

A BYSTANDER'S NOTES.

Two books have recently been published which are worthy of attention; not less for what they are than for what they indicate: they are entitled "Dessalines" and "A Voice from the South."

The former is a drama by a colored man, William E. Easton, Galveston, Texas; the other a volume of essays by Anna Julia Cooper, a colored woman of Xenia, Ohio.

Any one who wishes to study at first hand the most important element of the race problem in America, to-wit: the relation of the best products of the race itself to this great problem, can not do better than to order these two books. The Bystander does not know the price of either of them, but would judge from the general make-up that it would be about \$1 each.

The first thing that will impress the cultured reader of these books will be the general tastefulness and accuracy of the works themselves, and the next will be the accuracy and finish of the literary style of the authors. Not only is there nothing loud or garish about these books, but there is to be found through them both an indescribable charm of finish and verbal exactitude; rarely excelled in the work of contemporary writers. The habit of a lifetime has made the Bystander's pencil almost infallible in its indication of verbal inaccuracy, which is, after all, the very highest test of literary merit. The word which exactly fills the place where it is used—is neither too large nor too small for the service assigned or the thought it is commissioned to convey—is to literary workmanship what the perfect note is to music. It may be sturred a little, often is without constituting actual fault, as the rush of some great movement may even hide or excuse a false note now and then, but only precision can give the feeling of finish which attests the genuine literary artist.

Rarely has the unsparring pencil passed so lightly over the pages of a book of essays as it did over the pages of this "Voice from the South," which yet has nothing of the South in it, except a bit more of vivacity and a little more evident desire to please, than the asperity of Northern culture usually permits, or at least encourages, in its feminine devotees.

"Dessalines" has a touch of Creole sentiment, and one finds occasionally in its words and phrases a flavor of French significance, no doubt unconscious to the author and not all ungrateful to one familiar with its origin. These, however, are very rare and not so pronounced as even to attract the attention of most readers. It, too, is singularly simple, clear, and correct in its verbal quality. Both books impress one with a sense of neatness, care, and unpretentious thoroughness, pleasing in any writer, and especially gratifying to note in the work of authors whose mental inheritance has not been one of painstaking care—members of a race not yet generally freed from the trammels of restricted opportunity and imperfect diction. It will, perhaps, come with something like a sense of unpleasant surprise to some cultured men and women who may read this book that there are persons of this race who need not even the artifice of what is termed "dialect" to place them on a high level in that elegance of simplicity which marks the best use of our English tongue.

Both of these books are not only by colored writers but both proceed from the same *motif*—the relation of the colored race to Caucasian humanity and Christian civilization in the new world.

"Dessalines" is "a dramatic tale," based on the great Haytian struggle for liberty in which the arrogance of the old *regime* of France joined hands with the savagery of the *Sans Culottes* and the Creole hatred of the slave, to overawe and overpower those whom only the love of freedom made invincible. The hero of the tale is Dessalines, the black and indomitable lieutenant of Toussaint L'Ouverture. The action of the play is direct and strong; its language simple, chaste, and temperate—sometimes startling in its graphic plainness, but wholly without rant, and when the character of its *motif* is taken into account, showing a remarkable self-restraint and no slight degree of literary art.

The "Voice from the South," on the other hand, is a cultivated woman's view of the gulf which is set between white Christian man and womanhood and souls encased in darker-hued integuments: It is not profound, and there is in it a somewhat too abundant use of second-hand material and a little parade of quotation. But that is the fashion of the times; the borrowed matter is always good, is aptly used in the main, and shows breadth of reading, keen observation, and thoroughly good taste in selection. But this half-fault is soon forgotten by the reader as he comes to note the deft but s'ingling satire, and keen but not ill-tempered wit, of the colored woman whose tactful self-restraint avouches her a cultured lady. Its perusal would be a new sensation to many a white-souled Christian woman of the "superior race," who, when she had perused its bright pages from cover to cover, would be forced to admit that, though she had encountered many a sharp thrust, she had not received one awkward or ill-tempered blow.

