

# The Negro Problem eBook

## The Negro Problem

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## BY T. THOMAS FORTUNE

Considering the two hundred and forty-five years of his slavery and the comparatively short time he has enjoyed the opportunities of freedom, his place in American life at the present day is creditable to him and promising for the future.

[Illustration: T. THOMAS FORTUNE.]

There can be no healthy growth in the life of a race or a nation without a self-reliant spirit animating the whole body; if it amounts to optimism, devoid of egotism and vanity, so much the better. This spirit necessarily carries with it intense pride of race, or of nation, as the case may be, and ramifies the whole mass, inspiring and shaping its thought and effort, however humble or exalted these may be,—as it takes “all sorts and conditions of men” to make up a social order, instinct with the ambition and the activity which work for “high thinking and right living,” of which modern evolution in all directions is the most powerful illustration in history. If pride of ancestry can, happily, be added to pride of race and nation, and these are re-enforced by self-reliance, courage and correct moral living, the possible success of such people may be accepted, without equivocation, as a foregone conclusion. I have found all of these requirements so finely blended in the life and character of no people as that of the Japanese, who are just now emerging from “the double night of ages” into the vivifying sunlight of modern progress.

What is the Negro's place in American life at the present day?

The answer depends entirely upon the point of view. Unfortunately for the Afro-American people, they have no pride of ancestry; in the main, few of them can trace their parentage back four generations; and the “daughter of an hundred earls” of whom there are probably many, is unconscious of her descent, and would profit nothing by it if this were not true. The blood of all the ethnic types that go to make up American citizenship flows in the veins of the Afro-American people, so that of the ten million of them in this country, accounted for by the Federal census, not more than four million are of pure negroid descent, while some four million of them, not accounted for by the Federal census, have escaped into the ranks of the white race, and are re-enforced very largely by such escapements every year. The vitiation of blood has operated irresistibly to weaken that pride of ancestry, which is the foundation-stone of pride of race; so that the Afro-American people have been held together rather by the segregation decreed by law and public opinion than by ties of consanguinity since their manumission and enfranchisement. It is not because they are poor and ignorant and oppressed, as a mass, that there is no such sympathy of thought and unity of effort among them as among Irishmen and Jews the world over, but because the vitiation of blood, beyond the honorable restrictions of law, has

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destroyed, in large measure, that pride of ancestry upon which pride of race must be builded. In no other logical way can we account for the failure of the Afro-American people to stand together, as other oppressed races do, and have done, for the righting of wrongs against them authorized by the laws of the several states, if not by the Federal Constitution, and sanctioned or tolerated by public opinion. In nothing has this radical defect been more noticeable since the War of the Rebellion than in the uniform failure of the people to sustain such civic organizations as exist and have existed, to test in the courts of law and in the forum of public opinion the validity of organic laws of States intended to deprive them of the civil and political rights guaranteed to them by the Federal Constitution. The two such organizations of this character which have appealed to them are the National Afro-American League, organized in Chicago, in 1890, and the National Afro-American Council, organized in Rochester, New York, out of the League, in 1898. The latter organization still exists, the strongest of its kind, but it has never commanded the sympathy and support of the masses of the people, nor is there, or has there been, substantial agreement and concert of effort among the thoughtful men of the race along these lines. They have been restrained by selfish, personal and petty motives, while the constitutional rights which vitalize their citizenship have been "denied or abridged" by legislation of certain of the States and by public opinion, even as Nero fiddled while Rome burned. If they had been actuated by a strong pride of ancestry and of race, if they had felt that injury to one was injury to all, if they had hung together instead of hanging separately, their place in the civil and political life of the Republic to-day would not be that, largely, of pariahs, with none so poor as to do them honor, but that of equality of right under the law enjoyed by all other alien ethnic forces in our citizenship. They who will not help themselves are usually not helped by others. They who make a loud noise and courageously contend for what is theirs, usually enjoy the respect and confidence of their fellows and get, in the end, what belongs to them, or a reasonable modification of it.

