

Our Contributors.

THE NEGRO VOTERS MUST BE EDUCATED.

By Henry A. Nelson, D.D.

The Fifteenth Amendment is adopted. The Secretary of State has officially announced its ratification by the Legislatures of "twenty-nine States," constituting "three-fourths of the whole number of States," and certifies that it "has become valid to all intents and purposes as a part of the Constitution."

The President regarding this as a "measure of grander importance than any other act of the kind from the foundation of our free government to the present time," accompanies the official "proclamation of the Secretary of State" with a message from himself addressed to the two Houses of Congress, and through them to their entire constituency, the new and the old, the entire people of the United States, forty millions of people, now absolutely equal in civil and political rights and franchises, although four millions of them were lately slaves, and judged incapable of becoming citizens. Fitly does the chief magistrate recognize the transcendent importance of this event, and make it the occasion of earnest paternal counsel, from his high seat, to the new citizens and to the old, urging upon the former "the importance of their striving in every honorable manner to make themselves worthy of their new privilege"; exhorting the latter "to withhold no legal privilege of advancement from the new citizens," "calling upon Congress to take all the means within their constitutional power to promote and encourage popular education throughout the country, and upon the people everywhere to see to it that all who possess and exercise political rights shall have opportunity to acquire knowledge which will make their share in the Government a blessing and not a danger."

These are golden words of our chief magistrate, which cannot be too often reiterated, nor too seriously pondered. Simultaneously with this grave announcement, the Washington dispatches say, "The House Committee on Education to-day reported a bill to establish a system of national education." This is made "the special order for the second Tuesday of next December." The provisions of the bill are explained to be such as will have no effect upon States which may have provided adequate means of education for their own people, but are intended to make such provision, by national authority, wherever it is neglected by the States.

Could anything be more fitting, more congruous than this? Admitting these freedmen to the exercise of the elective franchise, giving them an equal voice with ourselves in the choice of rulers, and making them eligible to every office, what could be more proper than that the nation should secure to them suitable means of fitting themselves for so great responsibilities?

The proposed law seems also to be wisely framed, with reference to the normal relations of the National and State authorities. The States are left to provide for the education of their citizens in their own way. The nation stands ready to insist that the necessary provision shall be made. No State of this Republic shall be permitted to rear barbarian citizens. No State shall leave nascent citizens of this Republic unprovided with means of education fit for such grand citizenship.

Not a few thoughtful men have entertained grave doubts of the wisdom of admitting all citizens to the elective franchise without some educational qualification. If it had not already been so done to immigrants in such vast numbers, it is doubtful whether this objection to the immediate full enfranchisement of the freedmen would have been waived. As matters stood, the friends of emancipation and of the national Union were not long in coming to practical agreement on this question. The result is realized to-day. We take it with awe and thankfulness. Let us take it with a just sense of the grave responsibilities involved.

When the nation shall have given the means of education to all its children, will it not then be just and wise to require that they shall improve those means, in order to exercise the freeman's prerogative? Shall twenty-one years of indolent neglect of opportunities which the Republic vouchsafes, entitle the lazy loafer to the same standing with the diligent youth who has improved his opportunities and fitted himself for citizenship? There is nothing in the Fifteenth Amendment to prevent any State from requiring every voter to be able to read and write, as I think Massachusetts already does, as Missouri will do under a wise provision of her present Constitution,* and as I hope that every State sooner or later will. Of course any such restriction must have no respect to color or nativity, but must apply impartially to all. Indeed, when a free school, supported by public taxation, shall be open to every American boy, why should not a diploma of attendance in such schools and respectable proficiency in its studies, according to some just standard fixed by law, be the young man's title-deed of citizenship, on presentation of which to the proper magistrate, he shall be enrolled as an elector? It might be well to fix a somewhat higher grade of scholarly attainment, which should entitle the youth to receive his electoral diploma without reference to age, or at least at any time after becoming subject to military duty. Would not such provisions dignify citizenship, encourage virtuous endeavors in the young,

and give new guaranties to the Republic?

But let us not wait for these. The present year has only the opportunities of voluntary effort. The Churches, and those who are willing voluntarily to cooperate with them, must do the most that can now be done to enlighten and to educate the millions of new citizens now taking the ballot into their free hands. Is our Church, are our people (in this grand Presbyterian year) ready to do our part in this work? Could dereliction anywhere be more disgraceful or more disastrous than here, to a Church of such pretensions and such antecedents?

* "After the first day of January, 1870, every person who was not a qualified voter prior to that time, shall, in addition to the other qualifications required, be able to read and write, in order to become a qualified voter, unless his inability to read and write shall be the result of a physical disability."—Constitution of Missouri, Art. II, Sec. 19.