

# The Southern Workman

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## THE OLD TIME NEGRO AND THE NEW

BY JEROME DOWD

THE reason that the old time Negro was so much loved and respected by the white people, was that, in spite of his humble and degrading position of servitude, he adorned himself with the traits of character which he found only in the best class of people of his community.

The old time Negro displayed the kind of virtues which characterized the Hebrew boy, Joseph, whom we read about in the Bible. Joseph, as the story goes, was sold by his brothers to some slave-trading Ismaelites for twenty pieces of silver and was carried as a slave down into Egypt. There he was resold to an officer of Pharaoh.

No slave was ever placed in a more humiliating or discouraging position than that in which Joseph found himself in this strange land. He belonged to a despised race with whom it was considered profane to eat. He had neither kinsman nor friend to console him, and he could not even speak the language of his master.

But, instead of falling into the depths of despair, and going to the dogs by imitating all of the vices of the slave class, he resolved to make the best of his situation by embracing every opportunity to make himself useful, and to acquire the virtues of his superiors. His faithfulness to his master was soon recognized, and he was rewarded by his promotion to the position of an overseer.

However, Joseph was fated to suffer a greater misfortune than that of being a slave. His master's wife falsely accused him of assaulting her, and he was sent to a loathsome dungeon. Surely this was enough to destroy his spirit and deprive him of all hope of rising out of the depths of his degradation.

But no, he still resolved to make the best of his situation. Pretty soon he won the favor of the prison-keeper, and was put in charge of the prison.

Then it came to pass that the king's butler and baker committed crimes, and were sent to this prison. These men were much cast down because they feared that they should have to suffer the penalty of death. In their disturbed state of mind they had strange dreams which they could not interpret, and which only added to their misery. Joseph, seeing the sad plight of these fellows, sought to comfort them, and told them the meaning of their dreams. And this apparently insignificant service proved to be the stepping-stone from the prison to the King's palace; for sometime after the King's butler had been released and restored to favor, the King himself had a troublesome dream which none of his magicians or wise men could interpret. The King's butler now recalled to mind the boy in prison who had interpreted his dream, and he told the King about him: Thereupon, the King sent for Joseph, and related to him the mysterious dream which no one had been able to interpret. Joseph astonished the court by his prophesy of a dreadful famine which the dream signified; and the King was so carried away with the wonderful wisdom of the interpreter that he bedecked him with jewels and arrayed him in vestures of fine linen. Moreover, he made him chief ruler in all the land of Egypt.

In the meantime a famine arose in Palestine, and Joseph's father, Jacob, who had been a rich man was reduced to the verge of starvation. As a last resort, the old man sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain—the sons who had sold Joseph to the Ismaelites. I need not repeat the rest of the story,—how Joseph filled the bags of these boys with grain, and also put in the bags the coins which they had given in payment.

This story teaches the lesson that human fortitude should equal human misfortune, no matter what may be the circumstances, and that even a slave, who improves the small opportunities that lie in his path, may rise to a position of great nobility of character and usefulness to mankind.

And the lesson of this story applies not only to every individual but to every race.

We have all been slaves. No race has ever risen to a state of civilization without having gone through the discipline of enforced servitude. The important thing for every race, of whatever color, is to imitate Joseph in coining virtue out of every adversity that may overtake it.

"Virtue," says Lord Bacon, "is like precious odors, most fragrant when they are incensed or crushed: for prosperity

doth best discover vice, but adversity doth best discover virtue!"

When the children of Israel were released from Egyptian bondage the Lord commanded each of them to borrow of their neighbors jewels of silver and jewels of gold. What he meant was that each of them should bring back from Egypt, not the vices of the people who had enslaved them but their virtues, so that in the Kingdom which they were to set up in the Promised Land they might adorn it with whatever gems of character were worth borrowing.

The old time Negro of the Southern States imitated the wisdom of the Israelites in bringing out of their bondage the jewels of silver and jewels of gold which had adorned the character of their masters.

Some of the virtues that the old time Negro borrowed were as follows:—

First, thrift. Among any people in a state of slavery, there have always been many who were lazy, so that it has been necessary to appoint an overseer to stand over them with a whip. Not so, however, with the old time Negro of the South. He was full of energy, and had not a lazy bone in his body. He learned every kind of handicraft, and was wonderfully skillful. A slave, belonging to my grandfather Dowd, had a friend living on another plantation whom he was very anxious for my grandfather to buy, and as an inducement, offered to lend my grandfather \$800 to make the purchase. This slave of my grandfather was an expert with the scythe, and he earned a small fortune hiring himself out to cut wheat and oats on the neighboring plantations.

A second virtue of the old time Negro was his love of service. The slaves who swarmed about the old plantation mansion were all eager to please and to be of service. The cooks, nurses, butlers, and coachmen were ever willing to do any kind of work with no other reward than the satisfaction of giving pleasure to other people. They found joy in service.

A third virtue of the old time Negro was his faithfulness. He could be trusted. Much has been, and is yet, said of the propensity of the Negro to steal, but the fact is that the old time Negro knew nothing of stealing. I want to tell you that there were fewer locks and keys in the days of slavery than there are in these days of freedom. The chicken-houses, smoke-houses, pantries, and jewelry boxes had no locks or bolts or bars, and yet they were rarely molested. Among the slaves of my grandfather Dowd and of my grandfather Bruce, I have never heard of a case of stealing.