Defects the book may have. It is not so simple in purpose or profound in feeling as the man's work with which it is compared. There is an evident preparation and sometimes a little straining for effect; but few female writers have shown a daintier wit, and few works, especially upon such a difficult subject, give promise of a finer literary art.

The Bystander has given this unusual prominence to these two books because they seem to mark a distinctly new departure in the literary production and intellectual quality of the race.

Aside from newspaper articles; and some controversial pamphlets, volumes of sermons and speeches, the colored people of the United States can scarcely be said to have produced any literature. This is not surprising nor at all discreditable to them. The best scion grafted on the strongest stock requires some period of growth before it produces fruit, and a race by law barred from the fields of literature for two centuries, need at least the lifetime of a generation in which to produce good literary work. The wonder is not that it came so late but that it came so soon, and is of such simple, genuine quality. Except Mr. Chestnut, whose brief novels were something marvelous in their unpretentious realism, of which there are no more because prosperity in other fields has smothered his rare gift, hardly any colored writer has made a serious attempt in the realm of fiction, and not one has ventured upon good-tempered, keen, yet kindly, discussion of present conditions with any specific attempt at literary excellence. These books are practically the first fruits of literary culture of the American negro. That there are not more is due in part to various causes. A generation moves with doubt and hesitancy along a road which none of their ancestors have trod. Politics, religion, and especially the daily struggle for existence have absorbed an unusual proportion of the race's energy. The actors in such intensely dramatic scenes as have marked the days of freedom of this new people have rarely power to give expression to its paths. The slave romance has yet to be written by the slave deceased, if indeed any pen can ever depict its lights and shadows. But the great field of first endeavor will not be the story of slavery, but the tale of half-freedom. The great opportunity which waits the pen of the colored novelist is not the plantation of yesterday, but the plantation of to-day. The literature which the colored man should strive to create should be along the line of these two books—the literature of colored life in juxtaposition with the Christian civilization of to-day—the literature not of argument, nor of protest, but of aspiration and truth. Is the Hugo born who will give the world the romance of the tenant's or the cropper's life so truly as to stir the world to justice?

The prevalence of false ideas in regard to actual racial conditions in this country is well illustrated by the following, which a friend sends us, clipped from a religious newspaper in Chicago:

"It is generally believed at the North that special cars are provided for colored people on the Southern railroads, and that they are forbidden to ride on the cars reserved for white people. Such is not the case. The simple fact is that every rail road in the South sells first and second-class tickets, whereas only first-class tickets are sold on most Northern roads. A second-class ticket entitles one to passage on the smoking-car. As a rule the Southern negro's are thriftless and poor, and but for second-class tickets would hardly be able to travel at all, for the rates of fare are nearly double what they are in the North."

It is fast to presume that the editor thought he was telling the truth. This presumption rests, however, solely on the fact that he edits a religious journal; if it were the editor of a secular newspaper which had made such a statement no well-informed person would have doubted for a moment that it was an intended barefaced falsehood.

An intelligent person who reads a daily paper could hardly help knowing the fact that the colored people throughout the country have

for two years been doing their utmost to bring the question of a State's power to compel passengers upon trains to be assorted as to race before the United States courts for adjudication. Such person ought also to know that it has twice been held that such a law is unconstitutional so far as interstate passengers—that is, passengers going from one State into another, are concerned. This, however, does not affect passengers whose routes lie wholly within a single State. This question will for the first time be presented to the Supreme Court in *ex parte Plessy*, from Louisiana, now pending, wherein the Bystander is of counsel for the plaintiff in error.

The simple fact is, that in eight States of the South, it is a crime punishable with fine or imprisonment for a colored man to ride in a car with white people, no matter what rate of fare he pays or is willing to pay.

