

Signs of Progress among the Negroes

Booker T. Washington

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IN addition to the problem of educating eight million negroes in our Southern States and ingrafting them into American citizenship, we now have the additional responsibility, either directly or indirectly, of educating and elevating about eight hundred thousand others of African descent in Cuba and Porto Rico, to say nothing of the white people of these islands, many of whom are in a condition about as deplorable as that of the negroes. We have, however, one advantage in approaching the question of the education of our new neighbors.

The experience that we have passed through in the Southern States during the last thirty years in the education of my race, whose history and needs are not very different from the history and needs of the Cubans and Porto Ricans, will prove most valuable in elevating the blacks of the West Indian Islands. To tell what has already been accomplished in the South under most difficult circumstances is to tell what may be done in Cuba and Porto Rico.

To this end let me tell a story.

In what is known as the black belt of the South — that is, where the negroes outnumber the whites — there lived before the Civil War a white man who owned some two hundred slaves, and was prosperous. At the close of the war he found his fortune gone, except that which was represented in land, of which he owned several thousand acres. Of the two hundred slaves a large proportion decided, after their freedom, to continue on the plantation of their former owner.

Some years after the war a young black boy, who seemed to have "rained down," was discovered on the plantation by Mr. S — — —, the owner. In daily rides through the plantation Mr. S — — — saw this boy sitting by the roadside, and his condition awakened his pity, for, from want of care, he was covered from head to foot with sores, and Mr. S — — — soon grew into the habit of tossing him a nickel or a dime as he rode by. In some way this boy heard of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama, and of the advantages which it offered poor but deserving colored men and women to secure an education through their own labor while taking the course of study. This boy, whose name was William, made known to the plantation hands his wish to go to the Tuskegee school. By each one "chipping in," and through the efforts of the boy himself, a few decent pieces of clothing were secured, and a little money, but not enough to pay his railroad fare, so the boy resolved to walk to Tuskegee, a distance of about one hundred and fifty miles. Strange to say, he made the long distance with an expenditure of only twenty cents in cash. He frankly told every one with whom he came in contact where he was going and what he was seeking. Both white and colored people along the route gave him food and a place to sleep free of cost, and even the usually exacting ferrymen were so impressed with the young negro's desire for an education that, except in one case, he was given free ferriage across the creeks and rivers.

One can easily imagine his appearance when he first arrived at Tuskegee, with his blistered feet and small white bundle, which contained all the clothing he possessed.

On being shown into my office his first words were: "I's come. S'pose you been lookin' for me, but I didn't come on de railroad." Looking up the records, it was found that this young man had been given permission to come several months ago, but the correspondence had long since been forgotten.

After being sent to the bath-room and provided with a tooth-brush, — for the tooth-brush at Tuskegee is the emblem of civilization, — William was assigned to a room, and was given work on the school farm of fourteen hundred acres, seven hundred of which are cultivated by student labor. During his first year at Tuskegee William worked on the farm during the day, where he soon learned to take a deep interest in all that the school was doing to teach the students the best and most improved methods of farming, and studied for two hours at night in the class-room after his hard day's work was over. At first he seemed drowsy and dull in the night-school, and would now and then fall asleep while trying to study; but he did not grow discouraged. The new machinery that he was compelled to use on the farm interested him because it taught him that the farm work could be stripped of much of the old-time drudgery and toil, and seemed to awaken his sleeping intellect. Soon he began asking the

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farm—instructors such questions as where the Jersey and Holstein cattle came from, and why they produced more milk and butter than the common long-tailed and long-horned cows that he had seen at home.

His night-school teachers found that he ceased to sleep in school, and began asking questions about his lessons, and was soon able to calculate the number of square yards in an acre and to tell the number of peach-trees required to plant an acre of land. After he had been at Tuskegee two or three months the farm-manager came into my office on a cold, rainy day, and said that William was virtually barefooted, the soles of his shoes having separated from the uppers, though William had fastened them together as best he could with bits of wire. In this condition the farm-instructor found him plowing without a word of complaint. A pair of second-hand shoes was secured for him, and he was soon very happy.

I will not take this part of the story further except to say that at the end of his first year at Tuskegee this young man, having made a start in his books, and having saved a small sum of money above the cost of his board, which was credited to his account, entered the next year our regular day-classes, though still dividing his time between the class-room and work on the farm.

