

THE NEW ASPECT OF THE NEGRO QUESTION

By THOMAS NELSON PAGE in Current Collier's Weekly.

The negro question has recently and somewhat unexpectedly appeared again at the south. After holding the stage for over thirty years to the complete exclusion of other questions, it has for the last five or six years seemed almost "as good as settled," and the south has congratulated herself that this settlement was for the peace and well-being of all classes of her people.

The colored race, more or less eliminated from politics, under wiser counsel than had formerly prevailed, was applying its energies to building itself up industrially. The white race, freed from the incubus that had weighted it down so long, had immediately begun to divide on economic questions. With this appeared to have passed the chief cause of misunderstanding between the two sections of the country—the north and the south. The division was not enough to break the solid south; but it was quite enough to contribute to the election of a republican president and vice president.

To illustrate: Fifteen years ago, the leading social club of Virginia, the Westmoreland Club of Richmond, had not a republican in it. Two years ago a majority of the members of that club voted for McKinley and Roosevelt.

When, in the Wilmington riot, northern men marched shoulder to shoulder with southern men, and when the Mississippi constitution passed the supreme court of the United States, the south considered that the negro question was at rest, and for the first time since the war felt free to divide on other lines of public policy.

Such was the state of the case when McKinley and Roosevelt were elected. Mr. McKinley, by his extraordinary tact, won the good-will of the southern people. His successor fell heir to this good-will, in addition to a large amount of popularity quite personal to himself. He was one-half southern by blood; his career had been one to appeal peculiarly to the imagination of the south; his character commanded admiration; his brief but honorable military career established him further in her esteem. In his command, for the first time since the war, a southerner found that to be a southerner did not operate against the chance for military preferment. It is probable that there was not a more popular man in the south than Mr. Roosevelt when he succeeded to the presidency. His first southern appointments were made from democrats who had supported McKinley, and added to his prestige.

The Change in Conditions.

This was but a year and a half ago. Within this brief time conditions appear to have totally changed. The negroes throughout the country are in a state of upheaval. The popularity of the president with the people of the south has suffered a sudden eclipse. The deepest feeling is beginning to be stirred.

It is claimed by some that this change is due to the appointment of negroes to office. But in the judgment of those better informed, this does not account for the present ferment. President McKinley filled over thirty places with negroes among them such important offices as the collectorship of the ports of Wilmington and Beaufort, N. C., and St. Augustine; the collectorship of customs at Savannah, Atlanta and Georgetown, Ga., and the postmasterships of Athens and Darien, Ga.; Beaufort and Florence, S. C.; Pine Bluff, Ark., and others—all without causing a fraction of the excitement that has arisen of late, while only four original appointments of negroes to office in the south have been made during the present administration, and but one of these has met with strenuous opposition. On the other hand, President Roosevelt has perhaps appointed more men to office from among the conservative whites of the south than all the other republican presidents put together.

It is plain, therefore, that the reason for the present ferment must lie deeper than the mere appointment to office of negroes. The true reason is that these appointments have been taken at the south as evidences of an attitude on the part of the president toward the race question which the south reprobates far more than the selection of however many negroes for office.

The Relation Between the Races.

The first of these causes was undoubtedly what is now known as "the Booker Washington incident."

To make this understood it is necessary to speak plainly. Conditions at the south have changed within ten years. The old relations between the races has changed. Those who have made that relation one of kindness and affection are passing away. The races are wider apart today than they have ever been. It is, in the main, only those who knew the old relation that retain the old feeling. The new negro, when he gets an education, becomes the "Afro-American." Every question in which the negro is concerned becomes now a race question. The negroes will not have it otherwise, and the whites must act accordingly. The most passionate aspiration of the new negro is for social equality. This means in plain terms what the south in plain terms intends shall not be. The increased frequency of the crime for which lynching has come to be the almost inevitable penalty is a manifestation of this aspiration. The frightful spread of lynching in its most terrible forms as the penalty for this crime is a manifestation of the determination on the part of the southern whites that this aspiration shall never be realized. This is the reason that an act which to the president and many others who are friendly with the south appeared simple enough aroused so much excitement there. The effect was instantaneous and far-reaching. The negroes showed it. The thrill of it was felt from one end of the south to the other. Even those who were most liberal toward that race, most friendly toward the distinguished educator who had come to be regarded at the south as perhaps the most sensible man of that race, and who held the president in highest esteem, were disappointed that he could have so little understood conditions at the south.

This, however, passed, and might have passed completely, but for another act which appeared to point in the same direction.

For years, throughout the south, there

has been the growing hope that the negro might be excluded from politics, and that another party might arise there to which the whites might turn without finding themselves in the association that affiliation with the negro party in the south has for the most part signified. It was generally held that this would mean the removal of the most debasing element of politics; of the chief cause of misunderstanding between the north and the south; and the opportunity for the south, relieved from the thralldom incident to the existence of only one party, to place herself in harmony with the rest of the country. This movement was advancing profitably when the administration intervened. One or two men who had made themselves prominent in it were removed from office. It is said that they would have been removed anyhow for violation of the general order prohibiting office-holders from too active participation in politics, and that the fact that they were excluding negroes from their conventions had nothing to do with their dismissal. It is possible that they ought to have been removed. At least, however, the circumstances were unfortunate. It looked as if these men were being disciplined for trying to form a party exclusively of whites. The negroes so understood it, and the whites so understood it.

Following close on this came the closing of the Indianola postoffice. There were two precedents for such removal; but the uprising of the whites had been inspired by the advances of a negro toward a white woman, and unhappily the action of the administration had the appearance of retaliation in behalf of the negroes. The president was hailed by them as a "new Joshua." Immediately on the heels of this came the appointment of a negro to the principal government office in perhaps the proudest and most sensitive city in the south—the city that had fired the first gun at Fort Sumter, and the city that, in the whole south, during the reconstruction period, had drunk deepest of the dregs of humiliation. The whole south, already stirred, resented it. It was taken as indicating a policy which conceivably might plunge the south again into horrors which she recalls with loathing. It was taken as indicating a want of appreciation of the grave dangers that underlie her social fabric, and above all, as showing, on the part of one who was half southern, a want of understanding of and of sympathy with the south.

These dangers cannot be expressed in cold print. But they lie at every man's door, and when they stir they thrill every heart. To one who does not feel them they cannot be explained by reasoning; but they are felt, and they are felt to be more imminent now than for a good while past.

The south does not fear social equality. It knows that it cannot be. But it fears the consequences of anything looking like the most remote recognition of it. It feels, as no one else can, the consequences of every agitation of this kind. "Social equality" and the "sword and torch"—terms which none would have ventured to use five years ago—are beginning to be openly advocated by candidates for office at "Afro-American" meetings.

A Hopeful Outlook.

Happily, there is still a conservative element among the negroes at the south, mainly composed of those who know the old relation between the whites and the blacks—who repudiate such incendiary doctrines. And, happily, there are those among the whites who know the president. These know that however he may have misunderstood conditions there, he has no intention of fastening again on the south negro domination or of fostering social equality in any form. Those who know him best feel that he has simply been misunderstood, and believe that in time the whole south will recognize it. They recall what he said a few years since in *The Sewanee Review*, and republished in *American Ideals*:

"The whole civilization of the future owes a debt of gratitude, greater than can be expressed in words, to that democratic policy which has kept the temperate zones of the new and the newest worlds a heritage for the white people."

The world has not changed since then, and neither has Theodore Roosevelt.