

THE VOICE OF AN OPTIMIST

RAISED IN REBUKE TO THEORIES
ADVANCED BY NOAH BAXTER.

TWO GENERATIONS IN THE BALANCE

The New Negro Not Inferior to the Old—Altered Demands of the Times—Spectacles Must be Re-adjusted to New Conditions—The Negro in a Transitory Stage—Undergoing a Refining Process—A Word for the Industrial Army—Choosing Between Two Pictures—Mr. Thompson Takes up the Gauntlet Thrown Down by the "Sage of Marble Falls," and Chants an Inspiring Creed.

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"Survey the whole, nor seek slight faults to find."—Pope.

EDITOR FREEMAN:

I ought to feel immensely flattered by the steady attention paid me by our distinguished antiquarian from the great Lone Star State, Uncle Noah Baxter. It would be an unpardonable breach of courtesy not to appropriately acknowledge the compliment of being bracketed with the eminent writers of the day, and exploited far and wide as one whose opinion is entitled to some weight relative to the speed at which the "progress" of the race is being "pushed along." Uncle Noah's original letters have been read with interest and his logic is always entertaining, if not at all points sound. In reviewing his recent effusions, the sarcastic references to the "grate newspaper writers," the "Thompson Boy," as well as the parting threat to brand the ellence of certain persons as cowardice, are irrelevant to the subject, and may be passed by without serious notice. More than usual pressure upon time and pen in other directions unavoidably delayed the contribution promised some weeks ago, designed to answer some queries propounded by the illustrious Sage of Marble Falls. Fortunately my pen is not "done broke," and the ink retains its liquid form. The orchestra will please strike a chord!

Several of your very able staff have justly accorded Uncle Noah a large measure of praise for some very practical suggestions for race improvement. To much that is said, our people should give prayerful attention; but I fear, that in commending in the aggregate, our writers have unwittingly endorsed a current of thought—cleverly concealed amid glittering generalities—that they would quickly condemn if separately considered. Lack of race confidence, and a squinting eye at laudable achievements are the twice stumbling blocks in the Negro's pathway to loftier heights. Bearing this fact in mind, I feel constrained to take issue with our aged for two reasons: First, the plausibility of his half-truth theories appeal dangerously to the superficial investigator and their peralistent agitation through so influential a medium as The Freeman gives them a pretentious value. Second, the deplorable tendency of the age toward pessimism, and the too prevalent habit of establishing racial status by isolated examples find an unhealthy encouragement if left unchallenged or unrebuked. It is far from my purpose to close my eyes to damaging facts concerning the colored people, nor to unduly extol their virtues. These scattering remarks are not put forward as an emancipation day oration, keyed to the pitch of brass bands and set to spectacular accessions to catch applause from the galleries. They are opinions grounded in all sincerity.

Every community is plentifully besprinkled with the Noah Baxter type. He is found in the church, the school room, and in politics, and every innovation looking toward a departure from threadbare methods must whip him in a hand-to-hand conflict before it can hope for a life. Some weeks ago I aimed to pay a just tribute to these pioneers as race builders. I withdraw no part of that eulogy upon their valuable service in laying the foundation upon which many have risen to eminence in letters and statecraft. But the world moves on, and with the birth of new conditions, the workman employing antiquated tools must either buy up-to-date ones or be distanced in the race for preferment. The pioneer's prestige is gone and his usefulness is at an end, unless he has kept pace with modern thought or is willing to follow progressive leadership. The class of Noah Baxter's who learn nothing new and forget nothing old, cannot be other than biased in judgement, contracted in vision, and false in reasoning, because of inspiration drawn from incorrect standards. The hypochondriacs and dyspeptics, who see nothing but the growth of unfavorable conditions in our race, and who view history with their faces turned backwards, are unsafe guides for the impressionable youth, yet, they are among the first to denounce the white people for judging us in the same manner. The pessimist is consistent only in his inconsistency. If our eyes are ever open to defects and our ears alert for complaints, it would be easy for all to join in a cry that the "progress of the race" is a delusion and a snare, and advise that a receiver

be speedily appointed to wind up our affairs as citizens.

But, happily, there are among us newer generations, with hearts quickened by hope, and whose minds are brightened by the spirit of modern institutions. They are profiting by the mistakes of the past. They are improving upon the crude, though strong foundations bequeathed by their forefathers, and are establishing new standards—aiming toward higher ideals than the most sanguine of ante-bellum heroes ever placed within the range of possibility. Some of these energetic soldiers of fortune are young—"boys," forsooth! And, while not desirous of playing Pitt to any antiquated Walpole, they are thankful that their follies show no sign of increasing with age, and rejoice that years of experience do not intensify ignorance or beget stupid obstinacy. The sensible young man of to-day respects gray hairs, and listens with tolerance when judgment repudiates; but he must not be asked to follow a leadership that flies "Despair" at the mast-head, or to step in unison with the "Dead-march in Saul." He will not agree that in being young he has committed a crime for which he need be held responsible. This is an era of progress—of get up and get. It has no time for jeremiads. As Carlyle aptly says: "The race of life has become intense; the runners are treading upon each others heels. Woe be to him who stops to tie his shoe-string."

Uncle Noah Baxter invites a comparison between the modern Negro and the Negro of the slave period as pushers of "progress." If Uncle Noah contends that the race is not advancing as rapidly as "befo' de wah," and that the men and women of to-day are not the peers of their predecessors, the issue is respectfully joined for a finish. I assert with renewed confidence that we are now living in the highest epoch that civilization has known, and that the future is rich in promise. To be sure the way toward the goal is strewn with failures, and many more will be added to the roll of unfortunates, but the aggregate mass will undoubtedly move up a peg with each generation. At each movement the friction will grow more and more painful, perhaps, but the increment of brain and brawn, improved facilities and fuller experience will give sufficient vigor and view to off-set the disadvantage of keener competition and sterner demand.

