

CHAPTER III

Slavery: Its effect upon the country, upon the people owning them, and upon the slaves themselves – Abolition of slavery one of the causes of the progress in Southwest Virginia.

Up to the year 1865 slavery was an institution in the Southern States, and in the particular section of the country of which we are now writing. It was not only a stigma to the country in a moral sense, but a stumbling block in the way of its material advancement and progress. History but repeats itself that slavery, in every form and shape, is an insuperable obstacle to the development of the general interests of a people at large, though it may render the slaveholders opulent and extremely rich as a class. Taking the people of any country as a whole, the tendency of the institution is to retard their growth, development, and welfare, and the interest of any people as a unit should always be considered before that of any particular class.

The fact that slavery exists in some form or shape the world over does not justify the kind of which we are writing. There may be such things as political, moral, mental, social, and pecuniary slavery, yet it is a badge adopted by the slave himself to serve some particular cause or end, and one for which he is to blame. **But the governing, directing, and training of minds and bodies by one class of men without the consent of the other necessarily entails ideas, views, and thoughts of life contrary to divine as well as true human wisdom.**

The effect of this institution upon the proprietor of the slaves was in many respects very bad, although in others it advanced him. The owner of hundreds of human beings accustomed to obey his slightest wish, never questioning the right or wrong of the command, could scarcely brook opposition or contradiction from any quarter whatever. In his behavior to any whom he deemed his inferiors there was that hauteur of class superiority, almost unconsciously on his part, which made the life of the inferior degraded and contemptuous, often causing the latter to be convinced that he possessed the right of living and nothing more. The poorer class, or "overseeing" population, was almost as degraded as people could be, and even the slaves had an unbounded contempt for them. This unfortunate state has been amply proven by subsequent events to have proceeded from the institution itself, because, after the abolition of slavery and the galling chains were removed in a social way, that very class improved and bettered themselves until they have become broad, representative citizens. **On the other hand, the effect of slavery, from various causes, gave the slave-owning people and their families the means of improving themselves morally, mentally, and physically until they inaugurated a regime which for culture, elegance, and refinement has never been excelled, nor ever will be; for as the general condition of the people has improved, that has retrograded, we are sorry to say, although recognizing both the force and necessity for it. Furthermore, slavery unfitted a large class of people from any self-reliance whatever, and inoculated a reign of luxurious ease which of itself gave the possessors an erroneous idea and view of life, and, when the slaves were freed, nothing but the pluck, virtue, and moral excellence of the Southern people themselves prevented them from drifting into absolute destruction.**

The results of this institution upon the slaves in bondage necessarily depend upon the people themselves in a great measure. **To some races (for instance, the Caucasian) it would mean a total elimination of the race itself, for they would never stand it. Even when placed in their native country now they relapse into barbarism, and people who cannot govern themselves properly are necessarily slaves to those who can. To them slavery was an honor rather than otherwise, and it was as much their joy and pleasure to look up to and**

serve their masters and mistresses as it was to breathe the air around them.

As a class, happier beings never existed, and they had a most unbounded contempt for a free negro – “Cuffee,” as they called him – and shunned him as they would a leper, and even to this day that prejudice still exists in the mind of the negro who can recall the days of slavery. A crowning proof, however, that the colored race was not dissatisfied with its existence was this: When the civil war was raging in all its fury, and the negro knew that the bone of contention was his freedom, he remained not only perfectly quiet, but aided and assisted his owner in every way possible, and had a death-like enmity towards the North. Of course there were exceptions to the rule in this as in all other cases. It is contended by some that the Negro had no such feelings of loyalty, but this quiet demeanor arose from superior virtue on the part of the race. No one can divine the motives and desires of the human heart of the Negro any more than anyone else, and they are capable of deceit at times; but their uttered thoughts and acts supported the position taken by us above.

They were treated kindly as a whole, and were well cared for in every way, having their prerogatives and rights guaranteed them by an unwritten law as binding and well defined as our laws from which we draw many of our strongest customs. The many accounts written about cruel treatment of them were untrue, although there were some owners who were harsh. Particularly have some dwelt upon the lash as a means of torture and barbarism, but they appear not to have given both sides an impartial examination. Punishment in some form must be administered to prevent vice, and if a Negro committed theft or any other crime, his owner, being in a measure amenable, administered punishment instead of the law. Shall it be said to be cruelty that a Negro’s liberty is snatched from him because he violates the law? Try him today, and see which would be his choice – thirty-and-nine, or the penitentiary for one year – for the commission of grand larceny.

