

THE NEGRO IN THE YAZOO-MISSISSIPPI DELTA.

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Among the many disturbing questions entering into our complex national life, the one above all others that seems to have provoked discussion in every quarter, is the so-called negro problem. Under this general designation have come to be embraced all the various and complicated questions arising from the contact at many points of the black race with the white. Not since the formation of this government has this discussion ceased, and ignorance has never been a bar to free participation in it. In a discussion of these questions in their broader aspects, though I have devoted some years to their consideration, I can claim no peculiar knowledge—no superior wisdom. The problem is so extensive in its ramifications, it presents so many and such varied phases, that to my mind there is but one proper and reasonable method of considering it: that is, through the analysis and study of its component parts—the attempted grasp and comprehension of the minor and elemental conditions and problems which enter into the composition of the whole. The intelligent study of this question must resolve itself at last into a study of local conditions.

A lifetime spent in the “blackest” of the south’s “black belts”; a sharer in the association between the two races in the life of the plantation,—the most constant and intimate association that is possible between them; a thorough acquaintance with the conditions surrounding the negro in a section wherein I firmly believe

will be discovered the region of his greatest material possibilities; these constitute my only equipment in venturing upon this discussion. It is to a consideration of local conditions only that this paper is addressed.

In the state of Mississippi, between the 32nd and 35th parallels of north latitude, its entire western border washed by the Mississippi river, and most of its eastern by the Yazoo, extending north from the confluence of those streams at a point just above the city of Vicksburg, lies the strip of territory known as the Yazoo-Mississippi delta. The exact origin of the word delta, as applied to this region, is not clear; though it was probably a simple extension of the old and accepted use of the word, descriptive both of the character and of the peculiar formation of the land built up by the diverging mouths of large silt-bearing streams. The character of the soil certainly justifies such a conclusion, for it is entirely of alluvial formation, detritus deposited during thousands of years in which the Mississippi has poured out its muddy flood waters over the adjacent country.

The Yazoo-Mississippi delta is about one hundred and fifty miles in length, and its greatest width is about one-third of that. Its front along the Mississippi is protected against overflows of that river by an unbroken line of levees, three hundred and ten miles in length, averaging fifteen feet in height, with a maximum of about thirty. The delta differs radically from the rest of Mississippi in many important respects, but in none more than in those wherein the negro is immediately concerned; hence only the nine counties lying wholly within it, Bolivar, Coahoma, Issaquena, Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tunica and Washington, are considered here. The alluvial valley of which these counties form a most important part has been called by

the most distinguished member of the Mississippi river commission, Judge Robert S. Taylor, of Indiana, "the cream jug of the continent." Of it he has written: "Nature knows not how to compound a richer soil. It can no more lie idle than the sea can keep still. Every square foot of it riots in vegetable life. . . . Its [the Mississippi's] floods came down loaded with skimmings from the great watershed above. Overtopping its banks, the enriched water spread far and wide over the alluvial area, so obstructed in its flow by the dense growth covering the land that its slackened velocity compelled it to let fall its load of sediment as it went. Thus the floods built up the valley year by year in layers of fatness, to live again in incalculable crops of grain, fruits and fibers."¹

By what warrant does this region claim attention in a consideration of America's gravest question? Simply because of the part it plays, and is destined to play, in the lives and fortunes of a constantly growing percentage of America's negro population. This has long been recognized by the authority just quoted. He says: "A feature of special interest in this connection [he was discussing the matter of levee protection] is the opportunity which the reclamation of the alluvial valley offers to the negro to better his condition. One-half or more of its entire area is suitable for cultivation of cotton. A bale per acre of ginned cotton, weighing five hundred pounds, is the standard yield—worth from thirty to fifty dollars according to the ups and downs of the market. . . . The negro is not seizing this golden opportunity as the white pioneer of the Northwest would have seized it, but he is not wholly neglecting it.

¹Tompkins, *Riparian lands of the Mississippi river*, p. 234.

In considerable and increasing numbers they are buying land and becoming independent cultivators. . . . Nowhere else in the south are as favorable opportunities offered to the black man as in the reclaimed Mississippi lowlands, and nowhere else is he doing as much for his own up-lifting."¹

The section of this territory with which we are concerned embraces an area of 5,480 square miles, containing about three and one-quarter million acres of land, with a population of 195,346. Of these but 24,137 are white, while the blacks number 171,209, a proportion of 7.1 blacks to 1 white. This proportion has increased steadily from 4.9 to 1 in 1880 and 6.7 to 1 in 1890, while in Mississippi as a whole it is almost stationary, being now 1.4 to 1, as against 1.3 to 1 in 1890 and 1880. I think I am not in error in stating that the largest proportion of blacks to whites exhibited by the last census for any part of the United States is found in one of the counties of this group, Issaquena, in which it is 15.5 to 1. In the same county the proportion was 15.7 to 1 by the eleventh census, and 11.1 to 1 by the tenth. Of the white inhabitants of the state but 3.7 per cent. are found in the delta, while 18.8 per cent. of all Mississippi's negro population make it their home. Comparison with former censuses shows this per cent. for whites to be practically at a standstill, while that for the negro is steadily increasing. In 1890 these percentages were 3.5 for the white and 17.7 for the negro, and in 1880, 3.4 and 12.6 respectively. From 1880 to 1890 the per cent. of increase of the white population of the United States was 26.7, and that of the negro 13.5. For the state of Mississippi these percentages were 13.7 for the one, and 14.2 for the other. During

¹ *Idem*, pp. 236, 237.

that decade the white population of the delta increased by only 17.3 per cent., while the increase of the black was no less than 60.4 per cent. Between the eleventh census and the twelfth, the white population of the country increased 21.4 per cent., and the negro 18.1. The figures for Mississippi exhibit a white increase of 17.6 per cent., with 22.2 for the negro. In the delta section of the state the increase was 23.5 for the white race, and 30.2 for the black. The last census shows that the negro constitutes 11.6 per cent. of the total population of the country, 58.5 per cent. of that of Mississippi, and 87.6 per cent. of that of the Yazoo-Mississippi delta.

Yet here we hear nothing about an ignorant mass of negroes dragging the white man down; we hear of no black incubus; we have few midnight assassinations, and fewer lynchings. The violation by a negro of the person of a white woman is with us an unknown crime; nowhere else is the line marking the social separation of the two races more rigidly drawn, nowhere are the relations between the two more kindly. With us race riots are unknown, and we have but one negro problem—though that constantly confronts us,—how to secure more negroes.