Toward the end of the year he found himself in need of money with which to buy books, clothing, etc., and so wrote a carefully worded letter to Mr. S — —, the white man on whose plantation he had lived, and who had been, in slavery, the owner of his mother.

In the letter he told Mr. S — — how he got to Tuskegee, what he was doing, and what his needs were, and asked Mr. S — — to lend him fifteen dollars. Before receiving this letter Mr. S — — had not thought once about the boy during his two years' absence; in fact, did not know that he had left the plantation.

Mr. S — — was a good deal shocked, as well as amused, over such a request from such a source. The letter went to the wastebasket without being answered. A few weeks later William sent a second letter, in which he took it for granted that the first letter had not been received. The second letter shared the same fate as the first. A third letter reached Mr. S — — in a few weeks, making the same request. In answer to the third letter Mr. S — — told me that, moved by some impulse which he himself never understood, he sent William the fifteen dollars.

Two or three years passed, and Mr. S — — had about forgotten William and the fifteen dollars; but one morning while sitting upon his porch a bright young colored man walked up and introduced himself as William, the boy to whom he used to toss small pieces of money, and the one to whom he had sent fifteen dollars.

William paid Mr. S — — the fifteen dollars with interest, which he had earned while teaching school after leaving Tuskegee.

This simple experience with this young colored man made a new and different person of Mr. S — —, so far as the negro was concerned.

He began to think. He thought of the long past, but he thought most of the future, and of his duty toward the hundreds of colored people on his plantation and in his community. After careful thought he asked William Edwards to open a school on his plantation in a vacant log cabin. That was seven years ago. On this same plantation at Snow Hill, Wilcox county, Alabama, a county where, according to the last census, there are twenty-four thousand colored people and about six thousand whites, there is now a school with two hundred pupils, five teachers from Tuskegee, and three school buildings. The school has forty acres of land. In addition to the text-book lessons, the boys are taught farming and carpentry, and the girls sewing and general house-keeping, and the school is now in the act of starting a blacksmith and wheelwright department. This school owes its existence almost wholly to Mr. S — —, who gave to the trustees the forty acres of land, and has contributed liberally to the building fund, as well as to the pay of the teachers. Gifts from a few friends in the North have been received, and the colored people have given their labor and small sums in cash. When the people cannot find money to give, they have often given corn, chickens, and eggs. The school has grown so popular that almost every leading white man in the community is willing to make a small gift toward its maintenance.

In addition to the work done directly in the school for the children, the teachers in the Snow Hill school have organized a kind of university extension movement. The farmers are organized into conferences, which hold meetings each month. In these meetings they are taught better methods of agriculture, how to buy land, how to economize and keep out of debt, how to stop mortgaging, how to build school-houses and dwelling-houses with more than one room, how to bring about a higher moral and religious standing, and are warned against buying cheap jewelry, snuff, and whisky.

No one is a more interested visitor at these meetings than Mr. S — — himself. The matter does not end in

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mere talk and advice. The women teachers go right into the cabins of the people and show them how to keep them clean, how to dust, sweep, and cook.

When William Edwards left this community a few years ago for the Tuskegee school, he left the larger proportion in debt, mortgaging their crops every year for the food on which to live. Most of them were living on rented land in small one-room log cabins, and attempting to pay an enormous rate of interest on the value of their food advances. As one old colored man expressed it, "I ain't got but six feet of land, and I is got to die to git dat." The little school taught in a cabin lasted only three or four months in the year. The religion was largely a matter of the emotions, with almost no practical ideas of morality. It was the white man for himself and the negro for himself, each in too many cases trying to take advantage of the other. The situation was pretty well described by a black man who said to me: "I tells you how we votes. We always watches de white man, and we keeps watchin' de white man. De nearer it gits to 'lection-time de more we watches de white man. We keeps watchin' de white man till we find out which way he gwine to vote; den we votes 'zactly de odder way. Den we knows we is right."

Now how changed is all at Snow Hill, and how it is gradually changing each year! Instead of the hopelessness and dejection that were there a few years ago, there are now light and buoyancy in the countenances and movements of the people. The negroes are getting out of debt and buying land, ceasing to mortgage their crops, building houses with two or three rooms, and a higher moral and religious standard has been established.

Last May, on the day that the school had its closing exercises, there were present, besides the hundreds of colored-people, about fifty of the leading white men and women of the county, and these white people seemed as much interested in the work of the school as the people of my own race.

