

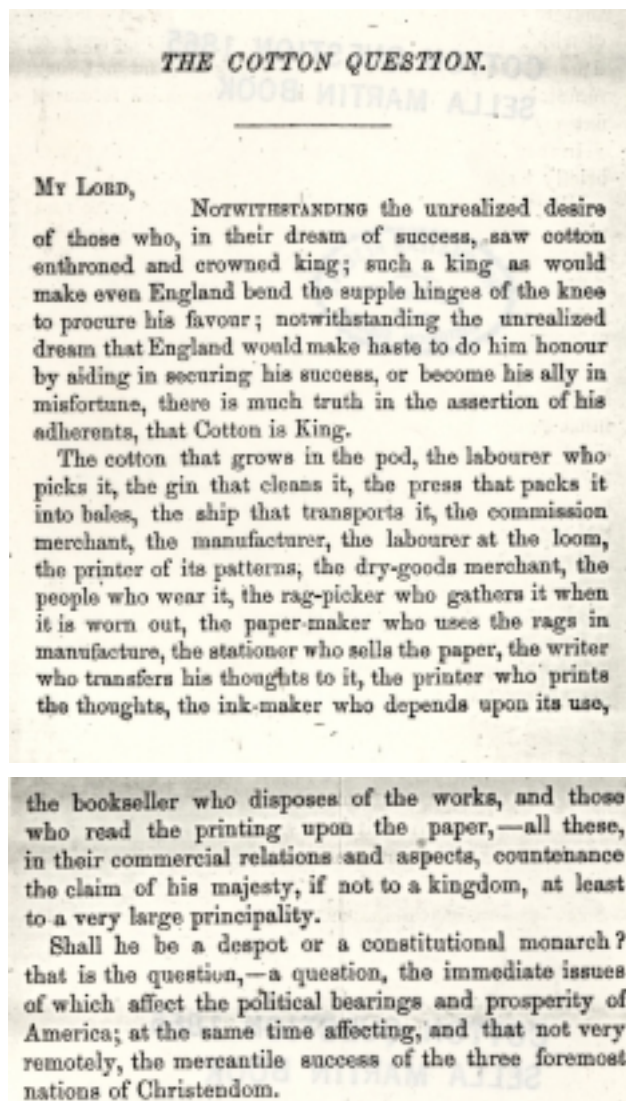
## THE COTTON QUESTION.

MY LORD,

NOTWITHSTANDING the unrealized desire of those who, in their dream of success, saw cotton enthroned and crowned king; such a king as would make even England bend the supple hinges of the knee to procure his favour; notwithstanding the unrealized dream that England would make haste to do him honour by aiding in securing his success, or become his ally in misfortune, there is much truth in the assertion of his adherents, that Cotton is King.

The cotton that grows in the pod, the labourer who picks it, the gin that cleans it, the press that packs it into bales, the ship that transports it, the commission merchant, the manufacturer, the labourer at the loom, the printer of its patterns, the dry-goods merchant, the people who wear it, the rag-picker who gathers it when it is worn out, the paper-maker who uses the rags in manufacture, the stationer who sells the paper, the writer who transfers his thoughts to it, the printer who prints the thoughts, the ink-maker who depends upon its use, the bookseller who disposes of the works, and those who read the printing upon the paper,—all these, in their commercial relations and aspects, countenance the claim of his majesty, if not to a kingdom, at least to a very large principality.

Shall he be a despot or a constitutional monarch? that is the question,—a question, the immediate issues of which affect the political bearings and prosperity of America; at the same time affecting, and that not very remotely, the mercantile success of the three foremost nations of Christendom.



In seeking a solution of this problem, let us inquire briefly what is cotton, and how it is cultivated.

What is Cotton? It is a plant with a strong and vigorous root, a quickly growing, rank and prolific stalk, with an abundant, capricious, but valuable product.

The soil on which it grows must be prolific, but not too rank. The ground on which it is for the first time produced, must be chastened by maize and pumpkins, which are gross in their nature. So exhausting is cotton, that the land on which it grows must be left to rest every third year at least. And even then, the stalk—which, on account of its gross cellular formation, its rank juices, and its weakness of fibre, decays as quickly as it grows—the stalk, or its chemical equivalents, must form the manure which makes possible a second crop.

The nature of this plant requires three things in its production. It requires promptitude in planting, constancy of attendance while growing, and great application in the gathering. Its culture is attended by these evils, namely, malaria in its locality, and rheumatic tendencies in its gatherers, on account of the dew that hangs about its pods and its abundant leaves, which keep the hands and garments of its gatherers wet for many hours in the early morning. It is also generally exhausting to the whole system of the labourer, since to preserve the weight and quality of the cotton, he must work not only all day, but late at night, to press into bales the picking of the preceding day, as it will either become mouldy from the dampness, or dry and brittle in fibre from the quick evaporation of the dew when exposed to

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the sun.

