

THE OTHER SIDE.

BY H. E. BELIN.

WERE a census to be taken of the disputes which have embroiled the world, it would be found that by far the greater number have been brought about by ignorance of existing facts on the part of one or both of the disputants. To this rule the slavery controversy was no exception. To begin with, the North approached the problem from the wrong side, with an entire misapprehension of its real nature. Slavery in the Southern States was not a proposition to be argued out theoretically as a question of abstract right or wrong; it was a concrete fact, to be reckoned with practically. For better or for worse the negro had been brought into the land, and so many millions of aliens were settled among the whites in a white man's country. What was to be done with them?

To those who knew nothing of negro nature the answer seemed simple enough: Give them civic privileges and convert them from human chattels into self-respecting workers and useful citizens of the Republic.

Good! had the scheme been possible. But the very foundation-stone on which it rested was a false assumption—the assumption of similarity between the races—that the negro was merely “a white man with a black skin.” In those days ethnology was practically an unknown science, and personal observation was the only medium by which a knowledge of the existence of racial differences could be acquired. This source of information—the vantage ground of experimental study—the North of necessity lacked, and the South, equally of necessity, possessed. Consequently, to the North the negro was a sealed book, or, figures apart, he was an object invested by distance with the glamour of ideality. Of the real negro the North knew nothing. Of the real slavery the North knew nothing. But what it lacked in information it made up by imagination; and thus equipped, it entered upon its slavery-crusade against the South.

The object of this paper, however, is not to fight old battles over again, but to give to Northern readers as succinctly as possible a Southern view of the negro character—in other words, the view presented by a life-study of the race at close quarters. To show what might be called the natural correspondence between the negro *as he is* and the system of government under which he is held; and so describe the actual working of the institution of slavery in the Southern States.

One prefatory word of explanation: In all that follows I have reference, not to rare and exceptional cases of negro development, but to the average negro who is the one type and representative of his race.

The most salient points of the negro character may be summarised in a sentence: He is a full-grown child, but a child with an ineradicable substratum of savagery underlying his surface characteristics. Strange as it may seem, the negro's peculiarities are to this day wholly unknown to the great majority of the people of these United States. To the Northern and Western troops of the Spanish-American war their sojourn in the camps of the South was a revelation completely revolutionizing their preconceived ideas of the negro race. And these peculiarities it is, which cast a side-light on that occasional resort to lynch-law for which the Old South was so vehemently abused. It is to be distinctly understood, however, that the "lynch-law" of ante-bellum days stood simply for certain, summary justice, not for the diabolical cruelties now associated with its name.

Briefly we dwell upon this point. Owing to the peculiar mental constitution of the negro, the publicity and formalities attendant upon a trial conducted according to established usages of law make such a trial positively attractive to him, as ministering to his egregious vanity and love of scenic effect. While it is a well-established fact that from the time sentence of capital punishment is passed upon him, the negro criminal (whatever the atrocity of his crime may have been) is regarded by himself and his race as a hero and a martyr who is going from the gallows "straight to glory." In short, the prospect of a public, spectacular death, so far from being a terror to the negro, actually possesses a strange sort of fascination for him! I do not mean to say that a negro would voluntarily elect to be hanged, even with all the pomp and circumstance usually accompanying such a function. But I do say that the fear of being hanged in an orthodox way is not operative in restraining him from crime, while the certainty of being so hanged is a phase of "the

inevitable" to which he resigns himself with a degree of philosophy truly marvellous to the white man. When specially drastic measures were required, therefore, resort was occasionally had to this secret, speedy and (to the negro mind) most terror-inspiring form of justice—lynch-law.

Parenthetically, it has been asserted! that the hideous cruelties too often practised nowadays by lynchers at the South are "a part of the horrible heritage of slavery, and all its incalculable evils." But these are rather to be regarded as part of "the heritage" of "reconstruction" and all its attendant horrors, from which—if ever—it will take the South generations to recover. The conditions imposed upon the Southern States at the close of the Civil War were as utterly abhorrent to reason and common sense as they were abnormal, and could only endure so long as force was employed to maintain them. And although this state of things no longer exists the evils it has left behind it as a baleful legacy are sown broadcast over the land.