Only a few years ago in the State of Alabama the law in reference to the education of the negro read as follows: "Any person or persons who shall attempt to teach any free person of color or slave to spell, read, or write shall, upon conviction thereof by indictment, be fined in a sum not less than two hundred and fifty dollars nor more than five hundred dollars."

Within half a dozen years I have heard Dr. J. L. M. Curry, a brave, honest ex-Confederate officer, in addressing both the Alabama and Georgia State legislatures, say to those bodies in the most emphatic manner that it was as much the duty of the State to educate the negro children as the white children, and in each case Dr. Curry's words were cheered.

Here at Snow Hill is the foundation for the solution of the legal and political difficulties that exist in the South, and the improvement of the industrial condition of the negro in Cuba and Porto Rico. This solution will not come all at once, but gradually. The foundation must exist in the commercial and industrial development of the people of my race in the South and in the West Indian Islands.

The most intelligent whites are beginning to realize that they cannot go much higher than they lift the negro at the same time. When a black man owns and cultivates the best farm to be found in his county he will have the confidence and respect of most of the white people in that county. When a black man is the largest taxpayer in his community his white neighbor will not object very long to his voting, and having that vote honestly counted. Even now a black man who has five hundred dollars to lend has no trouble in finding a white man who is willing to borrow his money. The negro who is a large stockholder in a railroad company will always be treated with justice on that railroad.

Many of the most intelligent colored people are learning that while there are many bad white men in the South, there are Southern whites who have the highest interests of the negro just as closely at heart as have any other people in any part of the country. Many of the negroes are learning that it is folly not to cultivate in every honorable way the friendship of the white man who is their next-door neighbor.

To describe the work being done in connection with the public schools by graduates of Tuskegee and other institutions in the South, at such places as Mount Meigs, under Miss Cornelia Bowen; Denmark, South Carolina; Abbeville and Newville, Alabama; Christiansburg, Virginia, and numbers of other places in the Gulf States, would be only to repeat in a larger or smaller degree what I have said of Snow Hill.

Not very long after the last national election I visited a town in the South, to speak at a meeting which had for its object the raising of money to complete the school-house. The audience was about equally divided between white men and women and black men and women. When the time for the collection came it was intensely satisfactory to observe that the white side of the audience was just as eager to make its small contributions as were the members of my own race. But I was anxious to see how the late election had been conducted in that

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community. I soon found out that the Republican party, composed almost wholly of the black people, was represented by an election officer in the person of one of the best-educated colored men in the town, that both the Democratic and Populist parties were equally well represented, and that there was no suspicion of unfairness.

But I wished to go a little deeper, and I soon found that one of the leading stores in this community was owned by a colored man; that a cotton-gin was owned by a colored man; that the sawmill was owned by another colored man. Colored men had mortgages on white men's crops, and vice versa, and colored people not only owned land, but in several cases were renting land to white men. Black men were in debt to white men, and white men were in debt to black men. In a word, the industrial and commercial relations of the races were interwoven just as if all had been of one race.

An object-lesson in civilization is more potent in compelling people to act right than a law compelling them to do so. Some years ago a colored woman who had graduated at Tuskegee began her life-work in a Southern community where the force of white public sentiment was opposed to the starting of what was termed a "nigger school." At first this girl was tempted to abuse her white sister, but she remembered that perhaps the white woman had been taught from her earliest childhood, through reading and conversation, that education was not good for the negro, that it would result only in trouble to the community, and that no amount of abuse could change this prejudice.

After a while this colored teacher was married to an educated colored man, and they built a little cottage, which, in connection with her husband's farm, was a model. One morning one of the white women who had been most intense in her feelings was passing this cottage, and her attention was attracted to the colored woman who was at work in her beautiful flower-garden. A conversation took place concerning the flowers. At another time this same white woman was so attracted by this flower-garden that she came inside the yard, and from the yard she went into the sitting-room and examined the books and papers.

This acquaintance has now ripened and broadened, so that to-day there are few people in that community more highly respected than this colored family. What did it all? This object-lesson. No one could explain that away. One such object-lesson in every community in the South is more powerful than all the laws Congress can pass in the direction of bringing about right relations between blacks and whites.

