The Negro and the "Solid" South

BY BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

A FEW weeks ago I made an extended trip thru the State of Virginia, spending seven days in visiting the different cities and towns along the line of the new Virginia Railway, which runs from Deepwater, W. Va., to Norfolk, Va. During the course of that visit I had an opportunity to observe for myself the condition of the colored people in the places thru which we passed and also to talk with a number of prominent and influential white people in regard to the progress of the negroes living in that section of the country.

One of the things that imprest me most upon this journey was the number and the character of the young white men I met who seemed to have, not only a very definite knowledge of, but a very sympathetic interest in the success and the progress of the colored people about them.

One of these men, for example, told me that, after finishing his studies in a Virginia college, he had traveled all over the North and West, hoping to find a place where he could settle down and go to work. After looking the whole country over he had decided to return to Virginia, where he was born and reared. He had settled in one of the little towns that have sprung up along the line of the new railway, and is now seeking, as he told me, to lay the foundation for his own fortune by doing what he is able to build up both races. He was one of many Southern men I have met recently who have discovered that their own success and that of the South lies not in the direction of holding the black man down, but in building him up, making him strong, mentally, morally and economically.

A few days after my return from Virginia there came into my hands a book, written by one of this same younger generation of Southern white men to which I have referred. In this book I found all that I had heard upon my trip thru Virginia and much that I had heard elsewhere, written out and expounded in a systematic way, making of the casual statements I had heard a sort of philosophy.

In no book which has ever come into my hands have I ever found the policy advocated by some, which seeks to solve the problem of the Southern States by keeping the negro ignorant, so clearly analyzed and described, and nowhere, I may add, have I found this policy so thoroly discredited and condemned as in this latest volume of Mr. Edgar Gardiner Murphy, of Montgomery, Ala., to which he has given the title, "The Basis of Ascendency."

The thing that makes the book significant, however, is not so much the fact that it condemns and discredits the policy which would deny to the negro the opportunity to advance along the lines in which he has the capacity to do so, but because it shows the futility of it, and outlines a policy which is based upon mutual good will, and gives to both races an opportunity to share in the upbuilding of the new South.

As the title of this book suggests, it is addressed particularly to the white people of the Southern States and seeks to define the terms upon which the Southern people can maintain the ascendency of the white man in the South and regain for the Southern people that large influence in the affairs of the country and of the world that they once held.

In the course of his argument the author points out that the negro question is not, in its widest significance, a local nor a national question, but is one of the problems that in one way or another touches every people in the world. In the larger sense it is the problem of so adjusting the relations of the different peoples and races of the world that all can live side by side in peace and prosper. In such a world, however, the only chance for a superior race is that it should lift the races and peoples that are down. In no other way, says Mr. Murphy in effect, can the superior race prove its superiority and maintain its ascendency.

In order to show that this is a stub-

born practical fact and not a mere sentimental idea Mr. Murphy begins his book by showing how closely interwoven are the moral and material interests of both races in the South. Whether the white man desires it or not every element of the white man's civilization has, to some extent and in some way or other, become the heritage of the black man. In some way or other, and to much greater degree than is generally supposed, the character of the white man's civilization is determined by the uses he makes of it in his relations with the other race. The author says:

"Just as the black man has the use of every street, of every well constructed country road, of every railway, of every public utility of every sort—facilities chiefly demanded and supported by the commerce and intercourse of the stronger race—so he enters, also, however humbly or indirectly, into the heritage of every intellectual and moral asset of the country. If there be freedom of the press; if there be a press fit or unfit to be free; if there be a vital and spiritual religion; if there be books, artists, poets; if there be an historic and responsive language; if there be stable banks, equitable markets, courts accessible and for the most part just; physicians, hospitals, and by no means least—the kindly interest of the widest and kindliest of a more highly developed population—these are the negro's."

And then he continues, and these words suggest the central theme of all the succeeding pages:

"In so far as they are ours, they are his; in so far as they are not his, they tend, in subtle, inexorable fashion, not to be our own. In the fundamental sense we can no more make a bi-racial division of these things than we can of the sunshine, the rain, the returning seasons. It is the fate of the land. It is the tragedy of those of long ago, North and South, who tried at its birth to divide their labors without dividing their liberties. We but confront the fiat of reversal. Labor and freedom are indivisible."

