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ARTICLE VII.

THE CRUX OF THE NEGRO QUESTION.

BY THE REVEREND HENRY A. STIMSON, D.D.

THE ultimate solution of the negro question unquestionably lies in the movement for general education which appears now to be so widely felt in the South. A larger intelligence will help to a better understanding, as well as furnish the means by which the race level will be raised. It was in this conviction that Northern philanthropists, more than half a century ago, began to give money liberally to plant educational institutions for the colored people in the South, and in the same conviction others founded and endowed similar institutions for the whites. The enterprise undertaken by Mr. Robert C. Ogden, which has drawn forth the splendid gift of Mr. Rockefeller, has already given an impulse to the movement which gives promise of greatly quickening its development and of securing for it much-needed recognition both at the South and the North. The foundations may now be regarded as thoroughly laid, and steady progress may be anticipated. Every dollar expended for the higher education of the negro has justified itself in proving the possibilities of the race and supplying both the inspiration and the teachers for the mass.

Meanwhile a *modus vivendi* between the races that shall remove unnecessary obstacles and conserve all progress is greatly required. Inasmuch as economic conditions are primary in all human society, the crux of the negro question, for the time being, lies in them. As there are conditions in which the sound body is essential to the sound

mind; so it is true, that while, in their last analysis, social questions must be carried back to their ethical and religious relations, and these may be held as ultimate, nevertheless, for the time being, the economic question may be all-important, and alone furnish the conditions under which the others can be reached and accorded their free action.

Unique as is the situation in the United States, it is not so exceptional as to close the door to lessons which are to be learned from the experience of other lands. The social question, regardless of questions of color, has always been a bar to the adjustment of difficulties between labor and capital. In England, a half-century ago, when Mr. J. P. Mundella, the well-known member of Parliament, was seeking to establish Boards of Conciliation between employers and laborers, he encountered the same difficulty which is occasioning us so much trouble in America. Employers refused to meet delegates from their workmen and to sit in council with them, lest it would lead to the demand for a social intercourse which they were not willing to yield. If they were to sit at a council-table with their men, they thought they would be expected eventually to sit with them at the dinner-table. After a prolonged and destructive struggle, at last the principle flashed out in one of the arguments: "We consider that in buying labor we should treat the seller of labor just as courteously as we would the seller of coal or cotton." That phrase quickly cast steady and permanent light upon the situation. It was accepted as self-evident and conclusive. The question was not, whether the workman had a right to sell his labor to whom he would, but whether, in selling it, he should be treated simply as a person having an article to sell. Opposition faded away. Common sense began to reign. And the relations of capital and labor in England, as a consequence, quickly passed into that stage in which

government interference is no longer sought, and mutual Boards of Conciliation are accepted as competent to deal with all problems that arise. The questions of the education of the masses, of their social status and progress, of their taxation, and of their relation to the state, are left to settle themselves without prejudice, and as experience may instruct.

It is not to be supposed that relations so strained as those involved in the labor question as it appears in England, were solved by a phrase, however suggestive and pertinent; but, coming at the right time, the phrase called attention to conditions which had been ignored or unseen, and furnished that illuminating of the situation which led the matter out of a state of opposition into one of acquiescence, and so made permanent the various advantages that from time to time were won.

The way for this final statement was prepared by the struggle that had been going on in England for more than half a century, and had won for workingmen recognition in legislation and improved industrial and social conditions. The happy phrase served to crystallize the new and necessary truth, and to fix men's minds upon a principle which was as vital as it is just. Unequal social conditions are the chief cause of injustice and oppression, as they are of class inferiority. Men who are without rights under the law or without power in the community, are inevitably without respect from their neighbors. Thucydides observed, that, in Greece, at the time of the Peloponnesian war, if one state among the petty Grecian states was more powerful than another, the most frivolous accusations were sufficient ground for apprehension, and appeal to the arbitrament of the sword; whereas, if the states were nearly equal in power, the differences that arose between them were compromised or referred to reason, justice, or arbitration. It would have taken much more than

