

THE PARTY OF FREEDOM AND THE FREEDMEN — A RECIPROCAL DUTY*

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Slavery has been well called the "perfected curse of the ages." Every civilization, ancient and modern, has experienced its blighting, withering effect, and it has cost thrones to learn the lesson that

"The laws of changeless justice blind
Oppressor and oppressed";

that

"Close as sin and suffering joined,"

these two

"March to Fate—abreast."

Since the world began, freedom has been at war with all that savored of servitude. The sentiment of liberty is innate in every human breast. Freedom of speech and of action—the right of every man to be his own master—has ever been the inestimable privilege sought, the boon

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most craved. For this guerdon men have fought; for this they have even gladly died.

It was the unquenchable desire for liberty that brought the Pilgrim Fathers to Plymouth Rock. They knew that all that is highest and noblest in the human soul is fostered to its greatest development only under the blazing sunlight of freedom. And it was the same flame burning in the heart of the young nation planted on these Western shores that led to the ratification of the sentiment placed by the hand of Thomas Jefferson in the corner-stone of our American independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident—that all men are created free and equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among them are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Here was heralded to the nation prophetic freedom for all mankind and for all generations.

However, the years of bondage for Africa's sons and daughters in this fair land stretched on over a half century more before the issue was raised. But at last the grasping arms of the gigantic octopus, that was feeding at the nation's heart, reached out too far, and the combat with the monster was begun. Then that laurelled champion and leader of freedom's cause, Charles S. Sumner, laid his hand upon that Declaration of Independence and declared that the nation was "dedicated to liberty and the rights of human nature."

I count it the glory of that gifted humanitarian that he gave his magnificent talents and energies to the organization of a party that could add to its *amor patriæ* the

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larger, broader, nobler love of freedom for all mankind; and I count it the glory of that party that it stood for

“the voice of a people—uprisen, awake”;

that it was “born to make men free.”

No matter what name has been inscribed on its banner during its existence of a full half century, the cause that the party of freedom espoused has given its standard-bearer a right to claim that it, and it alone, is the legitimate heir to power in this land where the forefathers sought the liberty the Old World denied. Who dares dispute the claim? Who dares challenge the assertion? Time and events have sanctioned it; age has but strengthened it. And to-day, holding as tenaciously the same principles of truth and justice, the party that, among the parties of this Republic, alone stands as the synonym of freedom is the Republican party.

None dare gainsay it. And, among the growing multitudes in this broad land of ours, none know this better than ten millions of Afro-Americans who but for its strong arm of power might still be suffering from “Man’s inhumanity to man.”

Forget it? The mightiest draughts from Lethe’s stream could not blot from the remembrance of the race the deed of that Republican leader enthroned upon the seat of government, the deed of the immortal Lincoln, whose birth we commemorate here to-night, the deed of that second Abraham who, true to his name as the “father of the faithful,” struck the chains from the Negro’s limbs and bade him stand forever free.

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But did the great work stop there? No; the fast following amendments to the Constitution show that the party of freedom never paused; and the bond forged during the long years of struggle and riveted by emancipation was indissolubly welded when that party crowned the freedman with the glorious rights and privileges of citizenship. Ah, what lamentations loud and long filled the land! What dire predictions smote the nation's ear! What a multitude of evils imagination turned loose like a horde of Furies! What a war of opinion raged 'twixt friends and foes of the race that drew the first full breath of freedom! More than three decades have passed. Have these dismal prophecies been fulfilled? No race under the sun has been so patient under calumny, under oppression, under mob violence; no race has ever shown itself so free from resentment.

But it has been said the Negro was not worth the struggle. Not worth the struggle when, at every call to arms in the nation's history, the black man has nobly responded, whether slave or freeman? Not worth the struggle when, in the Revolution, on Lake Erie with Perry, at Port Hudson, at Millikens Bend, in that fearful crater at Petersburg, he shed his blood freely in the nation's behalf? Not worth the struggle, when he won his way from spade to epaulet in the defense of the nation's honor? *The freedmen fathers were neither cowards nor traitors. Nor do the sons disgrace their sires.*

Who saved the Rough Riders from annihilation at Las Guasimas? Who stormed with unparalleled bravery the heights at El Caney and swept gallantly foremost in

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that magnificent charge up San Juan hill? Comrades, leaders, onlookers—all with one voice have made reply: "The Negro soldier." Aye; the race has proved its worth, and the whole country, irrespective of party or section, owes it a debt, not only for its heroic service on the battle-field in times of national peril, which was its duty, but for its splendid self-control generally, under the most harassing situations, under most inexcusable assaults.