For many years this region was largely a *terra incognita*, and the story of its development and opening explains the figures of negro population. The character of its white population, and the conditions under which its soil is tilled explain the relations between the white man and the black. Until recently the only means of communication between the delta and the outer world were river boats, for not till 1883 was it penetrated by a railroad. We have only to compare the statistics of

negro population of the eleventh census with those of the tenth to see the results of railway construction.

The early settlers were from Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee. They were all slave holders, and the nature of the enterprises upon which they embarked demanded the possession of means. Hence this section early came to be the seat of large planting operations. There was no place for the man who was unable to own slaves; no demand for his services, other than as an overseer. There were no small farms, no towns, no manufacturing enterprises, no foothold for the poor white, who is here a negligible, if not an absolutely unknown, quantity.

Every step taken in the development of this section has been dependent upon, and marked by, an increased negro population. The railroad rights of way through its forests have been cut out by the negro, and every mile of track laid by his hands. These forest lands have been converted by him into fertile fields, and their subsequent cultivation has called for his constant service. The levees upon which the delta depends for protection from floods have been erected mainly by the negro, and the daily labor in field and town, in planting and building, in operating gins and compresses and oil mills, in moving trains, in handling the great staple of the country,—all, in fact, that makes the life behind these earthen ramparts,—is but the negro's daily toil. The capital, the devising brain, the directing will, constitute the white man's part, the work itself is the negro's. Nowhere else does manual labor find a higher or more certain wage; nowhere do better relations exist between employer and employed; nowhere are capital and labor on better terms. There are no strikes, no

lockouts, no combinations, no operating on half time, no reductions of force, and the works never shut down.

One of the gravest causes of trouble between the two races is contact on a common industrial plane. A peculiar effect is almost invariably wrought upon the negro's attitude toward the white man by such association, exemplifying the truth of the old maxim that "familiarity breeds contempt." I am not now discussing its cause, but one who knows the negro masses knows that their ingrained admiration for wealth and station, strong as it is, is no more controlling a mental habit than is their lack of respect for the opposite conditions. This is as true in the mines of the north as in the fields of the south.

If I were asked what one factor makes most for the amicable relations between the races in the delta I should say without hesitation the absence of a white laboring class, particularly of field laborers. It cannot be accounted for on the hypothesis that we have a peculiar class of negroes, for this population is a commingling of blacks from every section of the south, brought here without the slightest process of selection. The white population is composed of the professional class, those engaged in mercantile and manufacturing pursuits, and those interested in cotton planting, either as owners or managers. The white artisans are so few in number as not to affect this division, and the relations between them and the negro are identical with those between the two masses of population. Of the field of manual labor the negro holds a practical monopoly.

In saying¹ that each year his feeling grew stronger "that perhaps in the heat of passion, growing out of

¹Tuskegee Normal Institute, Annual report, 1901.

racial and sectional prejudice, we have not given the southern people due credit for the immense amount of help rendered the negro during the period he was a slave," that he was then "started on the foundation of agriculture, mechanic and household arts", Booker T. Washington has but given expression to a conviction which unprejudiced study would make universal. I am thoroughly satisfied that the conditions existing here to-day are largely a heritage from the slavery régime. By the violence of the civil strife which wrought the destruction of southern social and economic conditions, the delta was probably less affected than any other equal area in the south. For this its isolation and inaccessibility easily account. Out of the ruin which was the legacy of war to the southern states no section emerged with less of violent change as regarded race relations.

In the *Contemporary Review* for July, 1900, Mr. Philip Alexander Bruce has drawn a faithful picture of the old plantation system of the south. He says truly that "the most distinctive feature of the old industrial order", next to slavery, "was the large plantation." He describes the plantation as having been frequently a small principality in extent, the planter the absolute master of his own domain, "his word the supreme law, his wishes the governing influence." Mr. Bruce then sets against this a picture of agricultural conditions in the south of to-day, telling us that "the ruin of the old plantation system is complete." His portrayal of the essential features of the old system fairly describes existing conditions in the delta. Here the era of small farms has not set in, the process of land division has not begun. On the contrary, most of the large plantations are growing larger, and such small farms as do

exist have not been erected upon the ruins of larger tracts. Change of ownership has not meant disintegration, but has been effected by sales of property entire.

It may be remarked here, parenthetically, that the census rule treating every tract of land on which agricultural industry is conducted as a farm, while doubtless essential to thorough investigation, is misleading to the student who is ignorant of local conditions that materially modify the application of this method of classification. In the language of bulletin 100, Agriculture in Delaware, "The number of farmers, that is, persons operating farms as owners or tenants, is the same at any period as the number of farms." Thus every holding becomes a "farm", and a tract of 1,000 acres, known locally as a plantation, though entirely under one ownership and management, would appear in census reports as so many different farm holdings, the number being dependent upon the number of tenants living on it during the census year, the average acreage governed by the size of these various, arbitrary and temporary subdivisions. That such figures, unless accompanied by an explanatory note, lead to inaccurate conclusions, is well illustrated in an article in the *Boston Transcript*, May 25, 1901, based upon the showings of the ninth census. Taking Mississippi as a "typical state", the writer concluded—and this was for 1870—that the figures showed "a revolutionary increase in the small farms", "the great plantations of some states being almost entirely eliminated, as in the black counties of Mississippi."

