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Chapter 11: An Appeal for Justice

While the Atlanta Exposition was in progress, the State Constitutional Convention of South Carolina was in session, having been convened for the specific purpose of passing a law that would result in disfranchising the greater proportion of the Negro voters. While this Convention was in session, I addressed an open letter to Senator Benj. Tillman of South Carolina, which read as follows:

"I am no politician. I never made a political speech, and do not know as I ever shall make one, so it is not on a political subject that I address you. I was born a slave; you a free man. I am but an humble member of an unfortunate race; you are a member of the greatest legislative body on earth, and of the great intelligent Caucasian race. The difference between us is great, yet I do not believe you will scorn the appeal I make to you in behalf of the 650,000 of my race in your State, who are to-day suppliants at your feet, and whose destiny and progress for the next century you hold largely in your hands. I have been told that you are brave and generous, and one--160--too great to harm the weak and dependent; that you represent the chivalry of the South, which has claimed no higher praise than that of being the protectors of the defenseless. I address you because I believe that you and those associated with you in convention, have been misunderstood in the following dispatch to a number of papers:

'An appalling fact that may not be obvious at a first glance, is that the course proposed means the end of Negro education and Negro progress in South Carolina. This is openly admitted by Senator Tillman and his friends.'

It has been said that the truest test of the civilization of a race is the desire of the race to assist the unfortunate. Judged by this standard, the Southern States as a whole have reason to feel proud of what they have done in helping in the education of the Negro.

I cannot believe that on the eve of the twentieth century, when there is more enlightenment, more generosity, more progress, more self-sacrifice, more love for humanity than ever existed in any other stage of the world's history, when our memories are pregnant with the scenes that took place at Chattanooga and Missionary Ridge but a few days ago, where brave men who wore the blue and gray clasped forgiving hands and pledged that henceforth the interests--161--of one should be the interests of all -- while the hearts of the whole South are centered upon the great city of Atlanta, where Southern people are demonstrating to the world in a practical way that it is the policy of the South to help and not to hinder the Negro -- in the midst of all these evidences of good feeling among all races and all sections of the country, I cannot believe that you and your fellow members are engaged in constructing laws that will keep 650,000 of my weak, dependent and unfortunate race in ignorance, poverty and crime.

You, honored Senator, are a student of history. Has there ever been a race that was helped by ignorance? Has there ever been a race that was harmed by Christian intelligence? It is agreed by some that the Negro schools should be practically closed because he cannot bear his proportion of this burden of taxation. Can an ignorant man produce taxable property faster than an intelligent man? Will capital and immigration be attracted to a State where three out of four are ignorant and where poverty and crime abound?

Within a dozen years, the white people of South Carolina have helped in the education of hundreds of colored boys and girls at Claflin University and smaller schools. Have these educated men and

women hindered the State or--162--hurt its reputation? It warms my heart as I read the messages of the Governors of Alabama, Georgia and other Southern States, and note their broad and statesman-like appeals for the education of all the people, none being so black or miserable as not to be reached by the beneficent hand of the State.

Honored Sir, do not misunderstand me; I am not so selfish as to make this appeal to you in the interest of my race alone, for, thank God, a white man is as near to my heart as a black man; but I appeal to you in the interest of humanity. 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' It is my belief that were it the purpose of your convention, as reported, to practically close Negro school-houses by limiting the support of these schools to the paltry tax that the Negro is able to pay out of his ignorance and poverty after but thirty years of freedom, his school-houses would not close. Let the world know it, and there would be such an inflowing of money from the pockets of the charitable from all sections of our country and other countries, as would keep the light of the school-houses burning on every hill and in every valley in South Carolina. I believe, Senator Tillman, that you are too great and magnanimous to permit this. I believe the people of South Carolina prefer to have a large part in the education of their own citizens; prefer to--163--have them educated to feel grateful to South Carolina for the larger part of their education rather than to outside parties wholly. This question I leave with you. The black yeomanry of your State will be educated. Shall South Carolina do it, or shall it be left to others? Here in my humble home, in the heart of the South, I beg to say that I know something of the great burden the Southern people are carrying, and sympathize with them; and I feel that I know the Southern people, and am convinced that the best white people in South Carolina and the South are determined to help lift up the Negro.

In addressing you this simple message, I am actuated by no motive save a desire that your State, in attempting to escape a burden, shall not add one that will be ten fold more grievous, and that we all shall so act in the spirit of Him who when on earth went about doing good, that we shall have in every part of our beloved South, a contented, intelligent and prosperous people."

