

The Negro Problem

A SERMON



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The Negro Problem.

There is a story often told by Wendell Phillips, of a man entering a store in a New England town, and beginning to describe a recent fire. According to the story, a man was going by a barn, and seeing an owl on the ridge pole, he fired his gun. The wadding somehow got into the shingles, setting fire to the hay. All was destroyed; ten tons of hay, six head of cattle, and the finest horse in the county, etc.

The men in the store began exclaiming and commenting upon it.

"What a loss!" said one. "Why, the owner will nigh break down under it," said another. And so they went on, speculating one after another, and the conversation drifted on in all sorts of conjectures. At last, a quiet man who sat spitting into the fire looked up and asked, "Did he hit the owl?"

This story, told by Wendell Phillips in the thrilling days before the war, when he, with other brave men were struggling for the rights of the negro, needs to be told in these days. For now, as then, in the present recrudescence of feeling,

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there is the tendency to be carried away in the discussion of secondary questions, forgetting the main question at issue,—to think of the hay, etc., and forget the owl on the ridge pole.

That a clear distinction may exist in our minds let us begin by noting some phases of the question that, though related, are not vital in the present discussion.

I. The question of slavery as an institution is not involved in the present controversy. That was settled almost half a century ago at the bar of public judgment and on the field of battle. Now and then some belated traveler along the highway of the world's progress arrives and asserts that slavery was a wise institution and its overthrow contrary to justice; but sensible men listen respectfully, though with an amiable expression of dissent on their faces.

II. The question of the expatriation, transportation or migration of the negro is not involved in the present controversy. Southern bishops and editors with apparent wisdom and real eloquence may elaborate such views, but the country both north and south, does not seriously consider such a solution. As has often been said of late, there are unanswerable objections:

(a) That of transporting nine million negroes across the sea. The transportation of an army of 200,000 from Japan to Korea presents enormous difficulties. What if an attempt should be made

to transport 45 times as many half way around the globe?

(b) The south, for economic reasons, would not allow it. The negro has always been of value, and never more so than today. The cotton, having increased almost threefold in forty years, demands his presence, to say nothing of other forms of industry that have been created and developed through these years. He is indigenous to the soil.

(c) He does not want to leave the country, and his rights should be respected. Some men were born in this country; other men came voluntarily, but the negro came by "pressing invitation," and has been here as long as the Cavalier or Puritan, and surely, long enough to establish his right to be considered a native of the land. So the consideration of transportation or migration whether to Africa, the Philippines or the southwest portions of our own country must be dismissed.

III. The question of the 14th or 15th Amendment to the Constitution is not immediately involved in the controversy. At the present time there is a marked disposition on the part of men of this generation to question the wisdom of these amendments and to charge that they were passed in the heat of sectional strife, and to secure power for a political party. I have only to observe that the men of the former generation who today, in

their advancing years possess memories and experiences of those tragic days, are either silent or express dissent, and whatever the truth may be, I would suggest a suspension of judgment until some historian may arise with a sufficiently comprehensive grasp, to marshal the facts and interpret the same.

As regards the remaking of the Constitutions of the several states in the south, I do not understand that the leaders are planning for or anticipating a repeal of these national amendments which would require the sanction of three-fourths of all the states of the Union, but rather they are so framing their laws as to place the question of negro suffrage beyond the reach of the fundamental law of the land. Whether this is legal or illegal remains to be seen. The question has not yet come squarely before the Supreme Court. Whatever the future may have in store, at this stage of the discussion, the constitutional question is not vital.

IV. The question of an educational test for the exercise of franchise is not involved in this controversy. All intelligent citizens, north and south, believe in a fair educational equipment as the basis of citizenship, and every northern state would impose an educational test if the percentage of illiteracy was sufficiently large to prove a menace to the institutions of government. As it is, six northern states, Maine, New Hampshire,

Massachusetts, Connecticut, Washington and California have such tests.

But it is possible to push the educational test too far and expect too much from it. It is well to remember that the basic strength of democracy is found in the character of its citizens and not in their education. Character is determined by righteous action and not by thoughtful theories. The father and mother of William Shakespeare could neither read nor write. The young bride taught the father of Abraham Lincoln how to sign his name. Recently there were twenty-six college graduates in Sing Sing. A man may be educated and be a sore on the body politic; a man may be uneducated and constitute one of the strong muscles of the same; yet, as a general proposition, all intelligent citizens black and white, believe in education for the voter and are ready to alter Jefferson's so-called political maxim until it reads "All just government depends upon the intelligent consent of the governed."

V. The question of negro domination in the south is not involved in the present controversy.

This phase of the question is much emphasized, but I am convinced that it is the Southern politician's hob-goblin, which is badly over-worked. There are communities in the south where the negro dominates numerically as there are communities in the north where the foreigner

dominates; but in the thirteen states of the south, taken as a whole, the negro does not numerically dominate nor is there any apparent danger for the future.

