportion of the most far-seeing in both sections, were exceptions. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, was as strong an advocate of emancipation as James Otis.*

When the principle that all men are created equal was enunciated in the Declaration of Independence, a great majority of those who signed it had no idea of embracing within its category the enslaved Africans. To have done so would have been to stultify themselves. And whether or not Thomas Jefferson at heart felt the far-reaching scope of his enunciation, he gave no evidence of it at the time.

The Negro was discussed and legislated about as a chattel by the very men who

* By the census of 1781, there were in Virginia 12,866 free Negroes.

issued that great charter. The whites had conquered this country from the savage and the wild, and they had no misgivings about their rights.

The inclusion of three-fifths of the Negroes in the representation of the several States was stated by Jefferson to have grown out of the claim made by Adams and certain other Northern representatives that they should be taxed just as the whites were taxed, every slave being counted just as every white laborer was counted. This view the Southerners opposed and the matter was adjusted by a compromise which reckoned only three out of every five slaves.*

It was, however, impossible that the spirit of liberty should be so all-pervading and not in time be felt to extend to all men — even to the slaves; but the growth of the idea was slow, and it was so inextricably bound up with party questions that it was difficult to consider it on its own merits. To show this, it is only necessary to recall that, in 1832, Virginia, through her Legislature, came within one vote of abolishing slavery within her borders, and that, in 1835, William Lloyd Garrison was dragged through the streets of Boston by a mob — an outrage which he says was planned and executed, not by the rabble or working-men, but "by gentlemen of property and standing from all parts of the city." †

Fugitive-slave laws and the attempt to enforce them against the sentiment of communities where slavery was opposed, played their part in fostering a sentiment of championship of the Negro race.

Then came "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which was the nail that, in the hands of a woman, fastened Sisera to the ground. It presented only one side of the question and did more, perhaps, than any one thing that ever occurred to precipitate the War. It aroused and crystallized feeling against the South throughout the world. For the first time, the world had the imaginable horrors of slavery presented in a manner that appealed alike to old and young; the learned and the ignorant; the high-born and the lowly. It blackened the fame of the Southern people in the eyes of the North and fixed in the mind of the North a conception not only of the institution of slavery, but of the Southern people, which lasted for more than a generation, and has only begun of late, in the light of a fuller knowledge, to be dislodged.*

* See Randolph's "Life of Jefferson," Vol. I, pp. 22–24.

† "Life of William Lloyd Garrison," Vol. II, p. 35, and *Liberator*, No. 5, p. 197.

III

Mr. Lincoln has been so generally declared the emancipator of the Negro race that it is probable the facts in all their significance will never be generally received. Emancipation was no doubt his desire; but the Preservation of the Union was his passion. And, whatever Mr. Lincoln may have felt on the subject of emancipation, he was too good a lawyer and too sound a statesman to act with the inconsiderate haste that has usually been accredited him. It was rather what he might do than what he actually did that alarmed the South and brought about secession. And the menace of destruction of the Union soon demanded all his energies and forced him to relegate to the background even the emancipation of the slaves.†

On the 22d of December, 1860, after South Carolina had seceded, he declared that the South would be in no more danger of being interfered with as to slavery by a Republican administration than it was in the days of Washington. In his inaugural address he declared: "I have no more purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the Institution of Slavery in the States where it now exists. I believe I have no right to do so and I have no inclination to do so."

Congress, in July, 1861, adopted a resolution, which Lincoln signed, declaring that war was not waged for any "purpose of overthrowing or interfering with the rights or established institutions" of the Southern States, "but to defend and maintain the supremacy of the Constitution and to preserve the Union with all the dignity, equality and rights of the several States unimpaired," etc. As late as March, 1862, he declared: "In my judgment, gradual and not sudden emancipation is

* An illustration of this may be found in T. W. Dwight's paper on the Dred Scott case in Johnson's Universal Cyclopedia, where he refers to the fact that, in the Dred Scott case, Chief Justice Taney's learned opinion, reviewing historically the attitude of the people towards the African race at the time of the adoption of the Constitution, has been generally taken as giving his own opinion. Even the senior Senator from Massachusetts has recently been reported as quoting this as Chief Justice Taney's opinion. But see Tyler's "Life of Chief Justice Taney."