The plantations of this section vary in size from five hundred to several thousand acres, and the proportion of negroes to white men living on them, from 25 to 1

to more than 100 to 1. Yet there is now no more feeling of fear on the white man's part whether for himself or his wife or his children, than in the days of slavery. As in the olden time, so now, the word of the planter or his representative is the law of the place, and on the one hand we have implicit obedience, on the other, firmness and moderation. Certainly the relation of master and slave no longer exists here, but out of it has been evolved that of patron and retainer. I so designate it because I know of no other to which it more nearly approaches. It is not at all one purely of business, the ordinary relation of landlord and tenant, or of employer and employee. The plantation owner or manager expects to do more than merely to see to the physical needs of the negroes under him, to provide for their wants and look over their work. He is called upon to settle family quarrels, to maintain peace and order between neighbors, to arbitrate disputes, to protect wives from the punishment of irate husbands, frequently to restore broken conjugal relations upon terms satisfactory to both parties, to procure marriage licenses and advise as to divorces, to aid in the erection of churches, to provide for the burial of the dead, to give counsel in the thousand and one matters peculiar to the plantation negro's life, whether whimsical or grave. Every plantation negro expects the discharge of these functions as a mere matter of course. Yet further, when in more serious trouble, he looks to the white man as to a friend, and appeals to him as to a protector, when a possible term in jail or the penitentiary looms up before him, and lawyers and bail are to be provided. All these things are mere incidents to the plantation system, the commonplace affairs of its daily routine. The negro regards them as his due, in return

for the proprietary interest and pride he feels in the plantation at large, his sense of being part and parcel of a large institution, and the certainty, in his own mind, that he himself is necessary to its success. Then too, there is his never failing assurance of ability to pay his account, no matter how large, his labor, when it is not too wet or too cold, his respect, and his implicit, and generally cheerful, obedience.

The one thing which in the south, directly and indirectly, has been the source of the gravest trouble between the races, and which has most disastrously worked their separation, has been the crime of rape. That it should lead to lynching was inevitable; it was equally inevitable that in time the same mode of punishment would be extended to less grave offenses. At the April meeting of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Dr. George T. Winston, of North Carolina, presented a most sombre picture of existing southern race conditions. He said: "The southern woman with her helpless little children in solitary farm house no longer sleeps secure in the absence of her husband, with doors unlocked but safely guarded by black men whose lives would be freely given in her defense. But now, when a knock is heard at the door, she shudders with nameless horror. The black brute is lurking in the dark, a monstrous beast, crazed with lust. His ferocity is almost demoniacal. A mad bull or a tiger could scarcely be more brutal. A whole community is now frenzied with horror, with blind and furious rage for vengeance. A stake is driven; the wretched brute, covered with oil, bruised and gashed, beaten and hacked and maimed, amid the jeers and shouts and curses, the tears of anger and of joy, the prayers and maledictions of thousands of civilized people, in the sight of school-houses, court-

houses and churches is burned to death. . . . I do not hesitate to say that more horrible crimes have been committed by the generation of negroes that have grown up in the south since slavery than by the six preceding generations in slavery. And also that the worst cruelties of slavery all combined for two centuries, were not equal to the savage barbarities inflicted in retaliation upon the negroes by the whites during the last twenty years.”¹

This forbidding picture is the best support for my contention that the wisest and most helpful study of this combination of intricate problems is from the local point of view,—the exhibition of conditions as presented upon particular horizons. From contrasts and comparisons some good may finally be realized. To be able to say that to one section of the south, at least, this picture presents not one familiar feature, is possibly alone enough to justify my presence here. I do not deny that this is a true statement of conditions in many sections of the south. I know too well that for many it is not overdrawn. I do not even assert that it is not more nearly typical of the south at large than is my own. But I do say that into the minds of the white men and women of my section, where not far from ninety per cent of all our people are black, where in our rural districts they sometimes outnumber us as much as one hundred to one, the thought of the possibility of rape never comes. Nor do I believe that in all this region there is a single plantation on which may not be found negroes who if left by the owner or manager in charge of his home would not fail to take the life of any man, white or black, attempting violence. They would know what was expected of

¹ Amer. Acad. of pol. and soc. sci. Annals, 18:108-9.

them, and that for the uttermost discharge of that duty not one hair of their heads would be harmed.

What is the cause of this difference between geographic divisions of a common country? I answer that our freedom from this curse is merely incidental to the general relations obtaining between the races, and properly ascribable to the general station and character of the white population, to the persistence of the same relative status between the masses of the two races that existed when the one was master and the other slave. Then the negro was bred to absolute obedience, made to respect the white race because it was white, taught that the person, even the name, of the humblest white woman was something not to be profaned by touch or word or thought. That feeling among the negroes, the result of this training, had enough vitality to project itself through the civil war, and through that period rendered safe the white woman who in the absence of her male protector typified in herself the dominance of her race. Through the influence of novel conditions in the process of time it began to disappear, and synchronously rape came to add its horrors and complications to the race problem. The influences and relations and peculiar lines of contact which wrought in the negro that mental habit are potent to-day in the delta, and in consequence rape is a crime we do not fear. I believe that this psychological habit is still latently persistent in the negro masses, and but requires contact with conditions approaching those which produced it to become again a controlling force. Thus I would account for the fact that in a negro population drawn from every quarter of the south there is absence not merely of the crime of rape, but of even the slightest disrespect to white women.

The peculiar attitude of the negro toward those upon

an equality with himself, makes possible such relations only where between the masses of the two races there is rigidly maintained the status of superior and inferior. This is not possible where a white laboring class comes into contact with the same negro class. To illustrate my general proposition, as seen from the negro's own standpoint, I may cite the following. In owning and operating a cotton plantation, I have come into relations with negroes from all sections of the country, and have had fair opportunities for observation. Before the abolition of the system, I was for a time a lessee of convicts from the state penitentiary. Among the prisoners allotted me was a particularly bright and efficient mulatto of about twenty-five years of age. He had a common school education, and was apt and skillful. He was serving a sentence for an attempted criminal assault upon a seventeen year old white girl in a county of my state where conditions obtain radically different from those existing with us. I was anxious to know how, if at all, he accounted for his crime, but he was reluctant to discuss it. Finally he said to me: "You don't understand,—things over here are so different. I hired to an old man over there by the year. He had only about forty acres of land, and he and his folks did all their own work, cooking, washing and everything. I was the only outside hand he had. His daughter worked right along side of me in the field every day, for three or four months. Finally one day, when nobody else was round, hell got into me and I tried to rape her. But you folks over here can't understand,—things are so different. Over here a nigger is a nigger, and a white man is a white man, and it's the same with the women". There was not the slightest intimation of accessory guilt on the girl's part; his only explana-

tion of his act was that "things were different". There was no fault upon the part of the attempted victim of his lust. Her only crime was a poverty which compelled her to do work which in the estimation of the negro was reserved as the natural portion of his own race, and the doing of which destroyed the relation which otherwise would have constituted a barrier to his brutality. I do not cite this as a typical instance, for many cases of rape occur wherein there is not even the occasion or opportunity of enforced familiarity. I give it for what it is worth, as the expression of a very intelligent negro.