As a consequence of inability to unite in thought and effort for the conservation of their civil and political rights, the Afro-American Negroes and colored people have lost, by fundamental enactments of the old slave-holding States, all of the civil and political rights guaranteed them by the Federal Constitution, in the full enjoyment of which they were from the adoption of the War Amendments up to 1876-7, when they were sacrificed by their Republican allies of the North and West, in the alienation of their State governments, in order to save the Presidency to Mr. Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio. Their reverses in this matter in the old slave-holding States, coupled with a vast

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mass of class legislation, modelled on the slave code, have affected the Afro-American people in their civil and political rights in all of the States of the Republic, especially as far as public opinion is concerned. This was inevitable, and follows in every instance in history where a race element of the citizenship is set aside by law or public opinion as separate and distinct from its fellows, with a fixed status or caste.

It will take the Afro-American people fully a century to recover what they lost of civil and political equality under the law in the Southern States, as a result of the re-actionary and bloody movement begun in the Reconstruction period by the Southern whites, and culminating in 1877,—the excesses of the Reconstruction governments, about which so much is said to the discredit of the Negro, being chargeable to the weakness and corruption of Northern carpet-baggers, who were the master and responsible spirits of the time and the situation, rather than to the weakness, the ignorance and venality of their Negro dupes, who, very naturally, followed where they led, as any other grateful people would have done. For, were not these same Northern carpet-baggers the direct representatives of the Government and the Army which crushed the slave power and broke the shackles of the slave? Even so. The Northern carpet-baggers planned and got the plunder, and have it; the Negro got the credit and the odium, and have them yet. It often happens that way in history, that the innocent dupes are made to suffer for the misdeeds and crimes of the guilty.

The recovery of civil and political rights under the Constitution, as “denied or abridged” by the constitutions of the States, more especially those of the old slave holding ones, will be a slow and tedious process, and will come to the individual rather than to the race, as the reward of character and thrift; because, for reasons already stated, it will hardly be possible in the future, as it has not been in the past, to unify the mass of the Afro-American people, in thought and conduct, for a proper contention in the courts and at the ballot-box and in the education of public opinion, to accomplish this purpose. Perhaps there is no other instance in history where everything depended so largely upon the individual, and so little upon the mass of his race, for that development in the religious and civic virtues which makes more surely for an honorable status in any citizenship than constitutions or legislative enactments built upon them.

But even from this point of view, I am disposed to believe that the Negro’s civil and political rights are more firmly fixed in law and public opinion than was true at the close of the Reconstruction period, when everything relating to him was unsettled and confused, based in legislative guarantees, subject to approval or disapproval of the dominant public opinion of the several States, and that he will gradually work out his own salvation under the Constitution,—such

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as Charles Sumner, Thaddeus Stevens, Benjamin F. Butler, Frederick Douglass, and their co-workers, hoped and labored that he might enjoy. He has lost nothing under the fundamental law; such of these restrictions, as apply to him by the law of certain of the States, necessarily apply to white men in like circumstances of ignorance and poverty, and can be overcome, in time, by assiduous courtship of the schoolmaster and the bank cashier. The extent to which the individual members of the race are overcoming the restrictions made a bar to their enjoyment of civil and political rights under the Constitution is gratifying to those who wish the race well and who look beyond the present into the future: while it is disturbing the dreams of those who spend most of their time and thought in abortive efforts to “keep the ‘nigger’ in his place”—as if any man or race could have a place in the world’s thought and effort which he did not make for himself! In our grand Republic, at least, it has been so often demonstrated as to become proverbial, that the door of opportunity shall be closed to no man, and that he shall be allowed to have that place in our national life which he makes for himself. So it is with the Negro now, as an individual. Will it be so with him in the future as a race? To answer that we shall first have to determine that he has a race.

However he may be lacking in pride of ancestry and race, no one can accuse the Negro of lack of pride of Nation and State, and even of county. Indeed, his pride in the Republic and his devotion to it are among the most pathetic phases of his pathetic history, from Jamestown, in 1620, to San Juan Hill, in 1898. He has given everything to the Republic,—his labor and blood and prayers. What has the Republic given him, but blows and rebuffs and criminal ingratitude! And he stands now, ready and eager, to give the Republic all that he has. What does the Republic stand ready and eager to give him? Let the answer come out of the mouth of the future.

