

## THE NEW NEGRO WOMAN.

BY MRS. BOOKER T. WASHINGTON.

Our world is made up of nations. The nations are made up of races, which, in their turn, are formed of classes or clans. There are, in each of these, the masses who, in their immensity, ought to not only attract the greatest attention in the way of criticism, but ought to receive the most thorough and systematic care from the rest of the world.

It is to the masses of negro women that I wish to call your attention for a few minutes. We certainly have no time to be idle in reference to these sisters of ours, for sisters they surely are. Not many days ago I was talking with a Northern white lady who told me this story: She said that, sitting beside a colored woman in a street car, she turned and said to her, "I am greatly interested in your people. I have for a number of years taught in the South," when all to the surprise of this good woman, the younger one turned, and, with a contemptuous sneer, said: "Oh, we don't have anything to do with those folks down there; they are none of us." The North, the South, the East, the West, must be one united whole in this great uplifting of our women—there can be no separation of interests, and the sooner each of us recognizes this fact, the sooner will the work be accomplished.

I repeat, we cannot be slow. We are the children of parents who were not the architects of their destiny, and perhaps we should not to-day be censured for having handed down to us a womanhood not equalling in strength that of our Caucasian sisters. But in the years that are to come we will be held responsible if the manhood, the womanhood, of the race is not higher, nobler, and stronger than it is to-day. In the words of Dr. Hale, let us "Look up and not

---

\* Paper read at the Conference of Colored Women held in Boston, August, 1895.

down; look out and not in; look forward and not back, and lend a hand" to this mass of women who, in their helplessness, appeal to us, their older sisters—if not older in years, certainly in advantages and the things which go to make life happier and more hopeful. Women of all races had a friend in George Eliot, and it is she who says to us:

"For they, the royal-hearted women are,  
Who nobly love the noble,  
Yet have grace  
For needy suffering lives in lowliest place;  
Carrying a choicer sunlight in their smile,  
The heavenliest ray that pitieth the vile.

"Though I were happy, throned beside the king,  
I should be tender to each little thing,  
With hurt-warm breast that had no speech to tell  
Its inward pangs; and I would sooth it well with tender touch,  
And with a low, soft moan for company."

We are a race of servants, not in the low sense of this word, but in the highest and purest sense, and, in our serving, let us keep these beautiful lines of the servant of all women as our guide.

In the struggle for money, for power, for intellectual attainment, for growth of any sort, there is always, and must always be, a starting-point. Thus it is with the struggle to uplift the negro woman there is a starting-point, and this I believe to be the home. The two words, home and woman, are so closely connected that I could not, even if I desired, separate one from the other.

Someone has said, "No race can rise above its women." This is just as true as the fact that no river can rise above its source; are we not the source of the home life, and if our influence upon this life is not good, how can the home be better? History will bear us out in all we say in reference to woman and home. Our own Emerson says, "A sufficient measure of civilization is the influence of good women." Plato, the Athenian philosopher, when he stood at the height of his intellectual attainments, gave to the ancient and modern world his great "Republic," which he had thought it

worth the while to write to show to the world his regard for woman in the home. He held that women are a very important factor in the human race, and that, holding out to her the help she so much needed, she will raise the standard of the home, and thus from the home will come stronger men to execute the nation's plan.

In every race there are many societies, and these societies are higher or lower as the case may be. But, for convenience, I shall divide the negro race of women into two classes, viz., that class which has had opportunity to improve and develop themselves mentally, physically, morally, spiritually, and financially, and that class who, because of the lack of these advantages, because of their unblamed-for ignorance, who, because of the cruelty of the master for more than two centuries—the master who, thirty years ago, turned his slave mothers away without giving them a single idea of the beauty of home life, a single idea of the responsibility of womanhood, wifehood, or citizenship—are our inferiors. This latter class is overwhelming in its numbers, mighty in its strength if only these numbers and this strength can be lifted up, can be inspired, taught and sustained. Is there no bond between these two classes of the same race? Yes, there is a tie which no attempt on our part can sever.

I sometimes fear that we are too slow in doing for others because we are, as we think, doing well. Individuals here and there among our men and women are climbing the ladder in almost all of the avenues of life, but this is not race progress; it is the lifting up as we climb which means growth to the race.

Thirty years ago the negro slaves were declared free. The most helpless members of the race at that time, as now, were its women. During all the black days of slavery they had come and gone only as commanded by the man and woman who called themselves master and mistress.

The negro woman had been given in marriage as the whim of the master's family saw fit; she had been sold from her husband as the master's financial interests demanded, with

no more pity than was exhibited at the selling of a hog. Was it possible that she should know or think very strongly of the cultivation of the sacredness of the marital relations which are at the very root of the home? Was there anything in these lessons to inspire morality, or even a respect for it? And yet these same people, with all their boasted chivalry for their own women, are ever ready to thrust the sword at this race of which these poor women, their own pupils, are members. In this time of the master and slave, it was not the mother who taught the responsibility of motherhood. The children came, and as soon as possible the mother went to the field or elsewhere to work, and the children were left practically alone. There was no time to bathe the babies, even once a day. There was no time to dress the children, to comb their hair, to see that they were getting clean, wholesome habits in order to become clean, wholesome men and women. It was not the slave mother who said how her children should be dressed, whether they should wear shoes or go bare-footed, and thus have inculcated within themselves respect for personal appearance and decency of dress. It was not the chattel-mother who said the baby was sick enough to need medical aid. These things and more in reference to the children were decided by the master and mistress. Was there anything in a lesson like this to teach responsibility of motherhood? Was there a single thing in a lesson like this to bring about the sanctity of family life? Was there anything in a life like this to establish confidence between mother and daughter, father and son, which is absolutely necessary in the home, in a truly happy family life?

