

"The Race Problem in America"

prepared by T. Blake Kennedy for an unknown audience,
sometime between about 1906 and about 1920.

THIS MAN
WAS THE
JUDGE THAT
PRESIDED AT THE
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The subject assigned me is by no means a new one for it has agitated the American mind for four decades, has been treated and discussed by the best brain of the nation, and perhaps the matter might be said to be no less a problem than when it first presented itself.

Numerous solutions have been put forth which in theory savor of propriety and plausibility but which in practice fall far short of the desired end.

The wholesale "transportation" plan has been met with such stalwart opposition of impracticability and impossibility that it is probably no longer seriously urged. The division of the African Continent by the European powers has made the return of the negro to his original haunts an impossibility, while the civil, educational and property rights of the colored man himself in this country make him a factor which could not but be consulted and such consultation would result in blank refusal.

So the negro is among us, a part of our commonwealth, a part of our citizenship, enjoying our property rights and governmental protection; and in the language of the small boy, "What are you going to do about it?"

We of the north perhaps see not so vital a question in the whole race problem as those whose destiny has cast them in the very midst of the battle as it were. The South sees the matter in general, "by wholesale" and in broadest scope while the North comes in contact with only comparative instances, "specialties" and glimpses of its real magnitude.

The result of the civil war left the negro free as it should but it left him also with equal rights of suffrage. The fact is admitted that the negro of the 60's was ignorant, illiterate, incapable of self government, and when suddenly and generously presented with the franchise of a full-fledged American Citizen, what more intellectual class of individuals would not have rushed to it madly and unreasonably from a viewpoint two-fold; that of repaying the political party, which made them free, which debt of gratitude the very animal itself shows forth, and that of seeking self-government and securing the reins from those whose domination has been too cruel. As a result the race war was on which has left its death knell ringing in our ears, and the blood of its victims besmearing the pages of our history down through nearly half a century. Party lines became largely disseminated and the vote was divided as to the color of the voter. Election frauds followed so palpable and so flagrant as to shock civilization. Shootings, lynchings, and fights occurred in the very shadow of the polls. But recently the stalwart intellects of the South realizing that permanent good cannot be the child of lawlessness have taken steps to remedy existing evils, and to throw around the ballot box that order, dignity and respect which is its due. Measures have been adopted in the majority of the southern states, which in a measure solve the election problems. It is known as the "disfranchising amendment". These new laws practically place so high an educational qualification upon the voter that the rank and file of the negroes are thereby disfranchised. While this may seem to be a harsh rule in some ways, yet it goes a long way toward relieving a situation which was much strained and positively dangerous, being in many instances a menace to our liberty and free institutions. After all is not educational

qualification the true source of wise government? If so, the new factor in southern politics is by no means a bad one. With it, the thinking men of the south vote according to principle and for the best man without fear that he will be overcome and dominated by the ignorant and illiterate black. At the same time it makes an incentive to the negro to bring himself within the qualifications, thereby increasing his usefulness to the Republic.

I think it may be truly said that the real source of the negro's helplessness, suffering and in many cases his retrogression is his ignorance.

The late Mary Kingsley, says Archibald Calquhoun in the North American Review, was a keen observer of the African negro and gives as his weakest points "his emotionalism, his sloth, his vanity and his lack of mechanical idea." Does not this short outline touch close to the home of the negro's shortcomings? His emotional proclivities are too well defined to make him reliable as a race; his natural laziness too pre-eminent to ensure thrift; his love of fine clothes and luxury too well developed to allow his mind to grasp the more material things of life, and his want of mechanical idea too pronounced to keep step with the great onward march of civilization in America. The first three weaknesses are wholly inherent, the latter merely lack of education. Yet education is in part the cure for them all. Practical demonstrative education would in some degree eliminate the overplus of emotion in his nature; it would teach him that only the man who works accomplishes; that fine clothes may enshroud the blackest villain; and finally that the elements of nature are adapted to the use of man, and he who discovers the combination can most readily unlock the secret of true, good, and prosperous living.

It has been truly said that the aim of the educator should be "to make a better black, and not an imitation of the white." The two classes are differently constituted, differently endowed, and must therefore be differently trained. With all respect to the negro it may be said that he has but recently emerged from the surroundings of savagery, and to expect that in so short a period he would be able to reach the height which the white has so slowly and painfully struggled up through the decaying centuries, would be but the reversal of the laws of nature. The education must necessarily be slow and withal practical. Let it be relentlessly thundered in his ear that the chief ambition of many must not be to avoid work, honest, earnest and faithful labor. So many of the misguided colored people get the idea that education is expressly fitting them for a life of ease and sloth, instead of for that grander and more earnest purpose, which we must all learn, that it is but fitting us for greater capacity and greater results in the great field of life's labor.

The vast majority of the population concentrate in the great cities where they believe circumstances will permit them to float with less effort on the stream and be free from seemingly onerous duties of the farm and country.

Booker T. Washington at his schools of practical learning in the South, I believe, is doing a splendid magnanimous work for the people of his race. A class, a race or a nation can only be prosperous where its people is self supporting, familiar with the practical everyday duties of life, for after all these make up the whole.

These schools familiarize the colored men and women with breadwinning methods which are always properly accompanied with intellectual training. As soon as a negro becomes self-supporting and independent he becomes self respecting and consequently a good citizen, which indeed is true of any man. By this I do not mean to deny higher education to the negro. By all means allow the gates of learning to stand wide open to all classes and races, but first we must have at least a sturdy practical stock to draw from in filling the higher walks of life.

The same remedy will relieve the situation where the illiterate colored man of the South

devoid of many of the finer sensibilities of civilized humanity pounces upon his innocent victim, and perhaps in a few short hours to be dragged a cowering mass of flesh and fear to the nearby tree to pay the penalty of his crime. To my mind the greatest cure for all evil is education and not force.

One other suggestion and that is along the line of amalgamation between the races. In my opinion, a law rigidly worded and strictly enforced prohibiting intermarriage between the white and Colored people would be a blessing not only to the white but to the colored as well. Nature intended them as distinct races and their blending has the tendency to weaken both. Many a heartache has been caused by the discrimination against a child so nearly white that only the close observer could discover the traces of foreign blood. And yet the child is looked down upon by the white associates and scorned by the black. Such conditions are weakening and should be remedied.

But education is the potent factor in the solution of the problem and in my opinion is the one, — the only way.

T. Blake Kennedy