If my theory is at fault, I **should** like to be told why it is that the delta negro never assaults a white woman, but does commit rape upon the women of his own race. This section while containing 18.8 per cent. of Mississippi negroes now furnishes 21.7 per cent. of the negro population of the state prison. Of the total number of convicts from the delta, 4.9 per cent. are serving sentences for rape. These convictions are upon presentments to grand juries solely by negroes, and from the circumstances are necessarily had solely upon negro testimony. It is a difficult crime to prove, but taking no account of the alleged cases, of those in which there seemed to the grand jury insufficient evidence to warrant an indictment, of those resulting in acquittals on the ground of consent, and of those which never came to the notice of the law at all, the number of convictions of delta negroes for the rape or attempted rape of negro women, during the past four years, is twelve. In 1898, there were three; one in the following year; three in 1900, and in 1901, to September 30th, there were five. The ages of those committing this crime range from sixteen to fifty-four, all but three being between twenty and

thirty-one. Some have been committed under circumstances as revolting as it is possible for the human mind to conceive.

Returning to the description of the economic condition of the negroes in my neighborhood let me say a word as to one of the most discussed features of the negro's life in the south, the house in which he lives. In the towns, where the negro rents or owns his home, it is whatever his ability commands, from a bare shelter, to a well furnished house containing four to six rooms. On the plantations the one-room cabin, that *bête noire* of social scientists, is not in evidence. They disappeared many years ago. Where one still stands it is deserted or temporarily occupied by cotton pickers or day hands. In the competition for laborers a steadily improving class of plantation houses is not the least of the inducements offered. If a family lives in a one-room cabin, it is a matter purely of choice; there are hundreds of a different kind to be had.

In the cultivation of cotton we have in the delta nearly every system of labor to be found in the south. They are roughly divisible into two classes, the more general being the true metayer, or some modification of it, and the other the fixed cash rental. Where the negro does not own the soil he cultivates, his relation to it is either that of a renter or a cropper. The share system presents no peculiar features. The cropper furnishes his labor in planting, cultivating and gathering the crop; the land owner furnishes the land, the team and the implements; and the crop is divided equally between them. The planter advances to the cropper such supplies as are needed during the year, to be paid for out of the latter's half of the crop. As soon as a quantity of cotton sufficient to pay this account has been

delivered to the planter, the cropper frequently receives his portion of the cotton, to be disposed of as he sees fit. The extent to which the cropper exercises control over his cotton varies with the locality.

The features of land renting by negroes vary according to the nature of the tenancy, whether the land is part of a plantation under white supervision, or a small tract, or part of a plantation entirely rented by a non-resident landlord. In the first case the land is rented for a fixed sum per acre, varying, with cotton prices and the character of the soil, from five to seven dollars. Where a lint rent is taken it varies from eighty to one hundred pounds. Generally speaking, the supervision over a renter is not as strict as that over a cropper, and as soon as his account is paid his cotton is at his own disposal. More privileges and a larger measure of independence are considered by the negro as incident to this tenure, and as he becomes the owner of a mule it is his ambition to become a renter. It frequently happens that a planter will rent a mule to a negro who has nothing at all, the uniform rent being twenty-five dollars. Under each of these systems certain general features obtain. The planter takes no deed of trust, for the state statutes give him a lien on the crop for rent and supplies. Nor is it usual to have any written contract other than a mere memorandum. There is generally no definite understanding as to the amount of supplies to be advanced, and it is well within the truth to say that usually the planter is engaged in an effort to keep the negro's account within such limits as will make it safe, while the negro is equally anxious to obtain as much as he can on credit.

The negro discriminates between the two systems, yet when results are considered, when one sees him

squander from year to year the proceeds of his labor, however obtained, when he is seen to move restlessly and aimlessly from place to place, gathering less moss than the proverbial rolling stone, it must appear to the close observer that, as a matter of fact, the system under which he works makes but little difference in his material welfare.

Where the negro rents land not under the supervision of plantation management, he obtains his supplies from a merchant or cotton factor. Here we have the crop lien system, so often, so earnestly, and, in my judgment, so unjustly inveighed against. What the negro obtains from the factor, and the manner of his getting it, depend largely upon himself. Usually his advances consist only of supplies, furnished him monthly or weekly. The only money advanced is such as the contingencies of cultivating or gathering the crop make necessary. The negro is dealt with just as his established reputation and the value of the security he has to offer may justify. The factor's method of self-protection is to take a deed of trust on the live stock and prospective crop, and is the same whether the applicant be a two-mule negro renter, or the white owner of a thousand acres of land, wanting ten thousand dollars of advances. The latter attaches his signature to a printed trust deed like that signed by the former covering his mules and crop to be grown. The amount advanced is governed by the character of the individual and the security. There is, however, this difference; the white man gets his advances in cash, available at stated intervals, while the negro gets the most of his in the shape of supplies. If, however, the negro has established for himself a reputation and credit, and is entitled to it under the standard applying to the white man, he can

secure advances in the same manner. On the other hand, if the white man is the owner of only two mules, he gets his just as does the negro. Of negroes of reputation and credit, there are in the delta a great many; of white men without property there are, fortunately for all concerned, extremely few. It is a matter of credit, and not of race.

Nor is the business custom which thus discriminates an arbitrary one. Experience has taught no lesson more severely than that the average negro will throw away—and I use the expression advisedly—whatever money comes into his hands. If he would refrain from this practice for a few generations, he could own from top to bottom and from side to side the section in which I live. Even where money is furnished the ordinary negro, it has to be done most carefully; for experience with padded pay-rolls and cotton that failed to make in the bale what the figures promised in the picking is so common as to excite no comment. Aside, however, from any consideration of honesty, the number of negroes who will not squander and utterly misapply funds coming into their hands—whether received under a solemn obligation to use them in making good the security pledged, a growing crop, or as the result of twelve months of toil—is so small that considerations of common business necessity dictate the course pursued. The negroes who are independent renters supplying themselves, or land owners, constitute practically the small thrifty class.

