

The Woman's Part in a Man's Business

By Mrs. Fannie Barrier Williams

One of the speakers, at the last National Convention of the National Negro Business League was honest enough to make public confession that he owed his success as a business man to his wife, and I believe that if they were generous enough, the majority of the successful men could truthfully say that they too owe more to their wives than to any other one thing for their achievement as business men.

It is because of this unseen, and often unacknowledged influence that makes for a man's success in the business world, that I wish to say a word in behalf of this silent partner, who concealed from the public eye often stands between the business man and bankruptcy.

Within the last few years, we have come

to feel a new pride and a strong sense of confidence in the future of the Negro race, because of the fine courage and wonderful success our men are gaining everywhere as men of business integrity and influence. Indeed we have all been thrilled at times to hear that some of our business men are gaining everywhere as men of business integrity and influence. Indeed we have all been thrilled at times to hear some of our business men relate how they have conquered prejudice and all kinds of adversity in their strivings to build up large enterprises. But a doubt is raised in some quarters as to whether they merit all of this unqualified praise. Are they not inclined to forget the brave little woman behind the scene whose whole life, through sacrifice, finer instinct and

prayers have been much a part of their business success as the more tangible things of bargain and sale? If these same business men were to take pencil in hand to make an inventory of their assets and all the factors that have entered into their successful business career and leave out the wife, daughter or the girl book-keeper they would be sadly lacking a true sense of real values.

Now if we attempt to answer the question, "What is a woman's part in a man's business," there is a sentimental as well as a practical answer that might be given, and one is quite as important as the other, because the intangible things of the spirit are sometimes more real than the things we perceive by the senses. For example, what is business? Is it merely the things that some one has and that some one else wants? Is it mere money, checks, accounts and exchange of commodities? It seems to me that it means something deeper and of more permanent value than all this. If behind all this passion and strife to have and to hold or to buy and to sell, there is no finer motive than the mere piling up of profits—no love of wife, child or home—no incentive to make those who are near and dear to them participate in their success, business would be a very cheap and vulgar thing indeed. A man either goes up or down according to the incentives that lie behind his ambitions and efforts. If it be his honorable ambition to be worthy of a worthy woman; to educate a promising son or daughter and to establish a respected family name, all his energies and talents will be strained to the uttermost to battle against all possible failure or disappointments. It must appear then that these sentimental considerations are as much a part of a man's business career as fresh air, good sanitation and good government are the essential conditions of the physical

world and the government under which he lives.

There is still another view concerning the importance of the colored woman's part in the business affairs of our men in the future. In the first place, we are living, in what may be called, a woman's age. The old notion that woman was intended by the Almighty to do only those things that men thought they ought to do, is fast passing away. In our day, and in this country, a woman's sphere is just as large as she can make it and still be true to her finer qualities of soul. Her world is constantly becoming larger and fuller of the things that are spiritual and beautiful by virtue of her wider influence and larger participation in human affairs. Man is becoming less savage and woman more positive in raising the standards of human living. Sex lines in the professions and business are giving way to the increasing demands for more intelligence and conscience in human affairs. Of course a woman must always be a woman, but nature's laws, and not mere prejudices must fix the boundary lines to her mind, ambitions and aspirations.

Looking at women then from this view point of her larger vision and opportunities, what can we say of her possibilities in the business development of our race?

I do not think it too much to say that the American Negro woman is the most interesting woman in this country. I do not say this in any boastful spirit, but I simply mean, that she is the only woman whose career lies wholly in front of her. She has no history, no traditions, no race ideals, no inherited resources and no established race character. She is the only woman in America who is almost unknown; the only woman for whom nothing is done; the only woman without sufficient defenders when assailed; the only woman who is still outside of that world of chivalry that in all the ages has apotheosized woman kind.

Wars have been declared and fought for women; governments have been established and developed in the name of woman; art, literature and song have all conspired to make woman little less than angels, but they have all been white women. Colored women share in no practical way, and indeed are not included in those ideals and creations and since time began have been the inspirations and motives of man's supreme efforts and ambition.

Alas, what a cheap and common thing would this life be and how unspeakably insignificant would the status of womankind be to-day had not all the world of man made her the one object, nay the shrine of his most passionate devotion. Yet colored women must face an age in this part of the world, that insists that they shall not be included in this world of exalted and protected womanhood.

We believe that it is to be the high privilege of the Negro business man to lift the colored woman up and out of her hateful obscurity until she shall be known, loved and exalted because she is a woman and not be despised and mistrusted simply because she is a black woman.

As I understand the significance of the progress of the successful Negro business man, it is that in his increasing business relationship with the white race he is opening up a new and respected way of contact, a contact that will give us a kind and extended acquaintance with the white race that we have never before had. If our men can obtain and hold the acquaintance and confidence of the business world, they will be in a position to conquer more prejudices than we have yet been able to estimate. Colored women will never be properly known and the best of them appreciated, until colored men have become more important in those affairs of life where character and achievements count for more than prejudices and suspicions.