† Horace Greeley's old paper, the *New York Tribune*, has recently, in commenting on a statement made by the successor of Henry Ward Beecher, felt compelled to declare that the War was primarily undertaken to save the Union and not to emancipate slaves.

best for all." The special message to Congress on this subject Thaddeus Stevens stigmatized as "about the most diluted milk-and-water gruel proposition that has ever been given to the American people." * The War had been going on more than a year before a bill was passed providing that all "slaves of persistent Rebels, found in any place occupied or commanded by the forces of the Union, should not be returned to their masters (as had hitherto been done under the law), and they might be enlisted to fight for the Union." Mr. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, declares on its face that it was issued on "military necessity."

In fact, this proclamation did not really emancipate at all, for it applied only to those slaves who were held in those States and "parts of States" then "in rebellion," and by express exception did not extend to Negroes within the territory under control of the Federal Government.

It is of record that, in some instances, owners near the Federal lines sent their servants into the territory occupied by the Federal troops to evade the proclamation.

A story is told of an officer under General Butler, on the James River, who, having a Negro baby left on his hands by a refugee mother who had returned to her home, sent the child back to her. Someone reported that he was sending refugee Negroes back and the matter was investigated. His defense was that he had sent the baby back to the only place where he was free, to wit: within the region occupied by the rebels.

Meantime, there was much reflection and no little discussion as to the subject among the Southern people. The loyalty of the Negroes had made a deep impression on them, and they were beginning to recognize the feeling of the European countries touching slavery. †

The Thirteenth Amendment (abolishing slavery) failed to pass in the spring of 1864 and was not passed until January 31, 1865, when all the Republicans and thirteen Democrats voted for it. Slavery, however, was abolished by the final conquest of the South and the enforced acquiescence of the Southern people, who recognized that the collapse of the Confederacy had effected what legal enactments had not been able to accomplish. Returning soldiers brought their body-servants home with them, and on arrival informed them that they were free; in some instances giving them the horses they had ridden, or dividing with them whatever money they had.* Throughout the South, the Negroes were told by their owners that they were free, in some cases receiving regular papers of manumission.

IV

No race ever behaved better than the Negroes behaved during the War. Not only were there no massacres and no outbreaks, but even the amount of defection was not large. While the number who entered the Northern Army was considerable ‡, it was not as great as might have been expected when all the facts are taken into account. A respectable number came from the North, while most of the others came from the sections of the South which had already been overrun by the armies of the Union and where mingled persuasion and compulsion were brought to bear.‡ Certainly no one could properly blame them for yielding to the arguments used. Their homes were more or less broken up; organization and discipline were relaxed, and the very means of subsistence had become precarious; while on the other hand they were offered bounties and glittering rewards that drew into the armies hundreds of thousands of other nationalities. The number that must be credited to refugees who left home

* Lincoln's paramount object, as he boldly avowed in his wonderful letter of August 22, 1862, to Horace Greeley, was "to save the Union, and not either to save or destroy slavery." —Cong. Globe, 2d Session, 37th Congress, Pt. II, p. 1154.

† General R. E. Lee emancipated his servants within eight days after the proclamation was issued. On the 8th of January, 1863, he wrote from his camp that he had executed and returned to his lawyer a deed of manumission which he had had prepared by him. He had discovered the omission of certain names and had inserted them. And he added that if any other names had been omitted, he wished a supplementary deed drawn up containing all that had been so omitted. "They are all entitled to their freedom," he writes, "and I wish to give it to them. Those that have been carried away, I hope, are free and happy. I cannot get their papers to them and they do not require them. I will give them if they call for them." See "Life of General R. E. Lee," by Fitzhugh Lee.

General Henry A. Wise, one of the most ultra-Democratic leaders in the South, states that, had the South succeeded in its struggle, he had intended to set his slaves free and canvass Virginia for the abolition of slavery. See Report of Joint Commission on Reconstruction, 1st Session, 39th Congress, p. 70.

* The writer recalls vividly one such case when his father returned from Appomattox: "Ralph," he said, as he dismounted at his door; "you are free. You have been a good servant. Turn the horses out." Ralph is still living.

† The total number of colored troops enlisted during the war was 186,097. — "Statistical Records of the Armies of the United States," by Frederick Phisterer, late Captain, U. S. A.

‡ There was a growing sentiment in favor of enlisting the Negroes to fight the Confederacy, and a number of regiments were enlisted. One of these was enlisted in New Orleans; two were enlisted in Virginia.