In these states, according to the United States Census of 1900, there were 13,782,541 whites and 7,514,842 blacks. The increase of white population for the ten years from 1890 to 1900 was 22 9-10 per cent among the whites and 18 9-10 per cent among the blacks, i. e., there are today in the south two white men for one black man, and the whites are increasing more rapidly than the black. And when an educational limitation is put upon the franchise, as is being done in the remaking of the constitutions of the several southern states, the ratio between the two races and in favor of the white is further increased. If a fair educational test in these states should be applied, regardless of color, so as to eliminate the ignorant element, the white population would be reduced by 20 per cent and the black by 45 per cent, i. e., there would be a white population of 11,026,032 and a black of 4,133,163 from which to draw voters.

VI. The question of social equality as between the negro and white man is not involved in the present controversy.

If negro domination is the hob-goblin of the race problem social equality is its scare crow, and it is impossible to observe the present wave

of race prejudice that is sweeping over the country without feeling that this dreadful scare crow is doing its work. But, as in the past history of mankind so here, some hitherto unrecognized factor asserts itself to contradict the most emphatic surmises. And the factor in the present problem is that of race consciousness, which, contrary to all expectations, is proving stronger than race amalgamation. To state this in academic terms, "Races that are differentiated by physical peculiarities which persist in offspring tend, under normal conditions, to greater separation rather than amalgamation," i. e., races revert to type. And this racial principle is being exemplified to a remarkable degree in the negro race of our country. Wherever negroes as a people are given the choice, they separate from the whites in social relations. In the light of the history of the past forty years it is amusing to read the terrible forebodings of Southern leaders as regards the evils due to inter-marriage. It is true that 25 per cent of the black race has white blood in its veins, but let it never be forgotten that the mulatto in America, numbering $2\frac{1}{4}$ millions, is the evidence not of intermarriage between the races due to the initiative of the black in seeking the white, but of the awful lust of the white in the use of the black. However, a change has taken place, and competent observers who deal directly with negro children tell us that the race is growing blacker

and that whereas ten years ago the popular pupil in the school was the light skinned mulatto, now it is the black-skinned negro.

And the same is true of education. The negro race does not seek for or desire education with the white. The question of commingling the races in education is not seriously raised in the South. The whites would not allow it, and the negroes would not have it. Except in the pursuit of exceptional education advantages the black youth prefers the company of others of his race.

And this same race consciousness is asserting itself in religious work. The negroes in the North as well as in the South prefer their own churches. In the work of the great American Missionary Association about 55 per cent of the missionaries at work among the negroes 25 years ago were white men and women, and today only 10 per cent.

The race is developing its own leaders for this work. Everywhere this race problem is studied evidence is found of a growing race consciousness and race pride. As James Bryce says, "He is unabsorbed and unabsorbable." As Du Bois says, "He would not plunge his negro soul in the blood of white Americanism, for he knows that the negro race has a message for the world."

VII. The question of race superiority or inferiority is not involved in the present controversy. Men may talk about the ruling and the

serving race, about the Anglo-Saxon as superior and the negro as inferior,, but such talk carries with it no weight in the present controversy, and for the following reasons: It is a revelation of the inferiority of the man thus speaking; the real gentleman never boasts of his superiority. It is no sign of superiority for a man to emphasize his superiority in relation to others whom he believes are inferior. The "first gentleman" forgot about his own superior strength in his desire to help those who did not possess it. Christianity teaches that superiority is not racial but individual, and as assured not by the dimensions of the cranium but by the loving impulses of the heart expressed in helpful deeds. Whatever may be our impressions and theories, no one really knows that the Anglo-Saxon is and must ever remain superior. Of course the negro, as a race, is backward,—a mere child,—but what he may be no one knows. All through history our racial conceits have been contradicted in the progress of civilization. The Romans looked with contempt upon the Britons, and said "They were not fit to be slaves." And Caesar's empire crumbled and Briton rules a vast portion of the world. A few years ago England and the United States looked with scorn upon the people of the far East as too inferior to respond to an enlightened civilization. But one Sunday morning in the year of 1853 a warship sailed into the Bay of Yeddo, a flag was

draped over the capstan, the Bible was read, a psalm was sung by the crew, and as its music floated over the waters, it caused the sleeping nation of Japan to rub its eyes, stretch itself, and then bound forth upon the stage of the world's action.

But granting that the negro race is now inferior, and supposing that it always will be, what then?