Of all the means for advancing the material interest of a country, manufacturing is the most successful. It gives a demand for both the raw material and the labor with which to work it up. Whatever has a tendency to advance the manufacturing interest of a country promotes its general welfare, while anything which retards it necessarily obstructs its material development. The necessary results of the institution of slavery invariably have this latter result. Slavery first has a tendency to encourage and foster agricultural pursuits, and discouraging those of the manufacturing business; therefore the owner of the slaves must exchange his surplus agricultural products for the manufactured machinery and products of some others. Except for the needs of the plantation and slaves themselves, the mechanical arts were not encouraged and education vetoed among them. It would not have been policy to have taught them the art of mechanics, or given them learning any farther than was necessary for their absolute maintenance and support and the purposes of the master, which were to give him the necessaries, comforts, and luxuries of life. The owner cared not for manufacturing when his slaves could make his meat, his clothes, his farming implements, and do his blacksmith work. The capitalist who desired to institute such an enterprise as an establishment for manufactured goods, except in a few instances, were discouraged. When class distinctions ran high, and the ensign of a gentleman was to have no virtual occupation except one of pleasure, to be engaged in trade was rather a stigma than otherwise; so the capital of the country was not invested in such pursuits. Mining and iron-manufacturing were not resorted to, but if a man became possessed of any capital the first impulse was to invest in a plantation and Negroes.

The labor of any country has much to do with its manufacturing interests. Manufacturers require generally a class of skilled labor, which is not necessary in agricultural pursuits. In the South, where slavery existed, the skilled white mechanic rebelled against working with the slave, which he deemed degrading to himself, and thus the emigration of this

class of labor into the South was extremely small indeed. Not until after the abolition of slavery did they come here and seek employment in developing our vast resources.

Whatever virtues the Negro may possess, experience shows that they are only capable of the lowest class of manual labor as a race, although instances have been, and are known, which vary the rule. Skilled work – mechanical art – is far beyond their powers, nor are they placed in any such position. The friends themselves of the colored race, who advocate their having equal rights and being pushed forward in every way, are a living contradiction to such views, when the negro applies for an engineer's place to run a locomotive, or to fire one, or to take the place of a skilled laborer in any other of the numerous departments of the gigantic enterprises now set on foot. **This is but right and correct, because the Negro is incapable of reaching that state of intelligence necessary to fill these important posts as the Caucasian can do.** Again, in addition to the necessary skill and knowledge which is requisite to fill these positions, there is more or less responsibility attached to them which requires a more or less truth and honesty to fill them properly. **A Negro might be trusted implicitly to plow your field, but there would be some objection to his having a passenger train crowded with human freight under his care, although he might be cognizant of the modus operandi of a locomotive engine.**

When slavery was abolished and the whole phase of life in Virginia changed in this respect, the agricultural interest began to develop on a new basis, while capital slowly crept in until the wonderful resources of the country were made public, and then it began to pour in. The old large estates were cut up into smaller ones, and the true agricultural policy adopted – that of cultivating the most on the least possible ground. This new regime in farming caused many people to turn their efforts and energies in other directions. The opening up of the great western granaries, with through railroad facilities, caused agriculture here to have a hard time, and people turned their attention towards the vast wealth imbedded within their mountains.

But the native population had no means with which to develop these large hidden treasures. Their property consisted of slaves, which had been swept away, and they turned their attention to foreign capitalists who, on viewing the wonderful resources of the country, came in with their money, energy, and varied business experience. The result was that the Virginia young men gradually disrobed themselves of all false pride and became by apprenticeship the skilled labor of the southwest of Virginia in a great measure. Today ninety per cent of the fifteen hundred mechanics working at "The Roanoke Machine Works" are skilled laborers and from the surrounding country in Virginia.

This false pride to which we have just alluded is one of the logical results of the institution of slavery. Where all the labor in any country is performed by slaves or an inferior race, to become a laborer is to brand yourself with a stamp of counterfeit disgrace from which it is hard to recover; and during slavery the white man who earned his bread by the sweat of his brow in a social way was but little better than a slave, except he possessed personal liberty and the right of property. When the cruel war was over the abolition of slavery did not eradicate all his preconceived views concerning labor all at once. He still thought that to labor with his own hands was a shame, and it was not until necessity and the changed condition of things were apparent that he threw off this device of pride and went manfully to work. He then, with his superior mental and moral parts, soon took his natural position as a skilled mechanic, while the Negro continues to perform the lowest manual and menial service, and will continue so to do to the end of the chapter.

