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Topeka Daily Capital, December 11th, 1868.

Frederick Douglass.

The Condition of the Freedmen, by Frederick Douglass.

The Grand Old Man Talks Elocutively To and for his People.

From Harper’s Weekly.

Whether the lately emancipated slaves in the Southern States have made any sensible degree of progress since they obtained their freedom is a question often put to me in a tone of doubt and denial. Another question, equally pertinent, and even more momentous in view of the history of Yazoo, Hamburg, and the recent slaughter at Danville, is this: Have the recent slave-holders made any sensible degree of progress in civilization since the emancipation of their slaves? Are they more industrious, honest and humane, than when they bought, sold and flogged, their fellow-men to toil for them without wages? These two questions, like the two sides of a horse, should go together, since they are largely dependent upon each other. Plainly enough the recent freedmen can make little progress without the consent and co-operation of the ruling class among whom they live, and who own the land upon which they live. Nobody seems to doubt the progress of the masters, but everybody is curious to know how the freedmen are getting along.

Well, it is not for me to speak for the late slave-holders. They have never been in want of defenders. It is mine, by your leave and magnanimity, to speak for the class less favored. The answer to the question now put to them is of vital importance. If it shall be found that the freedmen are progressive and improving, that they only need time, patience, and a fair chance in the race of life to become useful citizens, making the nation prosperous in peace and powerful in war, there is, I believe, justice and generosity enough in the American people to supply the needed conditions of success. If, on the other hand, they are found to be non-progressive, worse masters to themselves
than their old masters were to them, that liberty neither improves their character nor condition, they are sure to be treated in the end as numbers of the ground, and will in due season perish from the earth. Civilization is all love and tenderness toward whatever concords and co-operates with it, but implacable, cruel, and remorseless to all obstacles. It spares neither forest, mountain, nor ocean, and it will not spare Indian, Mongolian, or Ethiopian. All must go along with it, or be crushed beneath its swift-flying wheels.

Before answering pro or con concerning the progress of freedmen, candid men will see the justice of another inquiry, namely, what these people were before they were emancipated, under what conditions they were emancipated, and what have been the means of improvement within their reach since they were emancipated? All will admit that it would be manifestly and grossly unfair to judge the freedmen without taking their antecedents into account. They should be measured, not from the height yet to be attained, but from the depths from which they have come.

My relation to these people does not make me close my eyes against facts favorable or unfavorable to them. I know no race in my regard but the human race. The same feeling that led me to risk my life to save that of a white boy in my boyhood, made me espouse the cause of the slave as I was able to think.

The question asked at the beginning of this article includes mental, moral, and material improvement. What the American people want to know, and have a right to know, is whether the lately enslaved lead better lives and have made for themselves more comfortable conditions of existence than in slavery—whether during these twenty years they have advanced, stood still, or retrograded. Let us first compare their mental condition of twenty years ago with what it is at present. Prior to emancipation the colored intellect of the South made no
visible sign-- and could make no sign-- of life or power. It was suppressed and shrouded in darkness. Letters were unknown. The law made fine and imprisonment the penalty for teaching one of these sable children to read. So far down were they in the scale of intelligence that they were deemed by many incapable of mastering the rudiments of an English education. Even in religion, nothing more than oral instruction was allowed them. 'Servants obey your masters, and be contented with your lot,' was the most they got of this, but of this they got abundance, both by arguments from the pulpit on Sunday and by the rhetoric of the lash on Monday. In those days, a colored man who could read was a curiosity, and was generally set down in the estimation of the white people as a dangerous character. It would be easy to enlarge upon this mental midnight darkness, but I will leave something to the reflection of the intelligent reader.

I affirm that in nothing have these illiterate and benighted people made more progress than in the acquisition of knowledge. There are now in the Southern States, according to statistics in the Bureau of Education at Washington, between two and three hundred thousand colored children attending schools during some portion of the year. Of course, this is but a small proportion of the children there of school age, and for whom there is no provision. The amount of illiteracy is, therefore, great and deplorable. The indisposition inherited from slavery to allow the States to be taxed for the education of the laboring classes is still strong, and the general government, which had no hesitation in crossing State lines to catch slaves, has thus far too much respect for the sovereign dignity of the States to cross their lines to secure civil rights or education to its citizens.