A few months ago an agricultural county fair, the first ever held in that county, was organized and held at Calhoun, Alabama, by the teachers in the Calhoun School, which is an offshoot of the Hampton Institute. Both the colored people and numbers of white visitors were astonished at the creditable exhibits made by the colored people. Most of these white people saw the school work at Calhoun for the first time. Perhaps no amount of abstract talk or advice could have brought them to this school, but the best hog, the largest pumpkin, or the most valuable bale of cotton possessed a common interest, and it has been a comparatively easy thing to extend their interest from the best hog to the work being done in the school-room. Further, this fair convinced these white people, as almost nothing else could have done, that education was making the negroes better citizens rather than worse; that the people were not being educated away from themselves, but with their elevation the conditions about them were being lifted in a manner that possessed an interest and value for both races.

It was after speaking, not long ago, to the colored people at such a county fair in North Carolina that I was asked the next morning to speak to the white students at their college, who gave me as hearty a greeting as I have ever received at Northern colleges.

But such forces as I have described — forces that are gradually regenerating the entire South and will regenerate Cuba and Porto Rico — are not started and kept in motion without a central plant — a power-house, where the power is generated. I cannot describe all these places of power. Perhaps the whole South and the whole country are most indebted to the Hampton Institute in Virginia. Then there is Fisk University at Nashville, Tennessee; Talladega College at Talladega, Alabama; Spelman Seminary, Atlanta University, and Atlanta Baptist College at Atlanta; Biddle University in North Carolina; Claflin University at Orangeburg, South Carolina; and Knoxville College at Knoxville, Tennessee. Some of these do a different grade of work, but one much needed.

At Tuskegee, Alabama, starting fifteen years ago in a little shanty with one teacher and thirty students, with no property, there has grown up an industrial and educational village where the ideas that I have referred to are put into the heads, hearts, and hands of an army of colored men and women, with the purpose of having them become centers of light and civilization in every part of the South. One visiting the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute to-day will find eight hundred and fifty students gathered from twenty-four States, with eighty-eight

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teachers and officers training these students in literary, religious, and industrial work.

Counting the students and the families of the instructors, the visitor will find a black village of about twelve hundred people. Instead of the old, worn-out plantation that was there fifteen years ago, there is a modern farm of seven hundred acres cultivated by student labor. There are Jersey and Holstein cows and Berkshire pigs, and the butter used is made by the most modern process.

Aside from the dozens of neat, comfortable cottages owned by individual teachers and other persons, who have settled in this village for the purpose of educating their children, he will find thirty-six buildings of various kinds and sizes, owned and built by the school, property valued at three hundred thousand dollars. Perhaps the most interesting thing in connection with these buildings is that, with the exception of three, they have been built by student labor. The friends of the school have furnished money to pay the teachers and for material.

When a building is to be erected, the teacher in charge of the mechanical and architectural drawing department gives to the class in drawing a general description of the building desired, and then there is a competition to see whose plan will be accepted. These same students in most cases help do the practical work of putting up the building — some at the sawmill, the brick-yard, or in the carpentry, brickmaking, plastering, painting, and tinsmithing departments. At the same time care is taken to see not only that the building goes up properly, but that the students, who are under intelligent instructors in their special branch, are taught at the same time the principles as well as the practical part of the trade.

The school has the building in the end, and the students have the knowledge of the trade. This same principle applies, whether in the laundry, where the washing for seven or eight hundred people is done, or in the sewing-room, where a large part of the clothing for this colony is made and repaired, or in the wheelwright and blacksmith departments, where all the wagons and buggies used by the school, besides a large number for the outside public, are manufactured, or in the printing-office, where a large part of the printing for the white and colored people in this region is done. Twenty-six different industries are here in constant operation.

When the student is through with his course of training he goes out feeling that it is just as honorable to labor with the hand as with the head, and instead of his having to look for a place, the place usually seeks him, because he has to give that which the South wants. One other thing should not be overlooked in our efforts to develop the black man. As bad as slavery was, almost every large plantation in the South during that time was, in a measure, an industrial school. It had its farming department, its blacksmith, wheelwright, brickmaking, carpentry, and sewing departments. Thus at the close of the war our people were in possession of all the common and skilled labor in the South. For nearly twenty years after the war we overlooked the value of the ante-bellum training, and no one was trained to replace these skilled men and women who were soon to pass away; and now, as skilled laborers from foreign countries, with not only educated hands but trained brains, begin to come into the South and take these positions once held by us, we are gradually waking up to the fact that we must compete with the white man in the industrial world if we would hold our own. No one understands his value in the labor world better than the old colored man. Recently, when a convention was held in the South by the white people for the purpose of inducing white settlers from the North and West to settle in the South, one of these colored men said to the president of the convention: "Fore de Lord, boss, we's got as many white people down here now as we niggers can support."

