

Chat on Current Literature Concerning the Negro

James R. Harris in Illinois Chronicle

We have on our desk a book entitled "My Brother," a series of essays and addresses by Dr. Amory H. Bradford, and one of the finest expositions of the doctrine of "human brotherhood" it has been our good fortune to see. With rare insight, the doctor talks of the dangers to society that follow a denial of equal chances in life to all men, regardless of class or race. He reproves the church for her failure to induce men to "practice in their lives what they profess with their lips," and to our mind the reproof is strictly merited. There is no trouble between the races; there is no maladjustment between the weak and the strong, which cannot be lessened by following the teaching of Confucius: "Do not unto others that you would not have them do to you," or the positive statement of the same truth by Christ: "Do unto others, that you would they should do unto you." "The university and the pulpit," he declares, "are the hope of the world." This is true. Civilized men are, after all, but cultured barbarians, and the old proverb: "Scratch a Russian and find a Tartar," is true in spirit of the great majority. We boast our enlightenment—pride ourselves upon our intellectual and moral excellence, yet in the final analysis, things are largely in the hands of the brass-buttoned gentleman who stands on the corner with a club or a black jack in his hand. True it is, that we have taken the rings out of our noses and we no longer paint (that is, most of us), yet in our treatment of the weak and the helpless we still believe in that good old rule, the simple plan:

"That they may take who have the power,

And they may keep, who can."

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We have just received the third of the series of monographs being published by the American Negro Monograph company, Washington, D. C. Its theme is the life of Benjamin Banneker, the great negro mathematician, who did so much to dispel doubt of the negro's mental capacity in the eighteenth century, and who was not only a recipient of letters of admiration and encouragement from Thomas Jefferson, but also an honored guest at the executive mansion during the administration of that great man. Without any of the numerous tables and other astronomical data, which must go so far toward lessening the difficulties of such a task, Mr. Banneker compiled an almanac for the year 1732, which fear-won the applause of many of the leading scientists of the day. He later sent a copy in the original manuscript to President Jefferson and accompanied it with a letter from which we quote:

"Sir—I am fully sensible of the greatness of that freedom which I now take with you on the present occasion, a liberty which seemed to me scarcely allowable, when I reflected on that distinguished and dignified station in which you stand, and the almost general prejudice and prepossession which is prevalent in the world against those of my complexion. I suppose it is a truth too well attested to you to need a proof here, that we are a race of beings who have long labored under the abuse and censure of the world; that we have long been considered as brutish rather than human and scarcely capable of mental endowments. Sir, I hope I may safely admit, in consequence of report which hath reached me, that you are a man far less inflexible in sentiments of this nature than many others; that you are measurably friendly and well disposed toward us, and that you are ready and willing to lend your aid and assistance to our relief from those many distressed and numerous calamities to which we are reduced. Sir—I suppose that your knowledge of the situation of my brethren is too extensive to need a recital here; neither shall I presume to prescribe methods by which they may be relieved, otherwise than by recommending to you and all others to wean yourselves from those narrow prejudices which you have imbibed with respect to them, and as Job proposed to his friends, "Put your souls in their souls instead," thus shall your hearts be enlarged with kindness and benevolence toward them, and thus shall you need neither the direction of myself nor others in what manner to proceed therein. This calculation, sir, is the production of my arduous study in this my advanced stage of life; for having long had unbounded desires to become acquainted with the secrets of nature, I have had to gratify my curiosity herein through my own assiduous application to astronomical study, in which I need not to recount to you the many difficulties and disadvantages I have had to encounter. We have quoted the letter at length that the reader may get an idea of the very intelligent way in which this self-taught negro expressed himself. Banneker died in 1794, and no marble shaft marks the site of his resting place; we mention the fact with shame. A people's character is interpreted in terms of its appreciation for its great men, and we hope the day is not far distant when our people, in whose name Benjamin Banneker lived and wrought, may in some

way show their gratitude by distinguishing the spot of his burial.

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The ten best-selling books in fiction for 1910 were the following: "The Rosary," "A Modern Chronicle," "When a Man Marries," "John Marvel," "Thruout King," "The Silver Horde," "Lord Loveland Discovers America," "The Kingdom of Slender Swords," "Simon the Jester" and "Nathan Burke." It is interesting to note that of the thirty "best sellers," nineteen were written by men and eleven by women. Of course, being a "best seller" does not make a book literature, yet popularity does not imply a lack of merit and most of the above-given list will repay perusal.

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In one of the magazines we read an article on "The New Japan," in which was expressed great concern over the rapid growth in power and prestige which the island-empire has made in the last half century. Occidental nations are justified in their speculations about Japan's future. Suppose, for instance, that she finds it possible to arouse the Chinese from their sleep of centuries, and to inspire them with their own dynamic energies—think, reader, what a power this yellow empire might become! Some idea of the enormous population of China can be formed when we remember that if we could place all the men in the world side by side in one long line, first an Englishman, then an American, etc., every fourth man would be a Chinaman. One of the sources of Oriental strength is their impenetrability—the occidental mind cannot see behind the mask, or as Kipling puts it:

"It is not good for the Christian race To worry the Aryan brown,

For the white man riles,

And the brown man smiles,

And it weareth the Christian down;

And the end of the fight

Is a tombstone white

With the name of the late deceased,

And the epitaph clear,

"A fool lies here

Who tried to hurry the east."

Or as another writer who also knows his subject, puts it:

"The brooding east with awe beheld

Her impious younger world;

The Roman tempest swelled and

swelled,

And on her head was hurled.

The east bow'd low before the blast,

In patient, deep disdain;

She let the legions thunder past,

And plunged in thought again."

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The recent magnificent showing by the negroes of Chicago in raising so great a sum of money for the Y. M. C. A. movement simply proves conclusively that in this city the brains and wealth of the race is to be found. This one incident has done more to raise our people in the estimation of the world than all the editorials ever written. A people who can in ten days secure \$60,000 for any given purpose must be reckoned with. When we remember that our people are wage earners largely, and often, for policy's sake, are deterred in making large contributions to public enterprises, even when able so to do, the result of this effort is all the more commendable. We thought we were doing a great thing here in Louisville in attempting to raise \$15,000, but we take off our hats to Chicago, promising to be in the future.