It may be added as a fair argument that the freed people have made some progress in the matter of education, that now nobody can be found to deny their capacity for education. If any such could be
found, they would only need to visit the public schools here in Washington, and witness the qualifications of the colored teachers and the aptitude of the colored pupils to have their doubts and denials made ridiculous. Colored children, to the credit of the statesmen of twenty years ago, have commodious school houses, competent teachers, and are pursuing the same course of study that white children pursue, and with almost equal success.

With respect to the moral progress of the lately enslaved class I am sorry to speak in a somewhat lower tone. But the same rule of judgment may be applied here as elsewhere. They are in this respect, as in others, the legitimate results of their antecedents. The sense of right and the voice of conscience had little chance of cultivation in the relation of master and slave. Conduct in that relation was guided by force and fear. Mutual interest and common welfare were excluded from that relation. Its corner-stone was the blood-cemented fragments of the moral constitution and human nature. Each party to it found himself impelled to do that which was not to the advantage of the other. They were mutual enemies on the same territory, and in daily unfriendly contact. In his notes on Virginia, Mr. Jefferson says, 'The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unlimited despotism on one part, and degrading submission on the other.' In such a state of society the moral sense was blunted, and the voice of conscience suppressed. The attributes of a manly character such as liberty now demands, had no chance for development. The master forced what he could and all he could from the slave, and the slave in turn stole all he could from the master, his only restraint being the fear of detection and punishment. He was born into a society organized to defraud him of the results of his labor, and he naturally enough thought it no robbery to obtain by stealth-- the only way open to him-- a part of
what was forced from him under the hard conditions of the lash. I do
not pretend to deny that there was ever a generous slave-holder or
honest slave, for I know the contrary, but I equally know that the sys-
tem made tyrants of one class and thieves of the other.

As to social relations, the system was even more destructive and
deadly. Its victims were herded together like horses, sheep and swine
without the restraint of moral instruction or decency. The master
was made more important by every addition to his slaves. Marriage did
not exist; the family was abolished. The young had no reputation to
gain, and the old had none to lose.

Let it be remembered in respect to the morals of these people,
that streams are not easily diverted from well worn channels; that the
moral character formed under the conditions thus feebly described is
not easily or speedily reformed. There is not only much to learn, but
much to unlearn. It is sad to think of the multitude who only dropped
out of slavery to drop into prisons and chain gangs, for the crimes for
which they are punished seldom rise higher than the stealing a pig or
a pair of shoes; but it is consoling to think that the fact is not due
to liberty, but to slavery, and that the evil will disappear as these
people recede from the system in which they were born.

From what has been now said it must not seem that I have conceded
that there has been no improvement in the manners and morals of the
freedmen since emancipation. I do not admit any such thing, for in
morals, as in mental power, according to my knowledge, obtained from
many sources of information, there is a visible and growing improvement
both as to honesty and chastity. What was once done among these
people not only with impunity, but with mirthful boasting, and without
apparent sense of wrong or shame, does not now escape the rebuke and
reproach of a large and growing class of their own color. There
is everywhere among them a dawning recognition of the new order of life
and society into which freedom has brought them, and they are gradually adjusting themselves to the requirements of a higher civilization. Churches, preachers, teachers, Sunday schools, night schools, day schools, singing schools and other schools, societies for mutual aid, debating societies, libraries and literary clubs, lawyers, doctors, editors, and newspapers, have sprung up and have multiplied with wonderful rapidity. These come not from immorality. Sin is death to such effort. They show an upward tendency which may well invite patient and benevolent effort in their behalf, and justify Mr. Slater in his magnificent donation to the cause of their elevation.

It is noticeable, too, that the old camp-meeting emotional religion is subsiding among them, and that thought is taking the place of feeling. In the dark time of slavery, when this world held only toils, stripes, and pain for them, they were easily wrought into paroxysms of momentary joy by the painted and promised glories of another world. They are now beginning to see that something can be made of this world as well as the other. Of course, some of them are still wearing the old cast-off theological hats and coats of fifty years ago, but the young people who have learned to read and write have no further use of these garments. They now demand an educated, chaste and upright ministry. This spirit of improvement has cost the old time preachers many sighs and groans. They see in it only decline of true religious feeling. However that may be, it is evident that morals and manners have gained by the change, and will continue to gain as the lamp of knowledge grows brighter among them. No doubt that even the wild incoherent Sambo sermons were a help in time of slavery. It was something to be told that their suffering time would soon be over, and that for stripes on earth they would have stars in heaven, even though it was clumsily told; but the rant of those days will not do for these. These old-fashioned preachers minister to passion, decry the intellect,
and induce contentment in ignorance and stupidity, and hence a hindrance to progress. The effect aimed at by their preaching is to excite feeling, and raise a shout—a thing which can be as well done by an eloquent stump speaker as by any modern Whitefield.