It is a fair conclusion that the Negro has a firmer and more assured civil and political status in American life to-day than at the close of the Reconstruction period, paradoxical as this may appear to many, despite the adverse legislation of the old slave-holding States, and the tolerant favor shown such legislation by the Federal Supreme Court, in such opinions as it has delivered, from time to time, upon the subject, since the adoption of the War amendments to the Federal Constitution. Technically, the Negro stands upon equality with all other citizens under this large body of special and class legislation; but, as a matter of fact, it is so framed that the greatest inequality prevails, and was intended to prevail, in the administration of it by the several States chiefly concerned. As long as such legislation by the States specifies, on the face of it, that it shall operate upon all citizens equally, however unequally and unjustly the legislation may be interpreted and administered by the local courts, the Federal Supreme Court has held, time and again, that no hardship was worked, and, if so, that the aggrieved had his recourse in appeal to the higher courts of the State of which he is a citizen,—a recourse at this time precisely like that of carrying coal to New Castle.

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Under the circumstances, there is no alternative for the Negro citizen but to work out his salvation under the Constitution, as other citizens have done and are doing. It will be a long and tedious process before the equitable adjustment has been attained, but that does not much matter, as full and fair enjoyment of civil and political rights requires much time and patience and hard labor in any given situation, where two races come together in the same governmental environment; such as is the case of the Negro in America, the Irishman in Ireland, and the Jew everywhere in Europe. It is just as well, perhaps, that the Negro will have to work out his salvation under the Constitution as an individual rather than as a race, as the Jew has done it in Great Britain and as the Irishman will have to do it under the same Empire, as it is and has been the tendency of our law and precedent to subordinate race elements and to exalt the individual citizens as indivisible "parts of one stupendous whole." When this has been accomplished by the law in the case of the Negro, as in the case of other alien ethnic elements of the citizenship, it will be more gradually, but assuredly, accomplished by society at large, the indestructible foundation of which was laid by the reckless and brutal prostitution of black women by white men in the days of slavery, from which a vast army of mulattoes were produced, who have been and are, gradually, by honorable marriage among themselves, changing the alleged "race characteristics and tendencies" of the Negro people. A race element, it is safe and fair to conclude, incapable, like that of the North American Indian, of such a process of elimination and assimilation, will always be a thorn in the flesh of the Republic, in which there is, admittedly, no place for the integrality and growth of a distinct race type. The Afro-American people, for reasons that I have stated, are even now very far from being such a distinct race type, and without further admixture of white and black blood, will continue to be less so to the end of the chapter. It seems to me that this view of the matter has not received the consideration that it deserves at the hands of those who set themselves up as past grand masters in the business of "solving the race problem," and in accurately defining "The Negro's Place in American Life at the Present Day." The negroid type and the Afro-American type are two very distinct types, and the sociologist who confounds them, as is very generally done, is bound to confuse his subject and his audience.

It is a debatable question as to whether the Negro's present industrial position is better or worse than it was, say, at the close of the Reconstruction period. As a mass, I am inclined to the opinion that it is worse, as the laws of the States where he is congregated most numerous are so framed as to favor the employer in every instance, and he does not scruple to get all out of the industrial slave that he can; which

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is, in the main, vastly more than the slave master got, as the latter was at the expense of housing, feeding, clothing and providing medical service for his chattel, while the former is relieved of this expense and trouble. Prof. W.E.B. DuBois, of Atlanta University, who has made a critical study of the rural Negro of the Southern States, sums up the industrial phase of the matter in the following ("The Souls of Black Folk," pp. 39-40):

"For this much all men know: Despite compromise, war and struggle, the Negro is not free. In the backwoods of the Gulf States, for miles and miles, he may not leave the plantation of his birth; in well-nigh the whole rural South the black farmers are peons, bound by law and custom to an economic slavery, from which the only escape is death or the penitentiary. In the most cultured sections and cities of the South the Negroes are a segregated servile caste, with restricted rights and privileges. Before the courts, both in law and custom, they stand on a different and peculiar basis. Taxation without representation is the rule of their political life. And the result of all this is, and in nature must have been, lawlessness and crime."