No; the faith of the party of freedom in the Negro has not been unfounded. In all these years the race has been steadily gaining wealth, education, refinement, places of responsibility and power. It might have done far more for the lasting good of all concerned, had it learned that in all things the

"... Heights are not gained by a single bound,
But we built the ladder by which we rise, . . .
And we mount to its summit round by round."

But the prophecies of the past are far behind us. The world has passed its verdict on what has been. Mistakes must yield us profit as the problems of the future confront us. We are to look forward with hope. And in preparation for that future,

"The riddling Sphynx puts dim things from our minds,
And sets us to the questions at our doors."

As the Republican party and the Negro face the coming years, one question is of equal moment to both. What shall be the mutual relations in the future? Shall the party of freedom declare at an end its duty toward

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the party it made men and citizens? On the other hand, shall the Negro say: "Indebtedness ceased with our fathers; we are free to make alliance where we will"?

In view of the blood shed so freely for Republican principles by the Negro as slave and freeman; in view of the loyalty, the courage, the patriotism, the strength, and the needs of the race; in view of this country's prospective broadened domain and the millions of dusky wards to be added to the nation o'er which the American eagle hovers to-day; and in view of the principles that inhere in Republicanism, the party of freedom should find but one answer: "It is and shall be our duty to view you ever as men and citizens, to see that no chain of our forging manacles you to lower planes, that no bar is thrown by us across your pathway up the hill of progress, to help maintain your rights, to throw the weight of our influence for fair treatment, for the side of law and order and justice. The Republican party must not forget for a moment the truth of the argument that Demosthenes once made against Philip with such striking force,—*"All power is unstable that is founded on injustice."* This party cannot afford to be less than just. The Negro should not ask for more.

This duty laid upon itself on the one hand, it becomes incumbent upon the Negro to reciprocate, and the reciprocation calls for his support of the party. This should be a support, wise and open-eyed, born of appreciation and intelligence. It should be a support, steadfast and loyal, based upon faith in the party's motives and the knowledge that it has stood and still stands for all that

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the Negro holds most dear. It should be a support that frees itself from selfish leaders and ranting demagogues, that puts aside all mere personal gain, and seeks the good of the race as a whole that it, too, may be lifted up. And lastly, it should be a support that looks for no reward but that which comes because of true worth and ability.

Reciprocity becomes a mutual duty, for there are mutual needs. The Negro's strength is not to be ignored by the party; but the race cannot stand alone. It needs alliance with friendly power; and there is no friend like the tried friend, no party for the freedman like the party that stands upon the high, broad platform of freedom and human rights, irrespective of race, or color, or previous condition.

But having said this, I would be false to the race and my own convictions did I not pause to give the warning that, after all, neither parties nor politics alone can save the Negro. He needs to make a new start in his civil and political career. He must pay less attention to politics and more to business, to industry, to education, to the building up of a strong and sturdy manhood everywhere—to the assimilation generally of all that goes to demand the world's respect and consideration. He must lop off, as so many *incubi*, the professional Negro office-seeker, the professional Negro office-holder, and the Negro politician who aspires to lead the race, for the revenue that is in it. The best men, the wisest, the most unselfish, and above all, the men of the most profound integrity and uprightness, must take the helm or retrogression will be the inevitable result. Politics followed as an end has been

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the curse of the race. Under it problems have multiplied, and under it the masses have remained longer than they should in the lower stages of development. Only in the hands of men of noble mold, and used only as a *means* to an end, can politics accomplish the highest good for all the race.

The Negro can keep all this in view and yet yield loyal support to the party that set him free.

Let the party of freedom and the freedmen recognize and observe these duties as reciprocal, and a force may be created, having its basis on undying principles, that will pave the way for the ultimate success of the highest aspirations of each—a force that will stretch southward and westward bearing, wherever Old Glory floats, the promise to the oppressed: Freedom, equality, prosperity. And though men may apostatize, this mutual righteous cause shall live to sway for unnumbered years the fortunes of this grand Republic, for the God who reared the continents above the seas and peopled them with nations, who gave these nations freedom of conscience and will, and who has watched their rise and fall from the dawn of creation, still guides the destinies of races and of parties, and standeth

“ . . . within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.”