the murder of a couple of missionaries to have furnished the occasion for Germany's seizing a Chinese province, had China's military position commanded more respect. The successive risings of the serfs in the different countries of Europe in past ages are regarded by some historians at least as having done more to abolish serfdom, and mitigate its hardships, than all the centuries of exhortation by the church. The prolonged agitation in England over the rights of workingmen, and the steady development of power in its trades-unions, have not only increased the wages of its workingmen, they have also greatly increased their political importance. The mere possession of material power to enforce demands, in the relation of masses of men to one another, is almost, if not quite, an essential condition to securing recognition of the justice of such demands as are made. This change of condition, economic and political, is without doubt the chief influence in securing the better condition of the workingman that to-day exists in England. But the adoption of the principle announced by Mr. Mundella has done much to develop the improvement which was thus begun, and to insure progress along the lines which had been opened as the result of controversy and of struggle. That principle, therefore, becomes luminous for the situation as it exists with us.

We have had a long struggle over the negro question in the United States. It has been costly and in many ways unprofitable; so that to-day we are still in deep bewilderment. There is no clear principle accepted for general guidance. The condition of the negro is melancholy to a degree, and the strain upon society and the danger to the state are as serious as they have ever been, notwithstanding the good hope that is cherished by many that widespread education will eventually bring peace, and purer religious conceptions eventually secure justice. No better form of immediate relief has been discovered than that of

legislation along lines which are manifestly unjust, and are defensible, if at all, only on the ground of dire necessity. Meanwhile, individual negroes in numbers not a few have made progress in education, and many more in establishing habits of self-sustaining industry and in the possession of property to no inconsiderable amount.

The organization of negroes in societies for mutual protection, or in labor-unions, has not yet occurred; but it must be recognized that progress has been made toward securing those conditions of respect which are the foundation of just treatment and of permanent social development. It would seem that now the announcement and acceptance of the principle which did so much for the peace of England would clarify the atmosphere with us, and help in some degree at least the much-to-be-desired movement.

It is not too much to expect that that principle will be found to be as applicable to the laboring man in America, whether he be white or black, as it has proved to the laboring man in England. The negro is preëminently a seller of labor. The question is not simply, whether he shall have a right to sell his labor, but whether, when he offers it for sale, he shall be treated just as cordially and under exactly the same conditions as the seller of coal or of cotton. He needs, he really asks, only this. He should be free to offer his wares in the market exactly as every other man does, be those wares what they may, and be the man rich or poor, educated or ignorant. If it be the labor of his hands, well and good. Buy his labor as you would groceries or a coat, and treat the seller exactly as you would every other. If he has anything else to offer, brain product for example, instead of hand product, let the man who wants it buy it, or leave the seller as free to offer it for sale to any one else who may want it, as any other man is to offer his own brain product, if he is a lawyer or

doctor or teacher. The negro's "own place" is just this in the community. And it can never be any other in a community which is civilized and at peace. It is simply the place of any man and of every man as a man among men. To-day we allow a negro with reasonable freedom to offer for sale, for example, his labor as a porter in a sleeping-car. We do not allow him, however fitted he may be, to offer for sale his labor as conductor of the car. We allow him to freely offer for sale his labor as a white-washer or a barber. We refuse him the opportunity, except in very limited conditions, of offering it for sale as a teacher or as a lawyer.

Since Carlyle's day and Mundella's day we are making progress in learning that workingmen, the world over, do not want protection or care, but do want to be treated as men. They offer for sale their work, and not themselves; and, when an employer has purchased and received their labor, and paid for it on the terms agreed, the men are free from other obligation. They stand as men before men. Only in the recognition of this fact has progress come in the recognition of labor in any land. Only so can it come in dealing with the negro at the South. It is perhaps not strange that a community that but yesterday owned the negro, cannot bring itself to this point of view. But it should be taken. It is simple and obvious, and completely solves the social question.