Among the instrumentalities which have been most effective in lifting up these people to a higher plane of life none is more worthy of mention than the American Missionary Association. While it has taken the church among the freedmen, it has not forgotten to take the school-house. But nearly all the denominations, Catholic as well as Protestant, have rushed into this vast field, each after its kind, to labor for the salvation of the late slaves. This is the more surprising in view of the long years during which our churches could more easily see the heathen thousands of miles over the wide waste of waters than at home. But let the dead past bury its dead.

I now come to the question as to what was the physical condition of these people before emancipation; and in referring to it I bear in mind that I am speaking to many of a generation to whom slavery is little more than a name, and who have no adequate idea of what that name covered. I have had this class of readers in mind in all I have said, and I deem it fortunate that you have allowed me to speak my word on this subject through your respected journal. With the exception of a few highly favored house servants, the physical condition of the slaves was indescribably wretched. A bushel of corn and eight pounds of salt pork per month were considered a large allowance for a full grown man. The huts in which they lived left them largely exposed to the mercy of the elements. Their beds were boards, and their covering a miserable blanket, with which they were served not once a year. Much of the time they were worked under the lash in all weathers. Want, exposure, and cruelty, brought to them bodily ills and general physical deterioration, often to the extent of repulsive deformity. That
physical well-being is essential to physical perfection, is easily demonstrated both in the case of man and beast. Men laugh at the irregular make-up of the Negro, but forget that no people, white or black, could preserve the finer attributes of physical manhood subjected to two hundred and fifty years of slavery. The woes of the slave mother can be read in the faces of her children. Slavery has twisted their legs, flattened their feet, and imparted a depressed and cowardly aspect to their features. Let those who laugh rather be ashamed of the crime against human nature which has produced the deformity over which they make merry.

Looking at the freedmen to-day, in that class which remains on the old plantation, we see but little improvement in food or raiment, in form or feature. Twenty years are but a speck in the life of a race. Still, even here there is improvement. Many have managed to get a few acres and a little home of their own. In the State of Louisiana, colored people pay taxes on more than twenty millions worth of property, and in Georgia, according to the late Senator Hill, of that State, they paid taxes five years ago on six millions. I doubt not of a showing equally creditable in North Carolina, Virginia, and other of the old slave States. The manner in which these people were set free should never be overlooked. No people were ever emancipated under conditions more unfavorable for good results. The Israelites had spoils of the Egyptians; the serfs of Russia had three acres of land given to each head of a family; the West India slave was permitted to remain upon the old plantation; but the American slave was turned loose to the open sky without money, land, or friends, and, worst of all, under the fierce resentment of those who owned the land from which he must obtain his bread. These in the heat of momentary wrath, drove him away; and away he went, free, but free only to want, hunger and pain; free to chilling blasts of winter, free to starve. Off he went with his sick
and well, young and old, and the infant in arms. Many died, and the mortality for a time caused the belief that the race would speedily die out. From the gallery of the United States Senate I heard an able Senator from the North answer Mr. Sumner's plea for suffrage with the remark that it was useless to legislate for these people, since they were sure to die out in a short time. But the old masters who thus resented emancipation, relented, if they do not repent, and after a time called back the freedmen to their old field and quarters. They saw that they had sent away the hands, but had left the mouths, and that they still needed the Negro to work their fields— a fortunate discovery for both. Instead of dying out, as predicted, the census tells us these people have increased ten per cent faster than the native born white people of the South.

In conclusion:— When I consider that these people have only been free during the last twenty years, and that this freedom has been more in name than in fact; when I consider the manner in which their emancipation was brought about, not with the consent, but against the consent of the masters; when I consider the fact, that it was born of blood boiling over on the battle field, the wounded pride and sullen determination it left in the old master class smarting under defeat, and the many obstacles thrown in the way of the progress of these people— I am far from discouraged or dissatisfied. On the contrary, I see the colored people steadily rising, and I believe they will ultimately fully justify all the endeavors made in their behalf, and fulfill the highest hopes of their friends.