Soon after the Exposition, in reply to a request from the editor, I addressed the following letter to the Atlanta Journal on the benefits of the Exposition:

"Without doubt the Atlanta Exposition has helped the cause of the Negro. Before the event there was much honest difference of opinion among members of the race as to the advisability--164--of our taking any part whatever. Many of the objectors earnestly advocated by word of mouth and through the press the policy of 'hands off,' others as much opposed participation, yet kept silent, and, so far as public expression was concerned, maintained a neutral position. From the one class no help was received by those trying to collect an exhibit; from the other, direct opposition was encountered. By reason of these disadvantages, the Negro exhibit, while highly creditable under the circumstances, was not by any means what it would have been had there been unanimity of purpose and concentrated action. There is, however, little difference of opinion, either within the race or outside of it, as to the good resulting from the Negro's part in the Exposition. Many, who for various reasons did not sanction a Negro exhibit, are inclined now to favor our embracing, as they are offered, these opportunities for showing of what we are capable along the various lines of activity. Others, still holding to what they consider the logic of their position, yet concede and rejoice in the good accomplished.

In the first instance, this Exposition has given the colored people an insight into their ability to accomplish something by united effort. There are two points to consider in this statement; that the colored people have been helped to a fuller--165--knowledge of their capabilities, and that they have been taught a practical lesson in the value of co-operation. Neither of these points can be too much emphasized. Without self-confidence, self-respect, a certain amount of self-assurance of the proper kind, nothing can be achieved, either by an individual or by a race. We must believe in ourselves, if we would have people believe in us. If we wonder, 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?' what must we expect of others?

Of but little less importance is the expressive example afforded of the power of co-operation. Mutual distrust, disinclination to unite forces, and inability to carry on concentrated action, belong to the dark days and are the badges of inferiority. We shall rise largely in proportion as we learn to join hands and to further mutual interests by joint action. The very effort to do something, to make something, in connection with the Exposition, regardless of intrinsic value of the thing produced or achieved, has been helpful and developing in its tendencies. We learn by doing and 'rise on stepping stones of our dead selves to higher things.'

The Exposition has also given thousands of white people, North and South, opportunities to see some of the best results of the Negro's advancement. It is a fact that always has been recognized and deplored by the better element of--166--the colored people, that most white people see and know only the worse phase of Negro character. They live side by side with the brother in black and yet have no acquaintance with him beyond the slight knowledge gained of those serving them in menial capacities. So, perhaps, the entire race is judged by a few individuals who have had little or no opportunities for advancement along any of the lines that make for a higher civilization. The homes of culture, the work of the school, the progress in the industries, in the arts, in all things that tend to prove the Negro a man among men, have been as a sealed book to the vast majority of the white people in all sections of our country, and the adverse judgments that have been formed as to the Negro's worth and ability may be attributed more to an unfortunate ignorance and blindness on the subject than to any intention or desire to be unjust. Of no class of people, probably, is this truer than of the class commonly known as the 'poor whites' of the South. It was both interesting and amusing to view their surprise as they entered the Negro building at Atlanta, and to listen to the exclamations of astonishment which escaped them as they walked around and observed the exhibits. 'What, this the work of niggers!' Race prejudice received a heavy blow at Atlanta. The white man left with increased respect for the Negro, and he will show--167--it in his future dealings with the members of the race. The Negro in turn, appreciative of the recognition accorded him, will entertain more cordial feelings toward those showing him such consideration. The Exposition brought the Negro prominently before the country. The attention of the press was drawn to him. Leading scientists and educators sat in judgment on the products of his brain and skill, ranged side by side with those of his white competitors for honors. His position as a part of the body politic was emphasized as never before. The impression his exhibit made was not such as to render him, in the eyes of the country, less desirable as a citizen than he had seemed before. On the contrary, his capabilities in various directions have been strikingly exemplified, and it has been demonstrated that he can measure up to the full stature of a man.

As might have been anticipated, the showing made by the school was most creditable. The friends and advancers of Negro education must have felt that their bounty has not been misplaced. Especially must the great heart of the generous North have glowed with gratification. It is an interesting fact that out of the four highest awards, that of the gold medal made to educational institutions, two went to colored schools -- Hampton and Tuskegee.

--168--In speaking of the helpful prominence which the Exposition gave to the Negro's cause, we must not omit the influence of the Negro congresses. The very presence in Atlanta of so many well-dressed, well-behaved, intelligent men and women of African descent, speaks loudly in our behalf. Besides, many wise words were uttered in the several addresses delivered and in the discussions which followed, and in all modesty, we think that we may claim that these black men and women made less perplexing some of the perplexing questions which confront us as a nation.

Not less important among the happy results of the exposition is that the Southern white people and the Negro have learned that they can unite successfully in business enterprises. They have been shown that because men differ on some points and are not as one in all the affairs of life, they need not stand entirely aloof from one another. They may meet upon the level ground of a common interest and work together towards the accomplishment of a mutual aim without loss of dignity or self-respect to either.

The exposition has encouraged the Negroes to become, more than ever before, producers. They have been helped to realize, as they may not have realized before, that no kind of toil is to be despised, that in every branch of industry the highest degree of proficiency should be sought,--169--that every product of labor is valuable in proportion as it approaches the perfect ideal which should animate the mind of every worker. Agriculture, the trades, education, the arts, have all received an impetus which will be seen in the more rapid advancement of the future. Above all, we are encouraged now by the certainty that recognition will come as it deserved. It is not too much to say that the recognition which the Negro received at Atlanta was the natural result of the development he has made during these thirty years of effort. Further opportunities will present themselves. Already other expositions are projected whose plans include a prominent part to be taken by the Negro.