Sentimentalists mourn here at the North because the employer of labor no longer knows his men personally, and, in the advance of system and the development of social and industrial organization, the old personal relationship between master and man has gone. They do not see that it must be so, and that it is well that it is so; for it is the proof of the workingman's emancipation. It marks the completeness of our escape from feudalism. It is an effect of the great contribution of the nineteenth century to hu-

man progress. To-day the employer buys of the workman his labor, not his life or his person. His life is now his own. He has won independence as a man, and as a citizen he is free to be and to become what he may before God and his fellows, to whom alone in the last relation he is responsible. He asks no favor. You need his work, and he sells it to you. He cares for no other recognition than that which he himself is free to give and to receive. He is on a par with men who have a mutual interest in the life of the community. He chooses his own wife, fits up his own home, eats his own food, drinks his own beer, selects his own friends, and pays his own money,—in short, lives his own life, with the same sense of independence that characterizes any and every man in a well-governed country. All that he asks, and all that he needs, is an open market for what he has to offer for sale,—that is, his labor,—and freedom from all question as to his color or his aims, so long as he obeys the law, and lives a decent life. Given that one condition, and all the rest follows as the proof of his independence and the witness of his manhood.

Why should not the negro have the same privilege? He asks no other. He needs no other. It at once establishes conditions under which the end of injustice, of fear and of strife, is inevitable. I am aware that no amount of exhortation, whether political or religious, will suffice to bring about the acceptance of this principle. Improved material conditions are, for the time being, the most effective argument. The approximation of one class to another in the possession of the fruits of life, and the power of self-defense and self-assertion, are the surest ground of a hearing before the bar of public opinion. That approximation of the negro to the economic conditions of his neighbors is slowly but surely coming on with the general prosperity of the country. Its practical result in securing

for him justice and a free life, both before the law and in the opinion of his fellow-men, may be hastened, however, if the community can be led to see what is at stake, and what is the line along which a safe and sure development may proceed. A view of the industrial situation that has behind it the teaching of history cannot be without its immediate and permanent value.

The alternative is a resort to the method now unfortunately gaining acceptance throughout the South, which is as destructive of all that is best among the whites as it is oppressive to the negro. Ingenious legislative devices can undoubtedly be everywhere introduced which will deprive the negro of his political rights, and relegate him to a condition in which he is, if not oppressed, at least permanently repressed. The course is full of peril. It arrests the progress of society; for that stands on the recognition of the oneness of the great essential features in human nature, regardless of color, race, or condition, and upon the growth and development of the individual as the supreme purpose for which all society exists. Exalting superficial differences, whether of intellect or occupation or distinctive ancestry, at the expense of the fundamental features of the oneness of man in all conditions and in all ages, and refusing to allow every man to be free to move in the line in which his gifts and character may best find their opportunity, is to deliver a whole people over to a few rulers, and by some cheap token, as the color of their skin, the character of their hair, the shape of their head or heel, to determine their fortunes. This attempt to split men up into castes, whether few or many, is to revert to Hinduism, for its inevitable result is seen in the stagnation of India. Where caste exists, there can be no equality of rights or duties. Nothing but moral confusion can result, for what is virtue in one class is not virtue in another. There is no common standard; only warfare and confusion

are possible. Any society that presses a man into an occupation or condition of life by the will of another, without regard to the thoughts or desires or ambitions that pertain to his own mind, making him a mere cog or wheel in the vast machine of society, to be compelled eternally to grind out his own particular product without right of entry into the open field of the world, makes him less than a man. Life to him becomes a stagnant marsh, a dreary, mechanical routine, without excitement, without ambition, and without hope. It sinks at last into the torpor of despair, relieved only by intrigue, insurrection, or crime. Any scheme of governmental administration or social order that would condemn a whole class to this bondage, would produce not only social degeneracy for all within the area, but eventually rottenness and destruction. No plea of social necessity or of political purification will justify it.

We can well appreciate the difficulty in which Southern society finds itself, loaded down as it is with a mass of illiteracy and political and social incompetence which the children of those who but yesterday were slaves represent. The experiments of the reconstruction period have certainly been disheartening to all concerned. We need not have them exaggerated, or perpetuated in the modern novel, or recounted on the political platform. The effect of so doing is to divert attention from the gravity of the real situation, and to perpetuate passions which make it difficult for even men of kindly impulses to see things as they are, and to recognize the promptings of their own better nature. The anxiety we feel is lest those who are chiefly responsible for the welfare of the community in which they live be tempted, in their perplexity, to resort to measures which, while promising immediate relief, are, from every standpoint,—moral, political, social,—unsound and unsafe.