I answer that the glory of the nation is not alone in the recognition it accords its superior citizens, but in the help it renders its inferior ones. The power of a democracy is not in the political amalgamation of forces that are equal, but in forces that are unequal. As Felix Adler says, "A democracy at its best is a partnership of the more efficient with the less efficient, the purpose of which is the lifting of the less efficient to its highest efficiency by the efforts of the more efficient," or, to state it in another way, progress comes through inequality.

Having noted the phases of the question not vital in the present discussion, the question arises, What is the vital point at issue? And my answer is as follows:

Is the negro a man possessing normal possibilities of manhood, which, if developed, will equip him for the usual privileges of citizenship in our democracy?

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This is the vital question involved in the present discussion and recrudescence of race prejudice. Physically, of course, the negro is a man, that is, he stands on two feet, has two hands, laughs, cries and talks. But is he a man morally and intellectually?

A definite answer to this question means a solution as regards method of the negro problem.

But who shall answer this question? It is apparent in the light of the present widespread discussion, that many think they are competent to give a final answer. However, in the face of the varied and innumerable answers as given, I want to insist that only one man is competent and he is the man about whom the question is raised. Negro-hating Southerners (who are few in number), Northern philanthropists, occasional travelers for business and pleasure, and others who look on have nothing authoritative to say. Only the negro himself can answer the question, and his answer must be in deed and not in word.

Thirty-nine years have passed since Lee surrendered at Appomattox. It was then that the negro began to make history for himself. He was a free man, as far as the Government could make him free. The Emancipation Proclamation declared that he was a man, with the normal possibilities of manhood. It challenged him to demonstrate to the world the fact. He accepted the challenge in the presence of adverse conditions without a parallel known to any people in his-

tory. He was in total ignorance and absolute poverty. He was an illegitimate as far as any legal sanction of the marriage rite. He constituted a social group weakened through the absence of the law of the survival of the fittest, due to the peculiar protection offered him by the institution of slavery. Lacking mental training, without the sense of property rights, debased by the absence of the restraining influences of the finer ideals of family life, hitherto a dependent and so lacking the experience of independence, he began his struggle. And he began it not in Africa amid equals or inferiors, but in America, along side of the aggressive Anglo-Saxon, and measured by the standard of our great democracy.

And what is his answer, after a generation has passed? His answer is that, as regards material prosperity he is able to enter the competitive world of commerce, gain wealth and acquire the sense of property rights so important in a democracy. Since the war he has accumulated \$800,000,000 of property.

The meaning of this may be suggested by a comparison, although the comparison needs to be qualified. In the year 1800 the population of the United States was about what the negro population is today. And assuming that the ratio of the increase of wealth during the first half of the nineteenth century was as great as the second half, the people of our country then had acquired.

after many generations, only as much property as the negro has in one generation.

But more important still is his intellectual advancement. Starting with an illiteracy of almost 100 per cent, he has reduced the same until it now amounts to less than 45 per cent. The thirst for knowledge has been increased so that it has often been said that no school-house has been opened for him since the war that he has not filled. One million five hundred thousand of his children are in the public schools, 40,000 are in the higher schools, 30,000 are teaching, 17,000 are college graduates, 500 are practicing medicine, 300 are in law. The force of these figures is felt only by comparison. Compare his progress with that of the mountain white since the war, and he does not suffer. Think of his 45 per cent of illiteracy, then note the illiteracy of Spain at 68 per cent, Italy at 38 per cent, the South American countries at 80 per cent; and better still, compare his progress with that of the serfs of Russia. Allow me to insert the following statement of Talcott Williams:

Our task is not alone. Lincoln was not the only emancipator. When, forty years ago, 4,000,000 negroes were freed in the United States, 44,500,000 serfs were freed in Russia. For two score years these two armies of bondmen have been traveling through the wilderness toward the promised land which freedom offered them. The ne-

gro had the immeasurable advantage of having his lot cast in a country whose institutions and whose education—though he was often debarred from both—stood in the world's forefront. But the serf had also his advantages. He was separated from his former masters by no difference of race or religion. He shared the same white Aryan blood. He had been trained by a thousand years of local self-government in the mir. Free, up to two centuries before, he had never been a chattel, and was at most a serf bound to the soil. The negro was an alien by color, by race and by land. He began his American career as a chattel; he had known no other life. A gulf of prejudice, of color; of different development, of altogether separate continental origin, divided him from the community in which he was free. For the Russian serf \$700,000,000 was expended by the state in providing him with land. For the American negro not one penny was provided from lands which his industry alone had made valuable. Both began in absolute illiteracy. The negro came of a race which had never known letters; the serf of a stock which had inherited the learning of the Byzantine empire. Forty years have passed. Among the serfs not one in ten can read and write; not one child in fourteen is attending school. Three per cent of the population—three out of every hundred—enter a schoolroom from year's end to year's end. The negro began environed with statutes which made his education a crime. After forty years 55 per cent of his adult population can read and write, where of the Russian serf 70 per cent are still illiterate. Thirty-five per cent of his population against three per cent of the Russian are at school; and

