

**QUESTIONS OF THE DAY. NO.
LVII. THE PLANTATION NEGRO AS
A FREEMAN, OBSERVATIONS ON
HIS CHARACTER, CONDITION
AND PROSPECTS IN VIRGINIA**

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Questions of the Day. No. LVII. The Plantation Negro as a Freeman, Observations on His Character, Condition and Prospects in Virginia by Philip A. Bruce

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BY

PHILIP A. BRUCE

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CONTENTS.

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|--|------|
| INTRODUCTION | vii |
| I.—PARENT AND CHILD | 1 |
| II.—HUSBAND AND WIFE | 15 |
| III.—MASTER AND SERVANT | 29 |
| IV.—BLACKS AND WHITES | 44 |
| V.—THE NEGRO AND THE COMMONWEALTH, | 61 |
| VI.—THE NEGRO AND THE CRIMINAL LAW . | 77 |
| VII.—RELIGION | 93 |
| VIII.—SUPERSTITION | 111 |
| IX.—GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS—MORAL . | 126 |
| X.—GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS—MENTAL . | 143 |
| XI.—REMARKS ON PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM . | 160 |
| XII.—THE NEGRO AS AN AGRICULTURAL LA- BORER | 175 |
| XIII.—MATERIAL CONDITION OF THE LABORER . | 193 |
| XIV.—RENTERS AND LAND-OWNERS | 211 |
| XV.—MECHANICS | 228 |
| XVI.—FUTURE OF NEGRO | 241 |

INTRODUCTION.

THE Southern negro, both as a man and as a citizen, has been so often and so fully discussed, and from such a variety of standpoints, that it would seem almost impossible now for any new information to be produced, or any opinion advanced that would be likely to add much to the general knowledge of the problem which his presence creates, or to dispel any of the darkness that envelops his future. That his presence in the South constitutes a problem of the gravest importance is obvious to any one who has had an opportunity of examining closely the various tendencies of his nature and conduct in those rural communities in which individuals of his race form a large proportion or a great majority of the inhabitants.¹ It is in such communities as these that the observations embodied in this volume were made, these observations extending over a long series of years, but being entirely confined to the period that has elapsed since the war. It is only as a freeman that the negro has been presented to my view, for I have no distinct recollection of slavery as an institution; it is only as he has been affected by the circumstances surrounding him since his emancipation that he is regarded

¹ The overwhelming majority of the Southern negroes are found in the rural districts, the number inhabiting the towns and cities being too small to exercise any material influence on the general destiny of their race.

in the following pages. I have sought to describe him in the light of that modification of his character which subsequent conditions have worked, as well as in the light of the resistance to these conditions which his ancestral traits are still making. The picture drawn will, no doubt, seem gloomy and repelling in its moral aspects. In reference to this, I will only say that I have stated my conclusions impartially and dispassionately, without any intention of improperly reflecting upon a population deserving of consideration in so many ways, and entitled to forbearance in all. If I have fallen into any mistake, it has been in applying to that population the common ethical standard by which the members of white communities are judged. I have been led to employ this standard not only because I believe it to be the only proper test, but also because I earnestly hope that a description of the moral, social, and political bent of the negroes, wherever they are found in a teeming mass, will quicken the efforts of those who are engaged in the task of improving them. No one can dwell for any length of time in those sections of the South where the members of that race predominate, without being animated by a strong desire that every means should be used to reform and elevate them, if not on their own account, then on account of the country which they inhabit. Patriotism steps in to inspire the wish, whether it would otherwise arise or not. I have been moved to write with unreserved freedom and candor, in order that there may be a clearer conception of the evils springing from the presence of the blacks, as well as a juster notion as to the nature of the remedies that should be adopted to remove these evils. There is much in the moral character of this people that is partially ascribable to the influences of