Chief among these evils may be reckoned on the one side the very marked increase of crime produced by the absence of former restraints which has quickened into life the dormant savagery of the blacks. And, on the other, the growing sense of insecurity on the part of the whites, owing to their loss of assured control. When these two facts are taken into consideration, human nature being what it is, the temptation is great where opportunity arises to exercise undue severity, in other words under such conditions, punishment was a tendency to degenerate into retaliation. That negro criminals are far more severely treated now than in the old days of slavery is an indisputable fact, of which a most striking proof is afforded by the official reports of the attempted negro insurrection in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1820. No provocation to exercise cruelty could ever have been given to the whites greater than that furnished by this plot. Yet, while adopting measures stringent enough to prevent a repetition of the horror, in the trial of the criminals all legal formalities were duly observed, nor was justice untempered by mercy. Only the ring-leaders were sentenced to the gallows. Those next in guilt were deported from the country. And the large majority of the slaves whose complicity in the plot was proved to be the result of ignorance were freely pardoned. Nor was this leniency to be laid to the account of commercial considerations—the dollars-and-cents value of the slaves outweighing in the balance of public opinion the heinousness of their crime against the community, for in true-born Southerners of those old days the com-

mercial instinct was wholly undeveloped. It was entirely the result of fair-minded sifting of evidence under the strongest provocation, with a leaning towards the side of mercy. Such, when full power was hers, was the way in which the slave-holding South dealt with her negro criminals.

But to return to our subject proper from this digression. I have said that in many of his characteristics the negro strongly resembles a child, both his virtues and his vices belonging to an immature stage of mental development. He is affectionate, confiding, dependent, kind-hearted, open-handed, and, in his normal state, easily amenable to control. He is lazy, thriftless, excitable, unreliable, irresponsible, short-sighted—his mental horizon being bounded by the day.

Hence, to the negro, the institution of slavery, so far from being prejudicial, was actually beneficial in its effects, in that, as a strictly paternal form of government, it furnished that combination of wise control and kind compulsion which is absolutely essential to his development and well-being.

“Were the Southern view of the negro the correct view, then was the abolition of slavery the greatest evil that ever befell this country,” wrote a Northern journalist, under the impression that he was using a *reductio ad absurdum* argument which effectually settled the whole matter. In point of fact, however, his statement is a correct one as far as the negro is concerned. It is the Southern white, not the Southern black, who has been benefitted by emancipation! For generations the South has sustained the burden of slavery imposed upon her entirely without her own volition. And although the questionable manner in which that burden was removed involved loss and entailed suffering, I believe I am justified in the assertion that not one former slave-holder in a thousand would be willing to go back to the old order of things and place his neck again under the yoke. Not that these men regarded slavery then, or regard it now, as a wrong against the negro, but they felt it to be a tremendous, almost crushing weight resting upon their own shoulders. They knew and acknowledged that in the sight of the Almighty they were their brother’s keeper, and were accountable to Him for that brother’s physical and moral well-being. The slave-holder was born into the world with an hereditary load descending upon him. He was handicapped in the race of life by the duty of supporting and providing for the necessities of so many helpless beings from whose claims upon him he could not escape and of whom he could not free himself. It is true the law permitted a master to sell his slave, but

practically this solution of the difficulty was seldom resorted to. As a rule, the master considered himself as bound to his slaves for life. Whatever their faults or shortcomings might be, it never occurred to him to sunder the tie between them; he simply tried to make the best of the situation. And his negroes knew that for life they were sure of being fed, and clothed, and sheltered, and doctored, entirely irrespective of their own deservings. For so long as the system lasted the combined forces of conscience and public opinion compelled the slave-owner to consider and secure the welfare of his people, even at the expense of his own comfort and convenience. To do him justice, however, this outside pressure was seldom required to insure the performance of his obligations towards his dependents. It would, no doubt, be a difficult task to convince Northern readers of the strength of the tie which generally bound together a master and his slaves. Yet that such a tie existed is an indisputable fact.

On the other hand, I do not attempt to deny that negroes were sometimes harshly treated. Nay, that occasionally they were subjected to actual physical cruelties. But such instances of inhumanity were extremely rare, and the full weight of an outraged public sentiment was invariably brought to bear with crushing effect upon the delinquent.

As with institutions of all times, and of all lands, the system of slavery was liable to abuses. But, contrary to the received opinions of the outside world at large, these abuses were reduced to a minimum by carefully planned checks and safeguards, both social and legal. Had that outside world but acquainted itself with the conditions which actually existed within Southern borders, what a vast amount of sectional bitterness would have been saved. And how many years of national prosperity would have been added to the annals of the American Commonwealth!