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How One Colored Man Made His Way to the Front

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Scarcely a week or a month goes by that I do not find on my desk a letter, a pamphlet or a book in which some one has tried to formulate a solution of the race problem. Many of these letters and pamphlets contain valuable suggestions, and, so far as I am able to do so, I read them all, read them with interest and, I hope, with profit. As a rule, however, it seems to me that these solutions have one common fault. They start out apparently with the notion that the Negro is a fixt quantity, always and everywhere the same, and then proceed as if the race problem, like a problem in arithmetic, could be solved once and for all by a mere process of reasoning, once you had defined all the terms.

The trouble in this case is that, like other human problems, the race problem is one in which the terms are not fixt and cannot, therefore, be brought into the shape of a hard and fast formula.

For my own part I have long ago given up the notion of solving the race problem wholesale. It seems to me rather that it can only be solved in detail. It is for this reason that I find myself interested in the progress of the individual Negro quite as much as I am interested in the progress of the general average. The colored man who breaks a record, who does something new and better in his particular line than any other colored man has done before, is not only widening the opportunities of the race, but he is encouraging others to follow in his steps. What one man has done another may do.

Recently I have run across two instances of Negro progress which are interesting in this sense. One of them is that of an individual colored man in the North and the other that of a Negro community in the South.

During a recent visit to the western part of Alabama I passed thru a little farming village known as Uniontown. This town, which has a population of only about 2000, is the center of a farming district in which there is a population of about 50,000 white people and 220,000 Negroes. Uniontown is the metropolis of this region. On Saturday afternoon, when all the farmers from the country for twenty-five miles around have come into town to bring in their produce or secure their supplies, it is one of the most lively communities in the State. The remainder of the week, however, is correspondingly quiet.

It was for this reason, perhaps, that Uniontown, which has the reputation with colored people of a town in which

Negroes do more business in proportion to their numbers than any other town in the South, is noted also as having the only wholesale grocery store conducted by Negroes in the United States. The advantage of conducting a wholesale grocery in Uniontown is that in that case it is possible to do business six days in the week, while a retail store is very largely confined to one, the Saturday market. About six years ago the firm of Eldrige Brothers, which had for a number of years been doing a retail business at Uniontown, began selling groceries in quantities to some of the smaller stores in the surrounding country. This gave the firm an opportunity, as I have said, to do business for six days in the week instead of one. The business, begun in a very small way, prospered. As yet the total amount of business done does not amount to more than $40,000 a year, but it is, as far as I can learn, growing steadily. The firm now keeps one traveling man on the road, and the wholesale business at the present time represents three-fourths of the trade of the firm. It has, in fact, grown to such an extent that Eldrige Brothers are now planning to give up their retail business altogether.

I wish that I had time to tell in detail the whole story of the growth of this business, how step by step the father, who had been a slave, starting with a little shop in a side street, picking up here and there, and often by hard experience, some knowledge of business methods, finally moved into the main

street of the town; of how he sent his two sons away to school, one to a business college and the other to a medical school; of how upon their returning, one of the boys entered the business with his father and the other started a drug store in connection with his practice as a physician, and how finally these young men have won the respect of white as well as black people until they are now counted substantial citizens of Uniontown.

There are about thirty other Negro business men in Uniontown. In numbers, at any rate, Negroes represent nearly half of the business enterprises of the town. In every case they are natives either of the town itself or of the surrounding counties, and in every case they have been assisted and encouraged by the white business men of the town. One of them, for example, a blacksmith, now runs the business in which he formerly worked as an apprentice and helper under a white man, who, when he left Uniontown to go to Birmingham, sold out his business to his Negro assistant on easy terms. I wish that I might describe, also, the condition of some of the Negro farmers living in the neighborhood of Uniontown, many of them conducting large plantations of their own. I might add, also, that if the white people have assisted and encouraged the thrifty Negro members of the community, it has not been merely a philanthropic interest which led them to do this. Negroes have, as I have been informed, not less than $70,000 deposits in the three white banks of the town, and there has never been a lynching in that neighborhood.

The other instance of Negro progress to which I have referred is that of Watt Terry, of Brockton, Mass. Watt Terry told his story at the last meeting of the Negro Business League in Chicago. Mr. Terry is a modest appearing young man, about thirty years of age. When he landed at Brockton some twelve years ago he had, according to his own story, a capital of just 12 cents. He found work at first as a coachman. After a time he obtained what he thought was a better position as janitor in the Young Men's Christian Association Building. Some of the members of the association then succeeded in getting him a position as a railway porter.

"Somehow or other," said Terry, "I did not care for that sort of work and after a few months gave it up. I made up my mind that I would rather work at a trade and tried to get work in one of the shoe factories in Brockton. As I did not know the trade and there was a good deal of competition for the places open to apprentices it looked rather hopeless at first. Finally, I got the foreman to say he would give me a chance, provided I was willing to work for two weeks without pay. I accepted that offer and made up my mind to make the most of those two weeks."

At the end of the two weeks Terry

had done so well that he was given a position in which he earned $7 a week. By sticking close to his job and making the most of his opportunities he was gradually promoted until he earned first $10, then $15, $18 and finally $25 a week.

"I had some difficulties at first," said Terry. "The other men did not like me at first and showed it. However, I stuck to the job, kept on smiling, and it was not long before I was on just as good terms with the men in the shop as I cared to be. As I did not have much opportunity to spend my money I found it easier to save."

When Terry reached the point where he was earning $25 a week his wife was earning $9 as matron in the Brockton railway station, and they both saved their money. Meanwhile Terry had begun to buy and sell real estate in a small way. One day he sold a house and lot upon which he cleared as a commission $100.

"That seemed to settle the question of my future," said Mr. Terry. "I decided to go into the real estate business."

He added that at the present time his gross income from his houses was between $6000 and $7000 per month. Altogether, including several store buildings and two apartment houses containing fifty-four suites of rooms, Mr. Terry now owns 222 buildings in Brockton. One of these buildings is leased

to the United States Government for the use of the post office; another is rented for a public library and reading room by the city.

I should not, perhaps, have dared to make this statement if I had not confirmed the truth of Mr. Terry's statement by independent inquiry. In a recent letter from Secretary White, of the Brockton Young Men's Christian Association, he says: "Some weeks ago I wrote you relative to our mutual friend (Watt Terry's) business, but now I want to enclose a clipping from the tax list which you will see is positive evidence that the time the taxes were recorded he was carrying well on to $300,000, and I know that his purchase of $120,000 occurred since that time. It is certainly a most wonderful development within a few years."

I ought to add that during all the time that Mr. Terry has been in Brockton he has been connected with the Young Men's Christian Association, and not long ago he contributed $1000 toward the support of that institution.

Many persons will, perhaps, feel that money which is acquired in this rapid way is likely to do the person who obtains it as much harm as it does good. I confess that it seems to me that the same amount of money acquired more slowly would mean more in character to the man who gained it. On the whole, however, the Negro race has not reached the point where it has been troubled by the number of its millionaires. And if getting slowly and laboriously is a good discipline, the Negro has almost a surplus of that kind of blessing. I ought to add, also, in justice to Mr. Terry, that from all I can learn, his rapid rise has neither injured his character nor destroyed his good sense. I suspect that the effort to keep all those houses rented and the effort to pay interest on his mortgages has had a tendency to make him humble.

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