It is a dark and gloomy picture, the substitution of industrial for chattel slavery, with none of the legal and selfish restraints upon the employer which surrounded and actuated the master. And this is true of the entire mass of the Afro-American laborers of the Southern States. Out of the mass have arisen a large number of individuals who own and till their own lands. This element is very largely recruited every year, and to this source must we look for the gradual undermining of the industrial slavery of the mass of the people. Here, too, we have a long and tedious process of evolution, but it is nothing new in the history of races circumstanced as the Afro-American people are. That the Negro is destined, however, to be the landlord and master agriculturist of the Southern States is a probability sustained by all the facts in the situation; not the least of which being the tendency of the poor white class and small farmers to abandon agricultural pursuits for those of the factory and the mine, from which the Negro laborer is excluded, partially in the mine and wholly in the factory. The development of mine and factory industries in the Southern States in the past two decades has been one of the most remarkable in industrial history.

In the skilled trades, at the close of the War of the Rebellion, most of the work was done by Negroes educated as artisans in the hard school of slavery, but there has been a steady decline in the number of such laborers, not because of lack of skill, but because trade unionism has gradually taken possession of such employments in the South, and will not allow the Negro to work alongside of the white man. And this is the rule of the trade unions in all parts of the country. It is to be hoped that there may be a gradual broadening



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of the views of white laborers in this vital matter and a change of attitude by the trade unions that they dominate. Can we reasonably expect this? As matters now stand, it is the individual Negro artisan, often a master contractor, who can work at his trade and give employment to his fellows. Fortunately, there are a great many of these in all parts of the Southern States, and their number is increasing every year, as the result of the rapid growth and high favor of industrial schools, where the trades are taught. A very great deal should be expected from this source, as a Negro contractor stands very nearly on as good footing as a white one in the bidding, when he has established a reputation for reliability. The facts obtained in every Southern city bear out this view of the matter. The individual black man has a fighting chance for success in the skilled trades; and, as he succeeds, will draw the skilled mass after him. The proper solution of the skilled labor problem is strictly within the power of the individual Negro. I believe that he is solving it, and that he will ultimately solve it.

It is, however, in the marvellous building up of a legal, comfortable and happy home life, where none whatever existed at the close of the War of the Rebellion; in the no less stupendous development of the church life, with large and puissant organizations that command the respect and admiration of mankind, and owning splendid church property valued at millions of dollars; in the quenchless thirst of the mass of the people for useful knowledge, displayed at the close of the War of the Rebellion, and abating nothing of its intense keenness since, with the remarkable reduction in the illiteracy of the mass of the people, as is eloquently disclosed by the census reports—it is in these results that no cause for complaint or discouragement can be found. The whole race here stands on improved ground over that it occupied at the close of the War of the Rebellion; albeit, even here, the individual has outstripped the mass of the race, as it was but natural that he should and always will. But, while this is true and gratifying to all those that hope the Afro-American people well, it is also true, and equally gratifying that, as far as the mass is concerned, the home life, the church and the school house have come into the life of the people, in some sort, everywhere, giving the whole race a character and a standing in the estimation of mankind which it did not have at the close of the war, and presaging, logically, unless all signs fail, a development along high and honorable lines in the future; the results from which, I predict, at the end of the ensuing half century, builded upon the foundation already laid, being such as to confound the prophets of evil, who never cease to doubt and shake their heads, asking: “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” We have the answer already in the social and home life of the people, which is so vast an improvement over the conditions and the heritage of slavery as to stagger the understanding of those who are informed on the subject, or will take the trouble to inform themselves.

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If we have much loose moral living, it is not sanctioned by the mass, wedlock being the rule, and not the exception; if we have a vast volume of illiteracy, we have reduced it by forty per cent. since the war, and the school houses are all full of children eager to learn, and the schools of higher and industrial training cannot accommodate all those who knock at their doors for admission; if we have more than our share of criminality, we have also churches in every hamlet and city, to which a vast majority of the people belong, and which are insistently pointing "the way, the light and the truth" to higher and nobler living.

Mindful, therefore, of the Negro's two hundred and forty-five years of slave education and unrequited toil, and of his thirty years of partial freedom and less than partial opportunity, who shall say that his place in American life at the present day is not all that should be reasonably expected of him, that it is not creditable to him, and that it is not a sufficient augury for better and nobler and higher thinking, striving and building in the future? Social growth is the slowest of all growth. If there be signs of growth, then, there is reasonable hope for a healthy maturity. There are plenty of such signs, and he who runs may read them, if he will.