The burden of slavery to the owner was more retarding to the material growth of a country than anyone would imagine from a cursory view. Upon every estate there were so many superannuated

Negroes, as well as young ones, who were a constant drain upon the working ones without yielding any return themselves. They had to be supported and cared for like the rest, who worked. If there was a failure in crops, why there was no shutting down and saving of expense as in other branches and states of business. The expense still went on. So if a man during slavery desired to invest in manufacturing pursuits he found it difficult so to do, because his capital was generally all invested in land, Negroes, and a sufficient bank account to meet any exigencies which might arise from any unforeseen accident. In this respect he was completely unfettered by the abolition of slavery.

So far as manufacturing industries were concerned, the want of knowledge concerning them was a serious hindrance to their either embarking in them as proprietors or employees. They first had to learn – i.e. begin at the bottom and master the rudiment of their occupations, as well as conquer their pride. Years were necessarily spent in becoming acquainted with the minor details which any ordinary mechanic's son would know at sixteen or seventeen years of age, and which they would have known had they lived in a country where labor was regarded as honorable and virtue brought out through dire necessity. This very want of knowledge on the part of native men at first – which is attributable to the institution of slavery – was one of the causes of the pouring into our borders throngs of new people. If a furnace a machine shop, a rolling-mill, and iron mine, or a coal mine was started, the necessary operatives had to be imported to do the labor, which meant, of course, the influx of families, too, and the necessary grocery men and clothiers to supply their wants. There are no better Illustrations of this salient fact than Roanoke, Salem, Radford, Pulaski City, and Bluefield. In these cases the opening of shops, furnaces, and other industries required skilled laborers at once, and the natives, from their want of knowledge, could not take hold at first, so the importation of the necessary clerks, skilled laborers, and mechanics who understand the business caused them all to grow as if by magic. When the young men found that the heads of these great establishments had worked as mechanics; that there was no disgrace in it; that good, remunerative wages were paid, they took hold, and in every case nearly made the best class of workmen, and numbers can now be pointed out who own their homes and smoke the pipe of peace by their own hearthstones.

Taking the people of this country as a whole, and the general welfare of the section itself, a greater boon could not have been bestowed upon them than the abolition of slavery. Before that time they manufactured but little, and purchased everything except the plainer necessaries of life made by slaves at home. Now it is the wish, desire, and will of the people, to give employment to thousands of their brethren, so that each and every ramification of society may perceive its benefits, which they cannot fail to do. The day when manufactured goods have to be brought from the North is over. From the raw material which composes the locomotive engine to the skilled labor which construct it we are full-handed, and everything made in the way of iron, from a shovel to a bridge, will soon be manufactured here – not only to supply our wants, but those of other people, because we can make them cheaper.

That the abolition of slavery, which is one of the chief causes of the rapid development of this country, was attended with some evil results is undeniably true. No great upheaval or revolution can occur in any country without some disaster, it matters not how much good its results may finally accomplish. The ideas, views, mode of life, and habits of a people can never be changed without trouble and great misery at first. Those who were reared to gratify every wish, to enjoy and possess the best of everything, suffered intensely when the means of gratifying their desires were swept away suddenly; but the fiery ordeal in crushing the few benefitted the many, and made the New South in her new era a greater and really wealthier country than she was before. And this view is becoming indoctrinated everywhere in the United States, for the old cry of "Go West" has been revised and changed, and now it is, "Go South." We cannot better illustrate this fact than by quoting the words of the Honorable Chauncey M. Depew, in an address to the Alumni Association of Yale University. He said, just after a tour through the Southern States:

"The net results of this visit to the South, to my mind, are just this: that the South is the bonanza of the future. We have developed all the great and sudden opportunities for wealth – or most of them – in the Northwestern States and on the Pacific slope, but here is a vast country with the best climate in the world; with conditions of health which are absolutely unparalleled; with vast forests untouched; with enormous veins of coal and iron which yet have not known anything beyond their original conditions; with soil that, under proper cultivation, for little capital, can support a tremendous population; with conditions in the atmosphere for comfortable living winter and summer which exist nowhere else in the country; and that is to be the attraction for the young men who go out from the farms to seek settlement, and not by immigration from abroad, for I do not think they will go that way, but by the internal immigration from our own country it is to become in time as prosperous as any other section of the country, and as prosperous by a purely American development."

The continual emigration of people into this section since the war is proof that Mr. DePew's utterances are truthful and prudent. Many of the people of the very State in which he delivered that address are locating in this section, and are pleased with it. And he is not alone. Many persons in all directions of the compass are pointing towards this country with the same sage and salient advice: "Go South, young man!"