As to the crop lien system, *per se*, I regard it as distinctly the poor man's opportunity. Under it a negro who is honest—honest with himself in his work, and honest with those with whom he deals—who does not

waste his money on excursions, picnics, crap games, whiskey, women and pinchbeck jewelry, can out of this soil easily and quickly become an independent man. The proposition appears too simple to argue. Knowing the capabilities of the soil, the cotton factor knows that it alone can be made to repay what he advances in its cultivation. Upon the security of a lien upon what it shall produce he is willing to make possible its cultivation by one who would otherwise be unable to obtain advances. I believe the figures submitted below will demonstrate that the delta negro, by the exercise of common thrift and economy, can become independent as the result of two or three years labor. But so long as he wastes his money and opportunities, as is now his too common habit, the particular system under which he accomplishes these barren results need occasion economists and himself but little concern. Because better results are not more visible in the way of a greater apparent negro prosperity, we sometimes hear it asserted that even here the black man is denied opportunities for his betterment. This is a superficial observation, based upon conditions resulting from a failure of a proper achievement, rather than from the absence of opportunity.

One of the greatest factors in our demand for negroes is the necessity of securing each year a great number of extra cotton pickers. It is an axiomatic proposition with us that no negro family will pick the cotton which it will raise. Not that it cannot be done; on the contrary in an average year, and by the exercise of due diligence, it can; but it will not. In order to save the crop it is necessary to employ additional pickers. The size of the stalk and the great number of bolls make cotton picking on alluvial land very easy work; the utter dis-

regard, by planter and tenant alike, of the true economy of the situation makes it a lucrative employment. Picking is paid for without much regard to the price which cotton commands. Whether it be worth ten cents per pound or six, the price of picking remains very near to fifty cents per hundred pounds of seed cotton. During the fall months a good picker can easily average two hundred pounds, while many can pick as much as three hundred and fifty, per day. One of the most difficult matters of plantation management is to get the tenant to act upon the proposition that every hundred pounds of cotton picked by himself means a saving to him of the cost of picking. The opening of each season finds most of them clamorous for extra pickers.

To supply this autumnal demand for labor the towns empty themselves of great numbers of their negro population. The vagrant leaves for a season his accustomed haunts, the crap shooter and "rounder", in fewer numbers, betake themselves to the country to earn easily a few unfamiliarly honest dollars, and to ply their vocation among their rural friends, the cooks and wash-women desert their regular callings to such an extent as to make the season a time of dread for urban house-keepers. Yet this source of labor is soon exhausted, and the business of securing pickers from towns outside this section and from other states and other parts of Mississippi is regularly pursued by a number of negro "agents". Of the great number of negroes thus brought yearly into the delta, many remain to make crops themselves, attracted by the superior growth of cotton, and the display of money always incident to the season. I have seen more than a thousand dollars in silver paid out of a plantation office on Saturday night for extra picking alone, and in the presence of a curious,

eager throng, coming from sections in which such a thing as a handful of negroes handling so much cash as the result of one week's plantation work would seem almost incredible. Such things, taken with the novel surroundings, the large talk of negroes making more cotton and handling more money than many white farmers elsewhere, the scale on which affairs are carried on, such as the measuring and selling of cotton seed by negroes by the ton instead of the bushel, the evidences of plenty and to spare furnished by the spendthrifts around them—for your delta darkey, especially when in the presence of his brother from some less favored section, is as free a spender as the world affords—all this tends to fire the stranger with a desire to come into this land of plenty. It is thus that much of our labor is recruited, and some of it the best we have especially during the first two or three years of residence.

So far as I can judge, the delta negro presents no peculiar social phenomena. His life is the same which the race leads in sections where its material opportunities are not so great. The only difference I can observe is that there may be a greater tendency to the commission of crimes against the person. For purposes of comparison, I have taken the negroes of a group composed of the nine counties of Mississippi where they are most largely outnumbered by the whites. To this group for convenience I shall apply the local designation, "hill" counties. In this group the proportion of whites to blacks is more than four to one, as against a reverse proportion of more than seven to one in the delta group. We have seen that in the latter the negroes constitute 18.8 per cent. of the total negro population of the state; in the hill group they constitute but 2.6 per cent. We have seen that the delta fur-

nishes 21.7 per cent. of the negro state prison population; the hills contribute 3.4 per cent. A comparison of the crimes of the two groups discloses the fact that 50.1 per cent. of those in the hills and only 19.3 per cent. of those in the delta are burglaries, larcenies, forgeries and arsons. Crimes against the person make up 80.7 per cent. of the offenses of delta negroes, and 49.9 per cent. of those in the hills. It may seem somewhat singular that rape constitutes 6.2 per cent. of the graver crimes of the hill negroes, while, as has been shown, 4.9 are the figures for the delta. It is in the crimes of murder, manslaughter and attempts to kill that the delta negro exhibits his criminal propensity most strongly. These compose 75.8 per cent. of all of their felonies, and 43.7 per cent. of those of the hill negro. In the two crimes of larceny and burglary the hills district is far ahead of the other section, the percentage of total felonies being respectively 40.6 and 15.2.

In the lower class of negroes a predilection for petty gambling amounts almost to a passion. Their opportunity of indulging it depends upon their command of ready money. A majority of the murders committed in this section arise out of gambling. Therefore I would attribute the difference in the relative number of homicidal crimes committed by the negro in the two sections to the delta negro's greater command of money. Any one who has witnessed a genuine crap game, played as only the negro can play it, has no difficulty whatever in understanding how easy it is for human life to be taken in a dispute arising over the most trivial sum. It is an entirely conservative statement to say that on or near every delta plantation may be found from one to four regularly patronized crap tables, while in every town and village from one to a half-

dozen negro crap dives are run. Around these tables, specially on Saturday nights and Sundays, gather crowds of men and boys of all ages, scarcely one in five without a knife or pistol. It takes but a word to bring one or both into the game. Making no attempt to estimate the number of such affrays in which both parties are killed, and no trial possible, and not reckoning the number of killings in which the surviving party escapes, is acquitted by a jury or hanged, there are now in the penitentiary from this section alone no less than one hundred and fifty-four negroes serving sentences for taking, or attempting to take, human life. In the courts of this group of counties there were for these crimes in 1898 thirty-three convictions; in 1899, twenty-nine; in 1900, thirty-three; in 1901, to September 30, thirty-seven.

It would be idle to discuss such a matter as the sexual looseness which marks the conditions obtaining among the masses of these people. No new light could be thrown upon it, and no good accomplished thereby. It may be safely affirmed that the marriage contract possesses for them little if any sanctity. This may seem a hard saying, but no man acquainted with the facts will deny its truth.