The conditions stated with such particularity by the editor, in regard to first and second-class tickets, do not prevail in those States. All tickets are of the same class, or if there is ever a second-class ticket sold there must also be separate cars for white and colored second-class passengers. The only trains which are permitted to carry white and colored passengers in the same car in any of these States are construction trains, on which the passengers are their own workmen. There is not a single road in either of them in which the separation is effected, as this editor so particularly describes, by a difference in rate or class of ticket. The colored man pays exactly the same fare as the white man, but must ride in a separate car or compartment. There was a time when the second-class ticket system abounded on all roads of the South; but then, there was also a time when those States were the special habitat of the saurians, and the one is about as ancient history now as the other. The separate car law was a deathblow to the second-class ticket, because it would require on every train at least four separate cars or compartments; one for first-class whites, one for second-class whites, and the same for the two classes of colored passengers.

This extract we have quoted is all the more misleading because it claims expressly to be the statement of one who knows, intended and designed to set right those who unwittingly have fallen into error. If the editor's religious incursions have no better basis of truth than his deliberate misstatements as to mundane affairs, he certainly can not complain if men count him "a blind leader of the blind."

Such imaginary statements as to easily ascertained facts are lamentably frequent with those who claim the place of "spiritual leaders." Another religious journal, commenting on the recent Texas immolation, remarks:

"It is consoling to know that these barbarities are neither participated in nor approved by the enlightened or religious elements of the South. They are the work of the low, ruffianly class of Southern whites whom the more respectable elements are unable to restrain. It is not the Christian people of the South who are responsible for these things."

This is another instance of that inability to distinguish between fact and the result of an over-charitable imagination in discussing Southern conditions. The writer simply concluded that it *must be so*, because he could not imagine that men he had known in amiable church relations could be guilty of such crimes against law, humanity, and civilization.

The truth is that the so-called "hoodlum" element of the South of which we have recently heard so much has hitherto been the willing tool of the so-called "better class." In certain parts of the South they have very recently broken away from such leadership, especially in Southern Mississippi, which is now overrun by "poor white" Regulators, as recently set forth in these notes. Mobs of 5,000 and 10,000 do not gather in open day, however, without the approval of the "better class" and the active participation of "Southern Christians," a fact which the man who penned this statement must have known if he read the published accounts of the barbarity.

His mistake lay in the fact that he quite ignored the fundamental truth that a Christianity colored by slavery has no regard for the personal or political rights of the formerly enslaved race.

The right to enslave included the power to deprive the enslaved person of all natural rights. The slave might ask and receive favor, but he could have no right. His person, his labor, his progeny belonged to another to do with as he pleased. He lived and enjoyed only on sufferance. To the rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" he had no shadow of any claim.

This state of society was sanctioned, maintained and defended by the church as a part of the divine ordainment. It was part and parcel of Southern Christianity, and, to tell the exact truth, part and parcel of a considerable portion of Northern Christianity as well. Northern Christians mobbed men for defending the religion of Jesus of Nazareth against this foul aspersion, who would never have thought of using violence against one who wholly denied the existence of a "First Great Cause."

It was an inevitable consequence that a religion on which was based the right of a white man to take away all the natural rights of a colored man should support and maintain the right of a white people to regulate and control in their own way the rights and privileges of a colored people.

And this is exactly the position of the "Southern Christian" to-day. He says: "We had a legal and divine right to hold the persons of these people and bar them from every privilege save what the master chose to give. This right the government of the United States took away from us by force; but we have still the right to rule and control them as we choose, collectively, and we intend to do it."

Thus "Southern Christianity" becomes again the Gibraltar of Southern barbarism. If a man had fired into the crowd that conducted the Texas incineration the chances are at least even that he would have hit a "Christian" or a "Colonel"—that is, a church member or one of the best of the much vaunted "better class."

The South is a great mass of very real and easily apprehended facts, even if they be very unpleasant ones; and it all becomes a religious teacher to mislead those who seek for truth in his pages by arguing from wholly imaginary and impossible hypotheses in regard to them. Northern Christianity has enough to answer for in having debased the God of justice, truth, and love by making Him the author and justifier of slavery without becoming in this day the excuser of that barbarism which sprung from and is based upon the same infamous theory of God's favor and partiality to the white man. If it has not learned that God is just and demands first of all things that they who take His name and claim to be exponents of His spirit should be just to their fellows, then, indeed, the blood shed in expiation of the crime of slavery was shed in vain.

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