Much has been said in recent years of a growing bitterness between the races. Mr. Murphy has described in detail the origin and development of this reactionary movement. Many people in the North and the South have been inclined to look upon this antagonism between the races as something mysterious and inevitable, which must contine to grow and increase until it ended in some frightful disaster. Mr. Murphy does not share this pessimistic view. He says:

"And yet this movement is among us. I have already dwelt upon the significant intolerance of its logic as it has viewed the interests of our negro masses. Its mere radical spokesmen have proceeded by easy stages from an undiscriminating attack upon the negro's ballot to a like attack upon his schools, his labor, his life—from the contention that no negro shall vote to the contention that no negro shall learn, that no negro shall labor, and (by implication) that no negro shall live. Weaker groups, if they remain at all, remain to serve rather than to share."

But this plan is not altogether practicable. "It is the old effort," as Mr. Murphy says, "to begin where the land began but to ignore its history and its sins." He continues:

"There are some things which are not found among the established privileges of men. No man may choose his parents, nor may he choose his native soil. He cannot remake his country's past, nor alter the assumptions or the principles which have become his civil heritage. More important still, he may not put these principles into operation upon Monday, repeal them or modify them on Tuesday, and reimpose them on Wednesday.

"The fundamental political constitution of a people cannot be perpetually readjusted between meals by devices of application. It cannot be so altered, from instance to instance, as that it may 'hit the negro' in one case and in the next may let the white man off. The thing cannot be done. 'Accidents' will surely happen. The man who declares boldly that he will have one law for the white man and another law for the negro would like us to believe that the only opposition to his program lies in the negro, or in the 'interference of the North,' or in the Fifteenth Amendment to the Federal Constitution. But the real obstacle is something else. It is in the very nature of things; it is in the bone and being of the country; and—little as he may at first believe it—it is in himself.

"No American, North or South, white or black or yellow, wants that sort of country. We know, if we know anything at all, that our own experience is, somehow, the final authority against arbitrary methods.

"Moreover, the very institutions which our discriminations were at first invented to protect are soon, by the increasing bias of these very discriminations, emasculated of their proper power. If it is hard to convict a white man of the murder of a negro, it soon becomes equally hard to convict him of the murder of a white man. Courts which find themselves unable to punish the crimes of a stronger class against a weaker class discover that the legal precedents and the social habit which have stood between the strong and the weak are likely at the last to stand between man and man thru all the classes of the strong. And the failure to punish means the inability to protect. In any society human life in general tends to become as cheap as the life of its humblest representative."

Not only is the repression of the negro, as it has been proposed by some of the more violent political leaders, imprac

ticable, but it is impossible and the South does not want it. Mr. Murphy says:

"An attitude of unreasoning and permanent repression is to us more intolerable than to the negro. We are too busy, too much interested in other things, too eager for larger enterprises and freer minds, to be consumingly engaged in the business of keeping some one down. The thing, moreover, is impossible. Not only is the negro daily growing stronger, but the whole world will daily add to his strength in direct proportion to the repression which he suffers. The universe—like the peacemaker in the streets—cannot hear our quarrel till the strong man let the weak man go. The South will never have its hearing till the fury goes out of certain eyes and the noise of certain of our public men is stilled. As the world takes the negro's part, as the negro gains in strength, as the South wearies of its more morbid preoccupations, as the cruder policies of repression begin to tremble in the rigid framework of their terms, the representatives of our reactionary leadership—in the honest but pitiful hysteria of their fears—would seek the remedy in *more* repression, and would attempt by the shrieking rancor of their appeals to galvanize into further life the old terrors, and to banish into still fainter distances the better angels of our age."

There is in the South today a class of sincere and honest men who have little or no interest in politics, who believe that the race problem would be solved if negroes would not merely acknowledge their present racial weakness, but accept a position of permanent inferiority, without hope or ambition of rising to a position of greater usefulness or importance than that which the masses of them now occupy in the Southern States. Mr. Murphy does not believe that the caste system is in any respect a solution of the racial problem. He says:

"A policy of fixt political humiliation toward any class of our population comports even less with our instincts than with our interests and our laws. There is no place in our American system for a helot class. Our country is a democracy; and whether we will or no we are the inheritors of a Constitution. This is the second irreducible factor of our problem. Not only is the nego a negro, and not only is that fact among the realities, but it is also among the realities that the re-creation of our institutions and the transformation of the political and social assumptions of our age are not among our privileges. Nor are such enterprises among our conjectures or desires. We want no fixt and permanent populations of 'the inferior.' We may in every personal or social sense desire separation that is an issue of personal reserve. It trenches upon no legal or social right. It inflicts no degradation of personal, industrial or political status. It is a dogma, not of repression, but of self-protection and self-development. But to legislate the permanent and indiscriminate political proscription of a whole population is to attempt the refounding of a country which is not exclusively our own, and the revival and reconstitution of an epoch of class autocracy which Jefferson, Washington and Marshall had themselves surpassed. Indeed, our own greater preference is our greater country. The men of the South—whatever may be their political expedients of the moment—have seriously no more interest in the reactionary philosophies of caste than in the political conceptions of Nicholas II. If the conscious and deliberate acceptance of such a status by the weaker group be the only condition of 'peace,' then we had better have something less than peace, for it would indicate an absence of manhood in the weaker population far more serious than an inadequate or belated political capacity, and an absence of moral sagacity in the stronger far more costly than any of the conceivable consequences of racial or political disturbance. To rear the population of a stronger race surrounded by an environment of the lowly and the menial is difficult enough, but to rear such a population—virile in spirit and sensitive to the finer instinct of self-dependence—thronged by the *deliberately* menial, by those who are not only inferior, but who have made a compact to be so, by those whose lot is an accepted subordination and a consenting subserviency, would be more difficult by far. The stronger group within the South, as I have already tried to illustrate, has suffered indescribably from being pressed upon, from either side, by a weaker racial life; yet this 'fate of the strong' has been light compared to the fate involving that higher racial group which thru long periods of time should be subjected to the personal, domestic and industrial contact of a race of men and women wearing the self-accepted and self-approving status of general proscription. It would involve a peril to everything in our life that is self-resourceful, wholesomely self-respecting and soundly strong. For the member of a weaker race to accept the plain personal fact, in this instance or that, that his race is inferior, that it has incapacities or weaknesses, is one thing; for a whole race deliberately to accept a fixt legal and collective inequality of status in a democracy is quite another thing; a thing as injurious to a stronger group as to a weaker; a thing, moreover, which there is a Constitution to prevent, and (should the Constitution sleep) the quick instinct of the South itself to weigh and to reject."

The remedy which Mr. Murphy proposes for present conditions in the South is, as has already been suggested, nothing fanciful nor even wholly new. The hope of the South is not in holding the negro down, but in lifting him up; not in degrading him, but in making him self respecting. Like most other thoughtful men in the South he believes in the ed

ucation of the negro. In regard to the kind of education the negro needs he says:

"As men are educated more largely by their occupations than by their schools, there can be no ultimate education of society until the educational significance of economic situations and of economic employments—in their reactions upon individual and social character—are more consciously and more directly included among the policies of the State."

People who have been disappointed in the results of negro education in the South should consider in the first place the meager quality of the education which the negro now receives in some parts of the South. They should consider, also, how very few negroes have thus far received a thoro or a practically valuable education of any kind. But education, the ordinary education, in and of itself is not sufficient. Says Mr. Murphy:

"Education will not instantly avail. The intelligent do not at once make more intelligent followers (or leaders) than the ignorant. The first effect of education in any social group, whether among the poor of Russia or among the negroes of America, will be distracting and divisive. There must be experience also; and education is a necessity, not as a substitute for experience, . . . but because it is the one force which makes experience available."

Few people consider what this experience is like, particularly in the case of the negro who has received some education and has begun to enter into the larger world that is opened to him thru the knowledge which enables him to read. On this point Mr. Murphy says:

"This, after all, is the most significant aspect of the actual education which a stronger group gives to a weaker. It may not be amiss if, in a single sentence, the case be overstated to give it clearness; to teach any group of human begins to read, and then—in the daily press which encompasses it—to give it little to read concerning itself except the flaring records of its crimes or monotonous comments upon its faults; to awaken a mind (and the very contact of our time is awakening the negro mind whether we give it a school or not), and then to touch it only with contempt; sharply to demand the development of high character, and then to class it with the lowest; to insist upon thrift, and then to tolerate such conditions of disadvantage or insecurity to the life and property of the weak as to take from thrift its deepest economic basis—all this constitutes an 'education' which cannot be expected to train any race, much less a weaker one, into the life of a highly useful or happy population. This, after all, is our question. It is not a mere question as to the 'rights' of the negro, as to academic and outworn contentions of 'the North' or as to the controversial justification of this or that political party. It is a question of practical and fundamental policy. Is the negro race at the South, a large and persistent factor in our economic and political organization, to be, in every fundamental sense, a retrogressive or a co-operative population? The negro masses need the schools, but they need even more profoundly that sort of education, that form of unconscious training, which is found in the quickening of the fundamental economic motives—in the renewal of hope, the arousal of elementary ambitions, the stimulation of those industrial tendencies (such as economy, tenacity, frugality) which spring from a larger sense of security, from a more general confidence in the average rewards of industry and from the simpler satisfactions of educational and civic opportunity. So to touch them and so to use them in the larger policy of our affairs is to increase both their power to produce and their power to purchase, and is to add increasingly to the forces which must contribute to the common development of the South."

Much has been said and written in regard to the manner and the extent to which the South has suffered because of the presence of the negro as a slave and a free man. Mr. Murphy has certainly not tried to minimize these disadvantages. He has pointed out that the very weakness of the black man has been a constant source of temptation to the white man to take advantage of and wrong him. Says Mr. Murphy:

"It is not a good thing for any race to be perpetually dealing with another race with which it does not have to argue, which it may control without explanation, for whom it may think without an attempt at persuasion, and for whom it may act without any real partnership in responsibility."

Notwithstanding this fact, the same weakness of the negro which tempts the white man to wrong him, gives to the white man an opportunity to help him. The author continues:

"In each weakness of every lower social group there lies an opportunity for exploitation; but in each weakness there lies also an opportunity to help. You may use the weak man or the weaker group in the one way or in the other, and by the nature of the use of this man or this group your capacities and faculties (which take their quality from use) are yielded to an education which assumes descending and contractive—or ascending and expanding—forms.

"This is the reason why, altho the average man deteriorates under habitual contact with weaker groups, the exceptional man—in whom the occasions of weakness have developed the co-operative rather than the coercive instinct—is, whether alone, as was Livingstone in Cen-

tral Africa, or submerged in the slums of our greater cities, the highest human type we know. Nor is this the least of the reasons why the exceptional citizen of the 'Black Belt' of the South is so often regarded as a most adequate representative of our gentler and nobler life."

It is from this point of view that Mr. Murphy believes he is able to define the real issue before the South today. The South has the opportunity, by dealing with the negro wisely, justly, and in a spirit at once of humanity and justice, of regaining that position of ascendency it once held in the affairs of the country and of the world. Says he:

"The issue is always there, for the stronger race so to dwell with the weaker as to upbuild a common state upon the basis of the common welfare, and expressive of the common happiness, may be called the distinctive task of the democratic imperialism, or of an imperial democracy. Yet it is—in either case—the supreme problem just now challenging the political capacity of modern peoples."

This, Mr. Murphy thinks, is the distinctive task, so far as the United States is concerned, of the South. And he adds:

"We may dislike the task, and may shrink from it, may much prefer to deal with the issues peculiar to other localities and peoples, but we cannot escape it; it is the problem which, in the phrase of the period, is 'up to us.'"

I have sought in this brief review to present the question discussed in this book in the spirit and, as far as possible, in the words of the author. I cannot hope that I have succeeded, in the few quotations I have made, in giving a complete and wholly satisfactory review of what is, in many ways, the most searching examination that I remember to have read of the racial question.

In conclusion, I cannot do better than quote the final paragraph of Mr. Murphy's book, in which he says:

"Those lands which are conscious of a great difficulty are not poor. The poor land is that which, having no great difficulty, busies itself with the fictions of its importance; or the land having a great difficulty, but finding no way out of its imperturbable complacency. It was thru the negro in our experience that the South once lost her mastery, not over him alone, but over those opportunities for a national leadership and for an uninterrupted eminence of service to which her capacities entitled her. It may be that thru this same strange waiting, baffling factor in her life, her ascendancy, in higher forms, may again return—in forms not threatening the estate and dignity of labor, the sway of freedom, the instinct and custom of our age, but bestowed by a labor which she has freed, and by an age and a democracy which, in her service to their profoundest task, she has supremely justified."

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