In discussions of the negro we have been repeatedly told of late years that the race should be judged by its best element, and not by its worst, and that statistics of criminality were an unfair index to negro conditions. That it is unfair to base opinions and conclusions upon partial investigations is true. But it is equally true that we cannot form just estimates by considering only the few who have risen superior to general environments and are confessedly exceptional. The only true index to the life of a people is furnished by a study of its masses—

its great general class. It is with this mass in my section that I am dealing, and my statements would lose none of their force or truth by being met with the counter claim that there are negroes here who lead decent, respectable lives. No race as a race can rise superior to the condition of its family unit, and it is the disregard of the marriage relation, the brutality of husbands to their wives and of both to their children, which will probably for a long while most impress the student of the negro masses, rather than the fact that here and there may be found families and individuals who have adopted for themselves standards obtaining generally among another people.

One of the traits which militates most against the negro here is his unreliability. Given certain conditions one may reason to fairly certain conclusions regarding a white man. It is not so with the negro. He presents a bundle of hopelessly unintelligible contradictions. Take his migratory habit for instance as one manifestation of his characteristic unreliability. The desire to move from place to place, the absence of local attachment, seems to be a governing trait in the negro character, and a most unfortunate one for the race. It has led to the fixed conviction on the part of many people having constant business relations with him that in this respect the negro cannot be depended upon at all and that the treatment he receives has but little real effect in shaping his course. It is undeniable that there is abundant ground for the most extreme opinion. His mental processes are past finding out, and he cannot be counted on to do or not to do a given thing under given circumstances. There is scarcely a planter in all this territory who would not gladly make substantial concessions for an assured tenantry. I do not mean for

negroes who would stay with him always, and never take advantage of an opportunity for genuine betterment, but merely for such as would remain with him only so long as they were willing to work at all under the same conditions, and should receive honest and considerate treatment at his hands. Yet no planter among us can tell how many or which of his tenants of to-day will be his tenants of another year.

Not all negroes can become landed proprietors, any more than all mill operatives can become mill owners, or all wage earners capitalists. It is inevitable that there must always be a large class of negro tillers of other men's soil, corresponding to relative classes among all the races of mankind. It is then manifestly to the interests of these that they should seek for themselves conditions as nearly as possible approaching actual land ownership,—a fixed tenure, and the comforts of a home. This status need not mark the limit of advancement of all those entering it; it would but afford a stepping stone to such as proved themselves capable of turning good conditions into better. In all that I have said, I would not be understood as claiming that motives of self interest do not operate with the negro at all; I simply and emphatically assert that they do not at all intelligently control him.

The negroes in the delta not only make in the aggregate a tremendous amount of money, but they squander more than any similar class of people of whom I have any knowledge. There is no way of computing the amount expended by them in railway travel alone, but it is an enormous sum. This travel is for the most part entirely aimless, and it is a common thing for a negro to take a trip from a plantation to a town fifteen miles distant, with bare train fare in his pocket, and a crop

badly in need of his attention at home. On Saturdays field work is practically suspended and the day is usually given up to such aimless moving about, or to assembling around stations and stores to witness the arrivals and departures of others.

The greatest diversions of these people, however, are excursions and the circus. The former come at irregular intervals, from four to six times a year, and mean trips of from eighty to one hundred and fifty miles. The money spent on this form of amusement is nothing in amount to the annual tribute poured into the coffers of the circus. In the months of October and November two of the largest of these concerns now exhibiting gave a total of ten performances in the delta. Making a careful and conservative estimate of the amounts spent on the three items of railroad fare, incidentals and admissions, the sum total could not have been under fifty thousand dollars.

Among our negroes we have few drunkards, and but few who do not drink; nor is the drinking by any means confined to the men. Considering the prevalence of the habit, the only surprising feature is that so few drunkards should be found.

The line of demarcation between rural and urban life is so indistinct and persons pass so constantly from one to the other that there is not much difference between the negroes of the town and those of the country. In each place we find the good, the bad and the indifferent. As in the country we have the moving, shiftless element, so do we also have the shiftless darkey of the town; as in the one place we have the land owner or prosperous tenant, so in the other we have the man who owns his home, and has steady employment at excellent wages; the "rounder," the pistol carrier and the pro-

fessional crap shooter alike infest each. Throughout the delta there are negroes filling places of responsibility and trust. In the country the gin crews and engineers are practically all negroes, and there are negro foremen, agents and sub-managers. There are many constables, and there is in my county a negro justice of the peace. In my own town every mail carrier is a negro, and we have a negro on the police force. Some are employed by cotton factors and buyers, and earn from six hundred to a thousand dollars per annum. Others are employees of electric light companies, some are telephone linemen, and some are engaged in merchandising. Wages paid in the country range from fifty to seventy-five cents per day for common hands, though going sometimes to one dollar, up to \$1.25 and \$1.50 for gin crews. In levee work the commonest laborers receive \$1.00 per day, and the more skilled \$1.50. In towns the wages vary greatly. Hands in oil mills and compresses are paid from \$1.00 to \$2.00 per day, while the wages and earnings of porters, hackmen, dray drivers, teamsters, etc., range from ten to sixty dollars per month.

Mississippi makes no separate assessment of the property of the two races, and it is therefore impossible to arrive at the value of the property owned by the negro in the delta. The best that can be done is to estimate it. In 1900 the total assessed value of all the property in this group of counties was \$29,095,167. Of this amount railroad property constituted \$5,396,008, leaving a balance for realty and personality of \$23,699,159. Without going into the methods employed in reaching the result, I conclude that a conservative estimate of the value of negro holdings would be, in round figures, not less than one million dollars. This is probably encumbered to the extent of one half its value. I give this

estimate as a minimum figure, and the correct value may be much greater. It is hardly possible to judge the extent of the increase in negro property, but it is considerable, though by no means in keeping with the opportunities of the race. But even now one cannot travel through this section without observing negro land owners everywhere. They are scattered over its entire area, holding tracts varying in size from a town lot to more than a thousand acres.

In considering the negro's condition and opportunities here, the factors assume important proportions. The amicable relations between the races, the peculiarly fertile soil—the absence of the necessity for fertilizers alone meaning a great deal—and the superior quality of the cotton produced. Of race relations enough has been said; of the soil it is sufficient to say that it needs no fertilization. It has often been the occasion of curiosity to me to know what became of the fertilizer shown by the eleventh census to have been purchased by these counties. The amount expended is stated to have been only \$12,472, it is true, with a value of farms and products of \$16,771,090, but I have always doubted the accuracy of even these figures. Commercial fertilizer is an article unknown to us, and not handled by our dealers in plantation supplies.