In not accurately estimating the effect of changed conditions is where the Noah Baxters make their mistake. They measure "progress" solely by surface results and isolated instances, forgetting that nature never sleeps, and that revolutions, like coral reefs, are the slow accumulations of centuries of almost imperceptible activity. The shell of a great building goes up rapidly, after which the work seems to slacken in pace. Ordinarily, it does not. Its character simply changes. The rough exterior—all that the superficial observer sees—can be hurried along, but the artistic carving, the rich moulding, the graceful statuary and the fine interior finish, which give tone, character and beauty to the structure, necessarily call for time and superior skill. Yet, the quality of advancement is as proportionately valuable as the first and expressive of a much higher grade of culture. The hard schooling ante-bellum times, continuing through the generation following emancipation gave form and stability to the race, but the advanced training now in vogue is a polishing process, and is rapidly placing the black man in touch with the finer civilizations about him. The Negro this decade is in a transitory stage, and if surface results do not appear so formidable, the way is being systematically pared toward a more elevated plane of citizenship. The restless energy of the age carries with it constantly changing conditions and differences in the peculiarity of demand. The palmy days "befo' de wah" gave evidence of the Negro's marvelous possibilities, and those who rose an inch above the level of their fellows, are entitled to a large need of praise. Strong occasions developed strong, courageous men, and pushed to the front individuals who, in less exciting times, might have remained in obscurity. The moderately smart man was a wonder. Ability to solve a problem in long division was an open sesame to the minor intellectuality. An ordinary achievement was voted a marvel, and a fair accumulation of this world's goods was a theme for the chronicler of treasurer's tales. Mediocre attainments passed muster and insignificant departures from the beaten path, merely deemed worthy of laudatory paragraphs. Now, under later standards,

the educated man and the accomplished woman are taken as a matter of course. The successful church builder, the university promoter, the profound scholar, the prosperous business manager, the experienced journalist, the eloquent orator, the literary genius, the office-holder and the man of means come as the natural product of improved opportunities. We have ceased to stare at them with open-mouthed astonishment. They no longer "set the rivers on fire," for they are not the novelties they used to be. They hail from every state, city, village and hamlet. The name of our smart men is legion. These two eras of progress must be compared with altered conditions in mind, or the judgment will fall short of justice.

Uncle Noah very plaintively points to the many bales of cotton he could put up for his "ole misses" before freedom "brake out," and bewails the fact that the educated Negro cannot do so well now. This difference was clearly analyzed a short time ago in The Freeman by "M. R. Right" who gave evidence of deep thought upon agricultural science, land taxation, etc. He attributed the alleged falling off of production and the Negro's apparently proved showing to the heavy increase in land values in the South, the depreciated market, the deadly competition, the relative unprofitableness of cotton raising and the diversification of industries—in which theory he is correct. The progress of great masses must be computed by averages and considered in broad generalizations.

If the individual Negro is not baling so much cotton or fattening so many hogs, he is achieving success not less important in a wider field. The Negro race is still cultivating the soil with goodly results, but more than that it is invading the arena of intellectuality and skilled industry. The modern generation is giving to civilization Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee, Council and Normal, besides magnificent institutions of learning everywhere, organizations for material development and moral culture, powerful journals, writers, teachers, preachers and professional men of superior qualifications. These times demand stronger equipment to achieve former results, for with such an army of able contestants in the field, stubbornly refusing to yield a point of vantage, the competition is intense, the pace maddening and victories are richly earned. In your quiet little pastoral home, Uncle Noah, soothed by the perfume of May blossoms and lulled by the music of happy birds and bees, you cannot estimate the grinding force of these great municipal mill-stones, under whose influence only the fittest may survive. You point to your neighbors' boys who have come back from the cities to die. You shake your hoary head sadly and exclaim "Fast life, wine, women, cards!" The majority of these farm lads, my dear old friend, are simply crushed between the upper and nether mill-stones of an exacting civilization. They are outclassed in the battle they are rash enough to enter without testing the quality of their armor. This higher standard must be reckoned with in estimating latter-day achievements. The large percentage of failures, or numerous cases of individual unworthiness, do not, in the eyes of discerning men, indicate race deterioration.

Look at the quadrupled efficiency, the greater magnitude of undertakings, the ceaseless striving for loftier pinnacles, the rapidly narrowing gap between the blacks and whites in all the departments of human activity! Then strike a balance. For every shining light of Uncle Noah's boyhood, the youngster of to-day can inscribe the names of fifty upon honor's luminous scroll.

Uncle Noah's sneer at the educated young men and women who go North or East is narrow, ungenerous and wholly out of place. It was unworthy of the kindly countenance that recently beamed from the Freeman's star page. These young people go North no doubt in the hope of escaping the galling barriers which cramps their ambition. They go out as modern Jasons in search of the Golden Fleece. Some performer, must miss their aim, and may ultimately land into the station of cook, waiter, lady's maid, body servant or hack-driver. This is true of all races and the dusky Jasons but shares the lot of his Irish, German or French brother. There is no royal road over which the poor may comfortably "push the progress of the race along." "It is the wisdom of a fool to laugh at the unfortunate," says an old saw. None of us are dead and buried yet.

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