Every colored man who succeeds in busi-

ness brings his wife and daughter a little nearer that sphere of chivalry and protection in which every white woman finds shelter and vindication against every hateful presumption.

Every Negro business man who takes his wife into his confidence, who respects her judgment when deserved, who does all he knows how to do to exalt and idealize her talents and virtues and that of her kind, until she shall become the all-sufficient motive for his further endeavors, is doing his part to make Negro womanhood a part of all that is best and most beautiful in the world's conception of an ideal woman.

A beautiful home built by a man is a tribute, not only to his own wife and family, but is also a tribute to womankind everywhere. Every girl well educated is a tribute to womankind. Every school house or hall beautifully adorned and furnished, every artistic window placed in a church, as a memorial to wife or daughter, is a tribute to woman, and the men who have done these things, or can do them, out of their well earned success as business men, are doing their share to exalt Negro womanhood in America.

That colored women are becoming more and more worthy of this exaltation can be easily proven. She is making progress and year by year is contradicting the cruelly false things imputed to her. The colored girl, like the white girl, is pushing her way into every school whose doors are not closed to her complexion. She is learning book-keeping, stenography and business principles, her fingers are becoming deft in every trade and handicraft that is accessible to her, and above all she is diligently studying the smaller opportunities that escape the eye of the average young man, who is always looking for something large, and seldom finds it.

Let me illustrate what I mean by this statement: There is a woman in Chicago, who knew that she knew how to do one

thing well, and that was bread making. One of the largest stores in the city employed her by the week as a cook. She understood her business so well that her bread making increased the business of the store so much, that it became the foundation of a new and important department of the store, and to-day that colored woman directs the work only, while several white girls are employed and kept busy making and selling the goods made under this woman's directing skill.

Another colored women in Chicago began some years ago, on a small scale, to do hair work. From a small beginning, she now has a well established business that gives employment to several women. This woman began this business at a time when there were no examples of what was possible in this line of trade.

There are now many sensible young women in our large cities who have stopped worrying over the fact that they cannot get employment as clerks in department stores and have made family sewing such a well paid profession, that they make several times the salary paid to white clerks, and the moral and sanitary conditions of their environment are certainly much better.

As a further evidence of how our young women are training themselves for service in Negro business enterprises, it can be truthfully said that it is no longer necessary for a colored business man, in any kind of business, to employ white girls as accountants or clerks, as he can always secure a competent colored girl, if he so desire. It may also be added that wherever these colored girls are found alert and intelligent, the business man can feel quite sure that his interests are being protected and that a thirst for whisky, cigars or racing does not threaten his cash box.

I believe that the colored woman has as fine an aptitude for business as any other woman in the world, and making all due allowance for her limitations, she is en-

gaged in as great a variety of occupations as any other class of women, which is another proof of her aptness and versatility.

The Negro woman is really the new woman of the times, and in possibilities the most interesting woman in America. This is the woman who is destined to play an important part in the future business man's career. Indeed she is to be the conservative force in the business of many a man who is today prosperous and hopeful. Many a time he will turn to her in distress when, through over confidence or display, his credit is gone and bankruptcy is staring him in the face, to find his heart gladdened by the sight of many dollars, she has stealthily saved out of the surplus, he was trying to throw away.

There need be no fear that because of her larger participation in the business affairs of life, that the colored woman will lose her power and influence as a wife and home maker. A woman has a large degree of adaptability and hence is capable of doing almost everything that a man can do besides doing what is strictly a woman's work.

The progress of the colored woman is normal. In our development as a race, the colored woman and the colored man started even. The man cannot say that he is better educated and has had a wider sphere, for they both began school at the same time. They have suffered the same misfortunes. The limitations put upon their ambitions have been identical. The colored man can scarcely say to his wife "I am better and stronger than you are," and from the present outlook, I do not think there is any danger of the man getting very far ahead. It is because of this equality of condition and training that colored women are destined to share more intimately in the management of Negro business enterprises, than is true of any other class of women.

As a concession to any doubts that may arise as to this optimistic view of the value

of colored women, I will admit that I have been talking only of that type of colored woman who represents the farthest reach of progress amongst us. Her heart is being purged from the dross of a hated bondage, her mind is alert and she sees and feels, as no one else can, the whole range of baleful influences that shut her out of one half of the better world of love and beauty. Her deft fingers are on every pulsation of pain and progress of the narrow world in which she must live and work. She is the one

woman in America, who must find her enjoyment in contemplating the remote future and not by living in a joyous present. She must view the promised land of a better and juster age than ours and not aspire to enter it.

Yes she is a woman of love—a woman of honor, a woman whose vision of the true, beautiful and good lends enchantment to her being. With the interest of this kind of woman in a man's business he cannot fail, and without her he has already failed.