The figures of the last census showing the comparative cotton acreage yield of this section, the state and the south, are not available, but it is not likely that much variation will be shown from those of the eleventh. These exhibit an average yield per acre of lint cotton for the south of 176.67 pounds, and for the state of Mississippi of 191.03 pounds. The yield of this county group was 257.87 pounds. It is only fair to state that the average of the state was increased by that of coun-

ties lying partly in the delta, but which, as explained above, have not been included here. While for a given year we have this average, the standard yield is with us five hundred pounds, and large areas will show a yield ranging between this and four hundred.

The cotton grown on this soil is much superior, both in the quality of its fiber and the length of its staple, to upland varieties. Taking its name from the fact of its growth in the bends of the Mississippi river at a time when it found its way to the port of New Orleans by means of boats plying that stream, it is known to the Liverpool, New Orleans and eastern markets as "benders," and commands a premium of about half a cent per pound over "uplands."

¹In conclusion I shall submit some of the features and results of a personal experiment with negro labor, carried on under conditions differing somewhat from those generally obtaining. Several years' experience in cotton planting led to certain conclusions relative to the usual manner of handling plantation labor. I became convinced for one thing that too much latitude was allowed the negro in the matter of his account and in the handling of his crop. Observation and experience satisfied me that better results could be obtained, for both the negro and the planter, by requiring the former to conform more strictly to business rules, and by making the relations between the two, in crop and money matters, more nearly of a purely business character. I also entertained the belief, not yet entirely dissipated that a reliable, industrious, and largely self-sustaining, plantation tenantry could be built up by effort along proper

¹The plan outlined here was a gradual development. In its execution credit is due Mr. Julian H. Fort, my business associate, and Mr. Carl Owens, manager of Dunleith plantation.

lines, coupled with a degree of liberality at the outset not entirely consistent with the general purpose of putting the negro on a strictly business footing.

Even casual observation will show that the greatest opportunity enjoyed by the negro for acquiring property is as a renter. It was determined, therefore, to adopt the rent system. The greatest objection to it is that, as it ordinarily obtains, it allows the negro privileges which he too often abuses. He does not take kindly to suggestion or direction as to what he shall plant, and wants to put practically all his land in cotton because it is a cash crop; he thinks he should be left free to work his crop when and as he pleases, which means frequently neglect, and oftener improper cultivation; having control of mules, he thinks that he should enjoy the privileges of riding them about the country, when both he and they should be at work, and of neglecting and poorly feeding them, if he so elect; in short, that he should enjoy various privileges and immunities which it is impossible to recite, but which are usually accorded by the custom of the country. These things mean that the negro as a renter is generally undesirable, often troublesome, and that his cultivation of land causes deterioration. To rent and yet avoid the difficulties ordinarily incident to the system was a problem solved by the use of a contract specifying in detail what was undertaken by each party, and reserving to the plantation management absolute control over all plantation affairs.

There is generally a great disproportion between the negro's ideas and his ability of execution; he wants to plant on as large a scale as possible, and will usually "overcrop" himself, undertake more land than he can cultivate, leading to the neglect of some, or all, of it.

It was accordingly determined to allot to each family only so much as it could cultivate thoroughly under all ordinary contingencies, believing that not only more money but an actually greater yield could be had by the tenant from twenty acres well handled than from twenty-five half neglected. Mules and implements were sold at reasonable prices and on two years time, one-half the purchase price payable annually. For handling the crop to the best advantage, as regards economy and grade, a thoroughly equipped gin plant was substituted for a less modern one, and as a means of lessening the cost of living to the tenant, and of encouraging the raising of corn, it was provided with a mill capable of making an excellent quality of meal, far more nutritious than the purchased, kiln dried article. The latter is operated once a week, the grinding being done for toll only, a bushel of meal being exchanged for a bushel of shelled corn. It may be remarked that during the three years of its operation there has been a marked increase in the demand for its services among the negroes of the neighborhood, many coming to it from distances of five and seven miles. Exercising the contract right of requiring the planting of as much corn as was deemed expedient, it was agreed, in return, that all surplus corn raised by the tenant would be taken off his hands at the market price.

In the accomplishment of the general objects in view, it was of as much interest to the plantation as to the tenant that the best possible price be realized for the latter's cotton. For this and other reasons, the privilege of absolutely controlling his crop was denied him. This was clearly stipulated in his contract, but he was not denied all voice in its disposition. He could sell it

to the plantation, if a mutually satisfactory price could be agreed upon, or he could let it go forward with the general crop, and have an accounting for its proceeds. One of the essentials to successful cotton growing here is thorough drainage. With this the tenant has nothing to do, it being stipulated that the land is to be kept well drained without cost to him.

Believing that not only is the laborer entitled to proper shelter, but that comfortable homes are a matter of plantation economy, these tenants are furnished excellently constructed houses, well lighted and heated. Each house has its driven well, kept in repair as an item of plantation expense. These houses, with the exception of some of three and four rooms, contain two rooms each, and are constructed with a view to accommodating a family working eighteen acres of land, that being the amount, per average family, from which the best results are found to be obtainable. It has been determined, however, in order to avoid any possibility of crowding, to add a third room to each of these houses. This is now being done, and within a year there will be no two-room houses remaining. Every effort is made to encourage tenants to raise gardens, and to own cattle and hogs, abundant pasturage being provided free. The proper care of live stock is rendered compulsory by close supervision.

To reduce the matter of advancing supplies as nearly as possible to a business system, a furnishing basis of fifty cents per acre, per month, for supplies only, was fixed upon. Incidentals usually require about twenty-five cents per acre additional. Each month the tenant is furnished a coupon book for the amount, in money, of his supplies, a twenty acre family receiving a ten dollar book, thirty acres securing one of fifteen dollars,

and so forth. These books are good only for supplies, such as meat, meal, tobacco, snuff and molasses, but it is agreed with the tenant that such coupons as he may have left in his book at the expiration of each month will be honored for whatever he wants. This is done with a view to encouraging economy, and to enable him to secure "extras" without increasing his account. Getting their meal without cost, by grinding corn, and getting flour in its stead out of their books, none of those who were on the plantation last year failed this year to secure with surplus coupons an abundance of sugar, coffee, rice, etc., at the end of each month to carry them through the following. This system possesses several advantages, not the least of which are that it saves the making of numerous small ledger entries, and enables the tenant to tell at any time during the month, from his unused coupons, the exact amount he has left to his credit, so that he may govern himself accordingly. The negroes regard the system with the utmost satisfaction, and would not exchange it for the usual method of "issuing rations".

