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THE "FREEDMEN'S BUREAU" IN THE UNITED STATES.

THE annual report of the United States Secretary at War, dated Nov. 20, 1869, contains, among other valuable papers, a report made to his department by Major-General Howard, Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, which is of peculiar interest to those desirous of ascertaining, through impartial evidence, the progress and prospects of the great experiment of slave emancipation. The Bureau is now winding up its work. It was closed for general purposes early last year. It is only continued for certain "educational" purposes, for the settlement of negro soldiers' claims to bounty, and for the maintenance of a small number of hospitals which still contain inmates. The time has, therefore, arrived for taking, as General Howard does in this paper, a general review of its operations.

Great efforts had been made by charitable associations during the last years of the war to relieve the misery which prevailed among the many thousand coloured refugees from the Southern States, and outcasts who remained on properties abandoned by their owners under the pressure of hostilities. But it was felt that more was needed than charity could furnish, and that not only casual support was required, but organization and drill. With these views the "Act to establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees" was passed in March, 1865, and committed to the new department the control of all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen from rebel States, under such rules and regulations as may be prescribed by the head of the Bureau and approved by the President.

This almost unlimited authority (says General Howard, with pardonable pride) gave me great scope and liberty of action, but at the same time it imposed upon me very perplexing and responsible duties. Legislative, judicial, and executive powers were combined in my commission, reaching all the interests of four millions of people, scattered over a vast territory, living in the midst of another people claiming to be superior, and known not to be altogether friendly.

It was, indeed, a desperate "cauldron," to all appearance, into which the General and his assistants were plunged.

In every State many thousands were found without employment, without homes, crowding into towns and about military posts, where they hoped to find protection and supplies. The sudden collapse of the rebellion, making emancipation an actual universal fact, was like an earthquake. It shattered and shook the whole social

system. It broke up the old industries, and threatened a reign of anarchy. Even the well-disposed and humane landowners were at a loss what to do, or how to begin the work of reorganizing society and of rebuilding their ruined fortunes. Very few had any knowledge of free labour, or any hope that their former slaves would serve them faithfully for wages. On the other hand, the freed people were in a state of great excitement and uncertainty. . . . Many were afraid to remain on the same soil that they had tilled as slaves, lest by any trick they might find themselves again in bondage. Others supposed that the Government would either take the entire supervision of their labour and support, or divide among them the lands of conquered rebels, and furnish them with all that might be necessary to begin life as independent farmers.

Under the pressure of the enormous mass of business thus thrown upon him, General Howard had the good sense to perceive that this was not a case for fixed uniformity of system.

No one minute system of rules could have been rigidly adhered to and applied in every part of the Southern country. I therefore set forth clearly the objects to be attained and the powers which the Bureau could legally exercise, and left it to my subordinates to devise suitable measures for effecting these objects.

The first object to be effected was the relief of actual misery: housing, clothing, food, hospitals, dispensaries. Thanks, however, to good management—for which we give the Bureau all credit—but more, we suspect, to the rapidly recuperative powers of American society, this part of the operations to be performed was, after all, comparatively easy.

The exhibit of rations and clothing furnished (says the General) shows that the Bureau has not been a pauperizing agency. It has not encouraged idleness and vagrancy. It has not existed for the benefit of able-bodied beggars. The wonder is not that so many, but that so few have needed help; that of the four million people thrown suddenly upon their own resources, only one in about two hundred has been an object of public charity, and nearly all who have received aid have been persons who, by reason of age, infirmity, or disease, would be objects of charity in any State and at any time.

To re-establish the labour-market was a more perplexing task.

The majority of planters were anxious to cultivate their land, and their former slaves were equally anxious to earn an honest living; but each class naturally distrusted the other. I was appealed to for a settlement of this great labour question. Letters from all parts of the country besought me and my assistant commissioners to enforce a specific rate of wages, and to exercise

power in one way or another over the labourer to compel him to work. All such appeals were resisted. Officers and agents of the Bureau were instructed to do all in their power to remove prejudice, to restore mutual confidence, and to quicken and direct the industry of the people. At the same time they were cautioned against giving countenance to any substitute for slavery. Negroes must be free to choose their employers. No fixed rate of wages will be prescribed, but the law of supply and demand must govern.

A system of written contracts was introduced wherever this could be done.

No compulsion was used, but all were advised to enter into written agreements and submit them to an officer of the Bureau for approval. The nature and obligation of these contracts were carefully explained to the freedmen, and a copy filed in the office of the agent approving it for their use in case any difficulty should arise between them and their employers. In a single State not less than 50,000 such contracts were drawn in duplicate, and filled up with the names of all the parties.

A body of evidence is adduced from the reports of assistant commissioners to show the working of this simple arrangement in different localities:—

It is confirmed by the fact that the great mass of freedmen are now self-supporting, and that many have commenced planting and other business on their own account. In spite of all disorders that have prevailed, and the misfortunes that have fallen upon many parts of the South, a good degree of prosperity and success has already been attained. To the oft-repeated slander that the negroes will not work and are incapable of taking care of themselves, it is a sufficient answer that their voluntary labour has produced nearly all the food that has supported the whole people, besides a large amount of rice, sugar, and tobacco for export, and two millions of bales of cotton each year. . . . It is not claimed that this result is wholly due to the care and oversight of this Bureau, but it is safe to say, as it has been said repeatedly by intelligent Southern men, that without the Bureau, or some similar agency, the material interests of the country would have greatly suffered, and the Government would have lost a far greater amount than has been expended in its maintenance.

A large scheme had been entertained of taking over to the Bureau all "abandoned" lands: "solely for the purpose of assigning, leasing, or selling them to refugees and freedmen," but before this could be carried into effect an order of President Johnson stopped the proceeding, and directed the restoration of "abandoned" property to its former owners, on their exhibiting pardons or taking certain oaths.

Nothing has been done in this direction, however, by the bold measure of opening for entry, by coloured and white men, without distinction, all the public lands in the States of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Florida. Next to a proper religious and intellectual training (says the General) the one thing needful to the freedmen is land and a home. Without that a high degree of civilization and moral culture is scarcely possible.

This is a thoroughly American opinion. It is by no means that which prevails in the governing class of West Indian society.

The subject of the progress of education among the coloured people is but slightly touched on, having been treated at length in former reports. As to keeping order among them and affording them protection against injustice, "the methods pursued have differed according to circumstances." . . . In all important cases, where civil courts existed, they were first resorted to; but when such courts would not admit the testimony of negroes, nor treat them as equals before the law with whites, appeal was made to military tribunals, or under the Civil Rights Bill of 1866 to the United States courts.

It is estimated that more than 100,000 complaints were heard and acted upon by Bureau officers in a single year. The reports of murders, assaults, and outrages of every description were so numerous, and so full of horrible details that at times one was inclined to believe the whole white population engaged in a war of extermination against the blacks. But careful investigation has proved that the worst outrages were generally committed by small bands of lawless men, organized under various names, whose principal objects were robbery and plunder. . . . No one can tell what scenes of violence and strife and insurrection the whole South might have presented without the presence of this agency of the Government to preserve order and to enforce justice. Several officers and agents have been severely wounded, and some have lost their lives in this service.

Such, and so successful, has been the institution which has done its best to keep the peace and to establish free industry in the South during the last few years. It is impossible not to feel regret and misgiving at the prospect of its dissolution. Such an intermediate authority between ex-masters and ex-slaves seems to have been the very thing demanded by the crisis. And we wish we could be satisfied that the crisis was sufficiently at an end to allow the seeds of good order which it has left behind to germinate in safety.