'All things come to him who waits,' but the Negro must understand that he must work and wait; not idly rest upon his oars. We must not only be prepared to make a good showing when the opportunity comes for us to let the world see what in us lies, but each opportunity must find us better prepared. With the New South the New Negro must arise and modestly, manfully, courageously, take his place in the march of progress. The old order of things has truly passed away, and side by side, white men and black men must determine to work out their destiny to a successful issue."

During the Fall and Winter of 1895-96 I addressed--170--several audiences in various parts of the country, notably New York, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. At the meeting in New York, which was held in Broadway Tabernacle, Hon' Joseph H' Choate presided. I also addressed during the Winter of 1896 the Hamilton Club of Brooklyn, New York. The most important meeting which I attended, however, after the Atlanta Exposition, was a large meeting held in Carnegie Hall, New York, in the interest of the Presbyterian Mission. This meeting was held under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church. The meeting was of national importance in its character, and the entire Presbyterian Church throughout the country was interested in it. The President of the United States, Hon' Grover Cleveland, was the presiding officer. The speakers included, besides the President, Rev' T' DeWitt Talmage, D' D'; Rev' Sheldon Jackson, D' D', and myself. The hall was packed from bottom to top with the best and most influential people in New York and vicinity, and much good seems to have resulted from the meeting. The following are some of the extracts from my speech delivered on that occasion:

"My word to you to-night will be based upon an humble effort during the last fourteen years to better the condition of my people in the 'black belt' of the South.

--171--What are some of the conditions in the South that need your urgent help and attention?" Eighty-five per cent' of my people in the Gulf States are on the plantations in the country districts, where a large majority are still in ignorance, without habits of thrift and economy; are in debt, mortgaging their crops to secure food; paying, or attempting to pay, a rate of interest that ranges between twenty and forty per cent'; living in one-room cabins on rented land, where schools are in session in these country districts from three to four months in the year, taught in places, as a rule, that have little resemblance to school houses.

Each colored child in these States has spent on him this year, for education, about 70 cents, while each child in Massachusetts has spent on him this year, for education, between \$18 and \$20.

What state of morality or practical Christianity you may expect when as many as six, eight, and even ten, cook, eat and sleep, get sick and die in one room, I need not explain. But what is the remedy for this condition? It is not practical nor desirable that the North attempt to educate, directly, all the colored people in the South, but the North can and should help the South educate strong Christian leaders who will go among our people and show them how to lift themselves--172--up. That is the great problem before us. Can this be done? If in the providence of God the Negro got any good out of slavery, he got the habit of work. Whether the call for labor comes from the cotton fields of Mississippi, the rice swamps of the Carolinas, or the sugar bottoms of Louisiana, the Negro answers the call. Yes, toil is the badge of all his tribe, but the trouble centers here: By reason of his ignorance and want of training he does not know how to utilize the results of his labor. My people do not need charity, neither

do they ask that charity be scattered among them. Very seldom in any part of this country do you see a black hand reached out for charity; but they do ask that through Lincoln and Biddle and Scotia and Hampton and Tuskegee, you send them leaders to guide and stimulate them till they are able to walk." I also gave it as my opinion that the American Church has never yet comprehended its duty to the millions of poor whites in the South. I said: "When you help the poor whites, you help the Negro. So long as the poor whites are ignorant, so long there will be crime against the Negro and civilization."

During the same year I delivered addresses in several Western cities, including Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul and Milwaukee.

Immediately after my address in Carnegie--173--Hall, on the evening of March 3, I took the train in order to be present at the meeting of the Negro Conference which occurred on March 5, and arrived in Tuskegee just in time to take part in the discussion of this meeting.

Soon after my address at the opening of the Atlanta Exposition there began to appear adverse criticisms in some of the colored papers regarding the position I had taken in my address. Some of these colored papers felt that I had been entirely too liberal towards the South. I gave no special attention to these criticisms, but in March, 1896, I accepted an invitation to speak before the Bethel Literary Association in Washington. This, I think, is by far the most cultured literary organization in existence among our people, and Washington city had been the center of a good part of the criticisms on my Atlanta speech, so I felt that that city would be a good place in which to make my position more clearly understood and to emphasize my views. On the evening that I spoke in Washington, the meeting was held in the Auditorium of the Metropolitan Church, and I hardly need say that the building was full to such an extent that many were unable to find seats. In my address before the Literary Association I took very much the same position I had taken in my address at Atlanta, but of course went more into--174--detail. After my speech, those who heard me seemed to be entirely satisfied with my position, and the newspapers which had been criticising me, in a large measure, ceased to do so.-NA-