To make a success of the system outlined here, three things were absolutely necessary: the utmost patience and good sense at the office, wise management, in the field, and discrimination in selecting tenants. Every negro known to be a professional crap shooter or pistol carrier was run off the place, all families known to be quarrelsome and troublesome were got rid of, and everybody whom it was necessary to compel to work was let go. Under no circumstances is a professional "exhorter", or lodge organizing preacher, allowed on the property. The virtue of patience has been exercised to a degree that has more than once threatened its destruction.

It would be manifestly unfair to judge such an experiment by its first year. This was a most troublesome, and, to the management, rather discouraging experience. Little was accomplished beyond getting affairs in easier running order. The third year is not yet closed, but promises results about in keeping with the second, the complete figures of which are available. There were in cultivation in 1900 thirteen hundred acres. The total value of the product was \$54,000, an average of a little more than \$41.50 per acre. There were on the place sixty-one families, containing eighty men and eighty-one women, including children old enough to work, and sixty-seven younger children, a total of 228 persons in families. These families occupied sixty-one houses, containing 147 rooms, an average of 1.5 persons to the room. There was an average of 3.7 persons to the family, while the average number of hands who assisted at some stage of the crop was 2.6. In addition to the families, there were eighteen wages hands employed, who, though separately housed, must be added to the number of working hands, giving a total of 179. We thus have an average acreage to the working hand of 7.2, with an average product value of \$301.67 per hand. Cotton was raised to the value of \$41,000, being 818 bales of 500 pounds average, or 4.5 bales, 2250 pounds, to the working hand. The yield was in excess of 450 pounds per acre of cotton land. It should be stated that while these wages hands assisted in various stages of the crop not all their time was thus employed by any means, for some tenants did not need extra hands at all. They were used, when not in crops, in clearing new land, ditching, and other plantation work.

The negroes with whom we started, in January, 1899, with possibly three exceptions, had absolutely nothing, barring their clothing, bedding and furniture,—all of the scantiest and poorest kind. It would be a most liberal estimate to put their entire belongings at that date at an average value per family of \$30. Yet they were an average lot of plantation negroes; they were of many ages, and came from many sections; of the older ones, most had had something, but had lost it in shifting from pillar to post, and at fifty and sixty years of age were empty handed; some had lived on a dozen different plantations in as many years. They had thus to start with us actually owing for their first week's supplies. After the lapse of three years, the average value of the property owned by the sixty and more families on the place may be conservatively estimated at \$200. This, of course, includes no cash on hand or to their credit on our books. After paying their accounts, the tenants on the place in 1900 received \$11,000 in cash. Their balances this year will amount to about the same figure. They have good clothing, their houses are now comfortably furnished, and for cooking purposes the open fire place has given way to the kitchen stove.

The following statement is drawn directly from the plantation ledger of 1900. It is the account of two men who worked together as a family. These hands were above the average in point of steadiness and efficiency, but the account is fairly illustrative of the possibilities to the negro of good soil, fair prices, hard work and economy. It will be noted that the value of their product per acre appears to be greater by about eight dollars than the average of the plantation, but this apparent difference will be explained by stating that in computing

the latter the entire acreage of the plantation was included. If we exclude from consideration all raw, first year land, such as was not allotted to renters, the difference will be shown to be very much less.

ACCOUNT.

DEBTS.

Land rent, 21 acres, \$6	126 00
Mule, paid for entirely in first year,	100 00
Gear and implements	18 50
Planting seed	10 30
Seed corn	1 15
Supply account	98 25
Sundries	18 20
Picking 6 ½ bales cotton	59 45
Ginning and wrapping 19 bales cotton, 500 lbs. av. ..	57 10
Mule feed	43 50
	<hr/>
	\$532 95

CREDITS.

Nineteen bales cotton	865 14
Cotton seed—9.4 tons	117 75
Corn—105 bushels—market price at time, 50 cts. ...	52 50
	<hr/>
	\$1035 39

Profits \$502.44.

Holding their corn, they had, as the result of the year's operations, property worth \$171.00. It will be seen that their cash crop overpaid their account by \$449.94.

As to the effect of the showing exhibited here upon the negro, if any, it is impossible to judge. Some of those who had least at the outset and have most to-day are preparing to leave—though they may change their minds in a night, after having made their arrangements to depart, while some have already left. To arrive at a just conclusion on this point at least five years would be required, and only such tenants as removed to other places to continue the tenant relation could be considered in enumerating the removals. It would be mani-

festly unfair, in considering the extent and influence of a migratory, restless habit, to attribute to it such as were actuated by opportunity and desire to purchase land. Of those who have thus far left the place, not one has done so to become a land owner.

All that I have said of general conditions in the delta applies, in greater or less degree, to all the 29,790 square miles of the alluvial valley of the Mississippi. The future of this territory will inevitably be linked with the future of the American negro. The movements of black population, as indicated by the last three censuses, show this clearly enough. In discussing the conditions surrounding the negro in the Yazoo-Mississippi delta, I have not attempted to present such a picture of rural felicity as John Stuart Mill quotes from Chateaufieux of the metayers of Piedmont. But I am well within the limits of conservatism when I assert that in the material potentialities of his environment the situation of the negro here is infinitely superior to that of any European peasant. It is not claimed that there are no instances of injustice to the negro. Not at all. But I do claim that nowhere else is his general treatment fairer,—nowhere is his remedy more certain. This is but corollary to the proposition that nowhere in the same extent of territory will be found a greater or more constant demand for his labor. Nowhere does he find a better market for his service, nowhere is he freer to change his local habitation.

To say how long conditions, particularly as regards the relations between the races, will remain as they are, would be to enter the field of speculation,—a pastime in which I am not engaged. The presentation which I have attempted is believed to be a not unfaithful portrayal of the present; with what the future holds in store, this paper has no concern.