of his children, not one in fourteen, but one in two, are regularly attending their classes. The gate of all higher education is closed to the serf by administrative order. Two thousand negroes, many of them owing their education to this Association, have taken their college degrees; and while no man can name a serf who stands in the forefront of Russian life, the negro race has produced in Booker Washington the man who must make every American proud that his African fellow-citizens are also Americans. There is much to discourage, doubtless, in the condition of the American negro; but when I remember the progress made by 44,000,000 of whites in Russia and of 4,000,000 negroes in the United States, I feel once more that freedom is justified of her children, whatever their color, and that the experience of the past is the just enlarging hope of the future.

In noting this response in things actually accomplished to the challenge of the Emancipation Proclamation, it is well to remember that the negro has contradicted all adverse theories regarding him. Read the literature for the period preceding the civil war, and you find the assertion repeatedly made that the negro would not work apart from slavery, and so slavery was an economic necessity.

The facts disprove the assertion. In the cotton crop, the banner year under slavery produced 4,861,000 bales, but under free labor in the South, this has increased until the banner year was reached which produced 11,256,000 bales.

Another assertion confidently made in slavery days was, that the negro could not be educated. John C. Calhoun went so far as to say that when a negro could be found educated to the point in which he could conjugate a Greek verb, he would admit him to the brotherhood, and that assertion has been disproved. There are negro scholars living in Calhoun's own state who could teach the famous statesman, were he living, much that he never knew about the Greek language.

But since the war, and especially in recent years, the assertion is changed, and now, we are told, that the negro can be educated, but to educate him means to make a criminal of him.

This suggests the oftold story of the backwoodsman, who had never seen a railway train. He refused to believe in the possibility of such a thing. His first objection was that the train could not be started. His friends finally prevailed upon him to make the journey to the railway tracks. When the train went thundering by and he realized that his first objection was removed, he at once found a second to the effect that they could never stop the train.

And this is true of some men and their assertions regarding the negro. But be it said to his honor, the negro is disproving the second as he did the first. Just because the negro is a man, education is doing for him what it does for other men.

As President Cravath used to say, at Fisk University, to the students, the only objection he had to find with the students in their class room work was that they were so much like white students. The fact is, that the educated negro is making a finer record for himself today than the educated white man. Trace a graduating class from Harvard, then trace a graduating class in the same year from Fisk or Atlanta, and compare the successes and failures in both, and the comparison will be decidedly to the advantage of the Southern institutions.

The reason is that the difficulties under which the negro acquires his education are so much greater that only the strongest succeed.

Booker T. Washington, at a recent meeting in Carnegie Hall, New York, said that not a single graduate of Hampton or Tuskegee was in prison, and in all, not half a dozen men who had finished a course of training in any reputable institution in the South were in prison.

The negro having answered in the affirmative this all important question of his possibilities as a normal human being, then two facts follow:

1. He has a place in our democracy, and should be recognized on the basis of his manhood as other men are recognized. But this is denied him by many. A senator from Mississippi said last winter in the United States Senate:

"If every colored man in the South twenty-one years of age had been graduated from the finest University in Europe or America, he would not be fit for the obligations and duties of citizenship."

In answer to this the senior senator from Massachusetts calls upon the negro to resist this agitation to deprive him of his citizenship, for, according to Senator Hoar, should this agitation be successful, the foundations of our democracy would be destroyed. But I am prepared to go further, and call upon every citizen, black and white alike, to resist this agitation, for, as another has well said, if the Republic is at length to fuse and assimilate all within its sovereignty, it can only be as all enjoy the possibility of every advantage open to any

2. Having the possibilities of normal manhood, it becomes the duty of the church to assist the state in developing the same. And this the Christian church has striven, in a measure, to do. There is no fairer page in American history than that regarding the devotion and sacrifice of noble men and women from the North who have given of time and substance to lead these backward people on. And the work must continue. For the sake of this race, for the sake of our common country, for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, and for the sake of the Master himself. It is the thought of the Master's sympathy in this work that has

cheered his followers in the past, and must cheer them in the future. As the heart of Bruce, worn by his successor in battle, was thrown into the advancing ranks of the enemy, changing defeat into victory, so the Master's heart of infinite love has been thrown into this black race and his disciples must follow. The struggle will be long and weary, the first flush of success has passed and henceforth the work will proceed more slowly. But let us not forget the history of the progress of the Anglo-Saxon.

As President Elliott, of Harvard, says:

"How many Anglo-Saxon generations have gone to dust on the long road from serfdom to freedom? It is a task to be worked out by each successive generation with the eager energy of men who know that for them the night cometh in which no man can work, but with a patience like that of God, who lives and rules forever."