We would make an appeal from them all to the simpler and surer method of recognizing the negro as a man who has labor to sell or any other service of which others may have need, securing to him in the community the same privilege of a free market for what he has to dispose of as is provided for other men, and enacting laws which bear equally upon all, which every man knows is the primary and indeed the sole condition of stability and of progress for the community, and then leaving him to work out his own career and to find his own place exactly as every one else does. This does not mean, as is now claimed, that the negro shall be free to sell certain kinds of labor, under certain fixed conditions, and to do nothing else; but that all markets shall be equally open to him, and that in them all he shall be free to offer his services, be they what they may, without more interrogation into his ancestry or his purposes than is applied to other men; in other words, that he shall be dealt with, for the time being, in this relationship alone.

If workmen in all lands are finding emancipation from conditions of serfdom and feudalism by this simple principle, and everywhere the community of which they are a part is attaining its freedom and its development by the recognition of this truth, is there any reason why the same should not be recognized, and honestly and hopefully applied, with the negro at the South? The white man who sells kindling-wood at my door, or supplies the labor which I need in cutting my lawn or in shoveling my snow in winter, asks no other social recognition than that I pay him a fair price for his service, pay it promptly when the work is performed and the product delivered, and then leave him free to go his own way and find such life as he chooses. The social question, however complex and difficult, settles itself at once when its relationship is understood and accepted. He does not expect to be invited to

my table, nor care to come if he were invited, and suffers no loss of respect because he is permitted to go away uninvited. He is under no obligation to enter into conversation with me about his private life, or his family, or the uses to which he intends to put the money that he may receive. In other words, so far as he as an individual is concerned, he has all the privileges which I demand for myself. In this sense at least he and I are both free and equal, whatever other differences may exist between us. On the recognition of this single fact, a free and growing and wholesome and peaceful society is secured. If, for any reason, I am moved to try also to be helpful to him or his household in matters of education or of religion or what you will, a plane is established upon which intercourse may continue that shall be satisfactory to us both, for it rests entirely upon the free will of each. The moment this relationship is departed from, and I begin to interrogate my neighbor and to patronize him, no less than when I venture to assert authority over him, the equilibrium is destroyed, and confusion and contention are introduced; the social question emerges, and both he and I are embarrassed. He becomes self-conscious and sensitive, and I become critical and suspicious. All the questions as to whom I want to sit by my side, or travel in the same car, or eat the same meat, or perhaps marry my daughter, force themselves upon me, when otherwise they are not even suggested.

If the market is absolutely open for every man to buy or to sell, and then to do what he will with his own, without patronage and without offensive interrogation, every man seeks freely and finds the level at which his means make him most comfortable or his tastes are most satisfactorily gratified. This, and this alone, constitutes an order of society in obedience to natural law. All attempts to order it differently are artificial and unnatural, and can produce nothing but instability and confusion. If in many

instances the negro, because of his ignorance and inherited degradation or his personal poverty, has little to sell, suffer him to sell that freely, and treat him as any other man is treated in the market of the world. The smaller his stock in trade, the scantier his ability of service, the greater his need of recognition, and the more positive the effect of the manly independence. He will quickly discover upon what his comfort and his self-respect depend, and may safely be left, as other men in a free country are left, to increase the stock of what he has to dispose of, or to suffer the consequences of his neglect. There is no surer way to induce him to become a better or more industrious workingman, or, if he is endowed with higher gifts, to cultivate them into marketable shape with the aid of schools and colleges, than to know that in the open market of the community in which he lives this course will bring him both recognition and reward. He then asks no favor and seeks no social privileges other than those he creates and chooses for himself. Anything more than that becomes a patronage which he at once recognizes as a reappearance of the artificial inequalities from which in slavery he has once for all escaped. Experience shows that where this principle is adopted, social questions settle themselves. And the social carries with it the political. There is nothing in the character or the condition or the history of the negro in the United States that excludes the application of the teachings of history to the problems that center in him. The largest wisdom will surely be found in acknowledging the universal application of the principles that underlie the free movement of all human society in the recognition of the fact that things are not settled until they are settled right. We have had the disturbance, the unrest. The country is making vast progress in bettering the material conditions of all classes. Philanthropy and education are united in a movement such as the world has

never seen, for the uplifting of the degraded and the helpless, which is full of blessed promise for the immediate future of our own country, if not of the world. We need only recognition of a just and fundamental principle to make these conditions permanent, and to secure justice for all, and general peace.