During the Civil War when my father was in the army,

and my mother was left in the house alone with three small children, an old slave belonging to my grandfather Bruce, put his cot on the back porch, and slept there with a gun under it every night to protect my mother from harm or even from fear. And throughout the Civil War thousands of the old time Negroes, in like manner, protected the white women and children while the men were far away at the battle front.

A fourth virtue of the old time Negro was his cheerfulness and playfulness. He was always in a good humor and always sang songs as he worked. He looked on the bright, instead of the dark side, of life, and he was always ready to jest or play. My grandfather Bruce was a great foxhunter, and he kept seventeen hounds. He and his slaves and his hounds had many a thrilling time chasing over hill and dale this slyest of the wild animals. You know the fact that two people jest and play together is the best evidence of their friendship, for it is impossible to find satisfaction in jesting or playing with one we do not like.

A fifth virtue of the old time Negro was his reverence. He was polite, and knew how to respect those who were above him, around him, and beneath him. All observant historians have commented on the graceful and princely manners of the old time Negro.

The reverence of the old time Negro was, however, most conspicuously shown in religious matters. In fact, he was spiritually-minded. Reverend Squire Dowd, who belonged to my grandfather, tells me how all the slaves used to pile into a wagon on Sundays and go to church, and how they sang and prayed, and read the Bible, for he says his mistress taught them to read. Old Squire himself was an exhorter and he is still at it. The old plantation spirituals that have come down to us from the slave days abundantly testify to the religious reverence of the old time Negro.

These virtues are the jewels of silver and the jewels of gold which the old time Negro brought with him out of the bondage of the old time South.

Now, how about the new time Negro?

I think there is a widespread notion that the new Negro has only imitated the vices of the whites; that he is slothful, criminal, and generally unfaithful to his domestic and social obligations; that he is ill-mannered, and impudent, going around with a chip on his shoulder, looking for trouble. In short, the notion is that the New Negro is a good-for-nothing, and is going to the dogs.

But this notion is far from the truth. Of course, we have a lot of bad Negroes now as we had in slavery times, but we



also have as many good Negroes now as we ever had under slavery.

If we compare the Negroes who have made good under freedom with those who made good under slavery, we will find that they are the same type of people and possess the same virtues.

The new Negro is thrifty. He is a producer and homeowner. Since the Civil War he has accumulated about a billion dollars worth of property. The string of colored people we see every Saturday night, lined up at the savings banks and building and loan associations, attest to the fact that the new Negro is earning money and saving it.

The new Negro loves to serve. For illustration, what group of people in any race stand out more conspicuously for noble and disinterested service than the group of new Negroes represented by Booker T. Washington, James D. Corrothers, R. R. Moton, W. E. B. DuBois, Benjamin Brawley, Carter G. Woodson, to say nothing of a host of others of less fame found in the business world, in the professions, and especially in the press and the pulpit.

The new Negro is faithful. He is faithful to his family, to his community and to his State. Was he not loyal to our country in the World War, and did he not do his part on the battlefield, in the purchase of bonds, and in producing food for our army and navy?

The new Negro is cheerful and playful. I never knew a more optimistic, good-natured and playful-minded man than Charles Price. In his lecturing tours he knew how to hit hard blows for his race without manifesting bitterness towards the white people. As many white as colored people came to hear him talk, and he kept everybody in a good frame of mind by his fine flashes of wit and humor. The same may be said of Booker Washington, James D. Corrothers, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and most of the other new Negroes who have rendered notable service to their generation.

As the old time Negro sang as he worked, so does the new time Negro sing as he works. The chief difference is that the latter has learned to sing with the pen as well as with the vocal organs. What wonderful songs have been given us by Paul Laurence Dunbar, Claude McKay, and James Weldon Johnson!

Finally the new Negro is reverent. He, like the old time Negro, is spiritually-minded. He sings the old spiritual songs, kneels before the Great Master in humility, imploring His guidance and blessings, and the new Negro, through his gen-

erous contributions to the church of his faith, is supporting schools and colleges scattered all over the Southland for the uplift of his race.

Yes, the new time Negro has the same virtues as the old time Negro, the chief difference being that the new time Negro is educated, and is serving mankind in new ways. The elements of success are the same for slave and free, and for all races of the earth.

If we would rise to higher heights we must do so by imitating Joseph in improving the small opportunities that lie in our path, and in imitating the children of Israel by adorning our characters with the jewels of silver and the jewels of gold that may be gathered out of whatever bondage or adversity we may have to endure. As the wine comes from the pressed grape, so the virtues of human nature come from our trials and tribulations.

Turning to the future, as I see it, the problems for the colored people are pretty much the same in kind as the problems for the white people, and we should draw closer together in sympathy and cooperation in the effort to make our country a better place in which to live, and to make our people rich in all the gems of human character.

## GEORGE'S WORK

BY JAMES HARDY DILLARD

IN THE eighteenth chapter of the Book of Jeremiah it reads like this: "I went down to the potter's house. He was at work with his wheel; and whenever a vessel he was making got spoiled in his hands, he re-moulded it to please himself, till he was satisfied." The saying "to please himself" means to get it up to what he knows to be the right thing. Every good workman has this spirit of doing things over until the right ideal is reached.

Teachers have to have this spirit. There they stand before their classes. The classes have certain things to learn, let us say the addition of fractions, or the geography of Georgia, or the story of the war of 1812, or the physiology of the human hand, or how to hemstitch. No matter what the job be, the point is to have it done thoroughly and patiently, over and over if necessary, until the satisfying standard is reached. This is just the opposite of having it done just to be through with it.

It is awfully easy, we know, to drop into a routine and