slavery ; I have not touched at any length on these influences, because my aim has been to delineate the negro as he is, without reverting to the possible causes of his condition that are to be found in the past. Now that he is a freeman and a citizen, he must stand like the members of every other class, on his own individual merits, and according to these merits he must be estimated. An apology for his shortcomings on the score of slavery has no practical bearing now, except so far as it is calculated to diminish the discouragement which his moral deficiencies are apt to inspire. Every decade withdraws him still further from the transmitted spirit of the former régime ; every decade only removes a still greater number of the artificial props that have hitherto supported him. The truest lover of his country, as well as the most disinterested friend of the blacks, is he who will portray their character and depict their society, without partiality and without prejudice. It is difficult to understand how any one can contemplate in a narrow and illiberal way the questions involved in their numerical increase at the South, for these questions in reality touch every citizen, affect directly or remotely the interests of every community, and are as wide in their scope as the republic itself. Such questions come very closely home to the Southern people. Much as the subject of the negro has been discussed, that subject continues to be profoundly interesting to them, because it is so intimately associated with the welfare and prosperity of the section in which they live. In the light of this interest, which they share with the most thoughtful citizens in every other section of the Union, a further contribution to that discussion will, perhaps, be neither ill-timed nor useless.

The part of the South to which the observations re-

corded in these pages especially relate is that portion of the Old Dominion which lies between the James River and the northern boundary line of North Carolina, a broad area of country which is locally designated as Southside Virginia. It has long been known as one of the most important tobacco regions of the United States, every variety of that staple, with few exceptions, being cultivated there ; for that reason, it was, before the late war, the principal seat of the slave-holding interest in the State, tobacco requiring in its production more arduous and protracted labor than cotton. By the census of 1860, there were 207,668 negroes in this section, a number that had increased in 1880, after an interval of twenty years, to 252,475, which is not very far from being one half of the whole colored population of the commonwealth. In many counties of Southside Virginia the blacks constitute two thirds of the inhabitants, this being strikingly the case in the group that form the famous "black belt," which includes Amelia, Brunswick, Charlotte, Cumberland, Greenville, Mecklenburg, Nottoway, Powhatan, Prince Edward, Prince George, Surry, and Sussex. In Buckingham the negroes exceed the whites numerically by two thousand ; in Lunenburg, by the same ; in Southampton, by three thousand ; in Dinwiddie, by four thousand ; in Halifax by seven thousand. In Campbell and Pittsylvania they have a majority in a combined population of 90,000. In all of these counties, which consist of a varied country of great extent, there are comparatively few school districts even, in which the whites predominate over the blacks. The whole section is, in fact, inhabited by large communities of negroes, in which their characteristics are developed in entire freedom from the pressure of any influences except those that

emanate from themselves. Nowhere can the tendencies of the race as a mass be studied to more advantage ; and it is only as a mass that I have sought to present the individuals of that race in this volume. For this reason, the observations are generalized, as a rule, and, except in the instance of the chapters on the material condition of colored laborers, without special local details. While the scope of these observations is more or less locally restricted, yet I believe that they will be found to be applicable, so far as they bear on the moral and social tendencies of the negro, to all parts of the South in which the black population forms large communities, which withdraws it from the influence of the whites, and exposes it only to the influences that arise in its own society. The members of that population have recently emerged from the same state everywhere ; their homogeneity as a people has always been remarkable at every period of their history, and wherever they have been observed. The local circumstances surrounding them in the southern counties of Virginia, do not differ from those that hedge them about in the cotton region ; Southside Virginia is, in fact, only the beginning of the black belt that runs as far to the southwest as Texas. What is true of the negroes in one division of this belt is very likely to be true of them in every other, only that in South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana, the condition of the race is still more degraded, and the problem which that condition creates more difficult of solution, on account of the numerical disproportion between the whites and blacks throughout the whole of these commonwealths, and not, as in Virginia, in isolated parts alone.

PHILIP A. BRUCE.

RICHMOND, VA., Nov. 1, 1888.