The negro in the South has another advantage. While there is prejudice against him along certain lines, — in the matter of business in general, and the trades especially, — there is virtually no prejudice so far as the native Southern white man is concerned. White men and black men work at the same carpenter's bench and on the same brick wall. Sometimes the white man is the "boss," sometimes the black man is the boss.

Some one chaffed a colored man recently because, when he got through with a contract for building a house, he cleared just ten cents; but he said: "All right, boss; it was worth ten cents to be de boss of dem white men." If a Southern white man has a contract to let for the building of a house, he prefers the black contractor, because he has been used to doing business of this character with a negro rather than with a white man.

The negro will find his way up as a man just in proportion as he makes himself valuable, possesses something that a white man wants, can do something as well as, or better than, a white man.

I would not have my readers get the thought that the problem in the South is settled, that there is nothing else to be done; far from this. Long years of patient, hard work will be required for the betterment of the condition of the negro in the South, as well as for the betterment of the condition of the negro in the West Indies.

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There are bright spots here and there that point the way. Perhaps the most that we have accomplished in the last thirty years is to show the North and the South how the fourteen slaves landed a few hundred years ago at Jamestown, Virginia, — now nearly eight millions of freemen in the South alone, — are to be made a safe and useful part of our democratic and Christian institutions.

The main thing that is now needed to bring about a solution of the difficulties in the South is money in large sums, to be used largely for Christian, technical, and industrial education.

For more than thirty years we have been trying to solve one of the most serious problems in the history of the world largely by passing around a hat in the North. Out of their poverty the Southern States have done well in assisting; many more millions are needed, and these millions will have to come before the question as to the negro in the South is settled.

There never was a greater opportunity for men of wealth to place a few million dollars where they could be used in lifting up and regenerating a whole race; and let it always be borne in mind that every dollar given for the proper education of the negro in the South is almost as much help to the Southern white man as to the negro himself. So long as the whites in the South are surrounded by a race that is, in a large measure, in ignorance and poverty, so long will this ignorance and poverty of the negro in a score of ways prevent the highest development of the white man.

The problem of lifting up the negro in Cuba and Porto Rico is an easier one in one respect, even if it proves more difficult in others. It will be less difficult, because there is the absence of that higher degree of race feeling which exists in many parts of the United States. Both the white Cuban and the white Spaniard have treated the people of African descent, in civil, political, military, and business matters, very much as they have treated others of their own race. Oppression has not cowed and unmanned the Cuban negro in certain respects as it has the American negro.

In only a few instances is the color-line drawn. How Americans will treat the negro Cuban, and what will be the tendency of American influences in the matter of the relation of the races, remains an interesting and open question. Certainly it will place this country in an awkward position to have gone to war to free a people from Spanish cruelty, and then as soon as it gets them within its power to treat a large proportion of the population worse than did even Spain herself, simply on account of color.

While in the matter of the relation of the races the problem before us in the West Indies is easier, in respect to the industrial, moral, and religious sides it is more difficult. The negroes on these islands are largely an agricultural people, and for this reason, in addition to a higher degree of mental and religious training, they need the same agricultural, mechanical, and domestic training that is fast helping the negroes in our Southern States. Industrial training will not only help them to the ownership of property, habits of thrift and economy, but the acquiring of these elements of strength will go further than anything else in improving the moral and religious condition of the masses, just as has been and is true of my people in the Southern States.

With the idea of getting the methods of industrial education pursued at Hampton and Tuskegee permanently and rightly started in Cuba and Porto Rico, a few of the most promising men and women from these islands have been brought to the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, and educated with the view of having them return and take the lead in affording industrial training on these islands, where the training can best be given to the masses.

The emphasis that I have placed upon an industrial education does not mean that the negro is to be excluded from the higher interests of life, but it does mean that in proportion as the negro gets the foundation, — the useful before the ornamental, — in the same proportion will he accelerate his progress in acquiring those elements which do not pertain so directly to the utilitarian.

Phillips Brooks once said, "One generation gathers the material, and the next builds the palaces." Very largely this must be the material-gathering generation of black people, but in due time the palaces will come if we are patient.