In the awful days gone by, the word "home," the word "woman" was a mockery, so far as we are concerned; in fact, there was no home, there was no manhood. All were chattel, bought, used, and sold at the master's will.

The log cabin of one room, with perhaps no hole to let in sunlight and air, holding the household goods, cooking utensils, furnishing room for cooking, sleeping, eating, and

living, was a substitute for home. Could anything good and healthy come out of this? Was it at all probable that these mothers could hand down to their daughters and sons correct ideas of home-making, pure ideas of family life? Was it at all probable that there should have come from homes like these women strong to fight disease, strong to fight the tempter who stands in the South as a sentinel by day and by night? Was there anything in this sort of living to instil purity of thought, and purity of action?

The women of this class are to-day needing our aid, needing our sympathy. We will answer as Cain answered the Master, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Surely we are the keepers of these women, and will answer, "Here am I; use me."

Let us not suppose that although more than thirty years have gone by, there is a very great change in the condition of the masses of the women of whom I speak. Turned loose with no knowledge of these things, she has groped the way but slowly. In the country districts of the Southern states in which slaves were held, a condition of affairs exists to-day that would touch the heart of any woman. Look for a moment into a log cabin in Alabama. There is only one room, 12x10, with a little hole in the side for a window, which in winter time is kept tightly closed. In this hut live the father and mother, and in here their eight or ten children are born and reared and die. I draw the curtain. I could show you other pictures more pathetic in their hopelessness, but I refrain.

Lessons in making home neat and attractive; lessons in making family life stronger, sweeter, and purer by personal efforts of the woman; lessons in tidiness of appearance among women; lessons of clean and pure habits of everyday life in the home, and thus bringing to the women self-respect and getting for them the respect of others; how to keep the girls near the mother, and many other kindred subjects, need to be given to this class of women to-day.

In the village of Tuskegee, in the state of Alabama, a little more than a year ago, a few of us women undertook

this kind of work for this class of women. To us it was not a very inviting work, but we could not rid ourselves of the recognition of the bond which linked us to these women. We knew that as they were lifted up, so might we rise. We meet the women in a hall in the central part of the town on Saturday afternoon, when they usually flock to the town from the neighboring plantations and country districts and congregate on the street corners to gossip and eat peanuts. Our meetings are very informal, and hence, I believe, very helpful; for the women would not come if the meetings were not informal. During the past few months we have talked in a simple way on home-getting, home-making, cultivating confidence between the parent and the child, how to protect our girls, plain and simple dress for the children, kinds of food best for the home, and many like subjects tending to better them along all lines. We have emphasized the respect that comes to a woman because of her neatness of dress, and upon the disrespect that comes to her by reason of her love for gaudy and extravagant dress. We have tried to get our women to substitute the neat calico dress of to-day for the slave homespun of the past. We have tried to teach them the self-respect which comes from wearing shoes instead of going bare-footed as the master taught them; the lack of self-respect and the physical injury incident to wrapping the hair. These are only a few of the crude things which these women will do. They have been taught these lessons by people who have had hundreds of years of advantages and experience, and they would naturally be loth to give up these habits. But we do not feel discouraged.

In addition to the work we are trying to do for the women, we have also each week a meeting for young girls, to whom we give lessons in simple sewing, in house-cleaning, in street and church manners, and in every line which goes to make young womanhood purer and nobler. Much of the social purity literature is given out to these girls, and here and there a seed is being sown which will bring forth a better wifehood and motherhood.

We only want women who will, everywhere that is needed, take up this cause of the large class of negro women who have not had the same opportunity which you and I have had. Are we not all of one race? Are not the interests of this class our interests? There is a hearty response in the efforts of the women to rise and shake off the terrible habits which, for two hundred and fifty years, were being fastened upon them. It is not rapid work, but I believe that it is sure work. I believe that in this kind of work is the salvation of the negro women, and all will agree with me that just in proportion as the women rise will the race rise. Work for these masses and you work for the race.

But this lamentable condition of affairs is not confined to any particular section of our country; but is it not true that right here, under the shadow of the Cradle of Liberty, as it were, and where a "man's a man for a' that and a' that," there are to be found parallel cases? In picturing to you the condition of affairs at the South, and pleading for my Southern sisters, I do not wish to withdraw your interest in and for the needy ones nearer home, but my heart goes out with a great longing in the interest of the Southern negro woman who is what she is because of force of circumstances, and not because of a lack of desire to be otherwise.

Let us all rise, shine and push right along in the work of helping our women in the South, in the North, everywhere that it is needed—and it is needed everywhere; let us rise with our money, though it be little; let us rise with our voices even though they be weak, with our hands even though they be feeble, and do this all-important work. Then only will there be fewer thrusts at the immorality of the race; there will be less lynchings of negro men and women; then only will the white man who hates everything that is black, and the black man who despises everything white, recognize in the broadest and truest sense the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God, and more readily accept the doctrine that of one blood hath he made the nations of the earth.