There are three kinds of cotton: known as Midland, Upland, and Sea Island. The lowest of this class is that produced on lands which, though not the best for cotton, will pay best with a cotton crop. The next is that produced on what is called the prairie lands of the States of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi—lands of such a rich though clayey character, that the feet of the beasts and labourer have to be cleaned of it every half hour, to enable them to continue their toil, so heavy is the weight. Then there is the finest species, the most expensive but the most injurious to human life in its cultivation, called the Sea Island cotton, produced only on the Sea Islands adjacent to the State of South Carolina.

This cotton requires peculiar conditions. It requires the sea-weed for manure, and the influence of the Gulf stream to bring it to its state of superiority over all other cottons. It always brings nearly double, and sometimes quadruple, the price of any other.

But, as I intimated, these conditions are secured at terrible expense to its producers. Where it grows, terrible fevers prevail—fevers contagious and deadly to the un-acclimatised, and deteriorating even to the native. So true is this, that during slavery the average of negro-life on the Sea Islands was not more than seven years, nor in any other Cotton region more than nine years. The rapid decay of the sea-weed, and the humid air produced by the Gulf stream especially, breed and perpetuate the deadly malaria.

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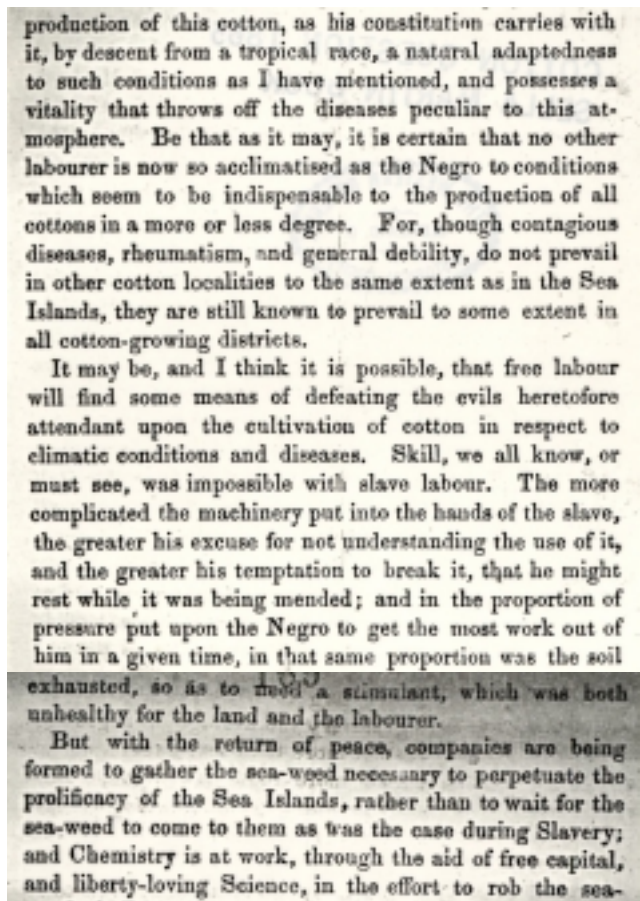
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production of this cotton, as his constitution carries with it, by descent from a tropical race, a natural adaptedness to such conditions as I have mentioned, and possesses a vitality that throws off the diseases peculiar to this atmosphere. Be that as it may, it is certain that no other labourer is now so acclimatised as the Negro to conditions which seem to be indispensable to the production of all cottons in a more or less degree. For, though contagious diseases, rheumatism, and general debility, do not prevail in other cotton localities to the same extent as in the Sea Islands, they are still known to prevail to some extent in all cotton-growing districts.

It may be, and I think it is possible, that free labour will find some means of defeating the evils heretofore attendant upon the cultivation of cotton in respect to climatic conditions and diseases. Skill, we all know, or must see, was impossible with slave labour. The more complicated the machinery put into the hands of the slave, the greater his excuse for not understanding the use of it, and the greater his temptation to break it, that he might rest while it was being mended; and in the proportion of pressure put upon the Negro to get the most work out of him in a given time, in that same proportion was the soil exhausted, so as to need a stimulant, which was both unhealthy for the land and the labourer.

But with the return of peace, companies are being formed to gather the sea-weed necessary to perpetuate the prolificacy of the Sea Islands, rather than to wait for the sea-weed to come to them as was the case during Slavery; and Chemistry is at work, through the aid of free capital, and liberty-loving Science, in the effort to rob the sea-



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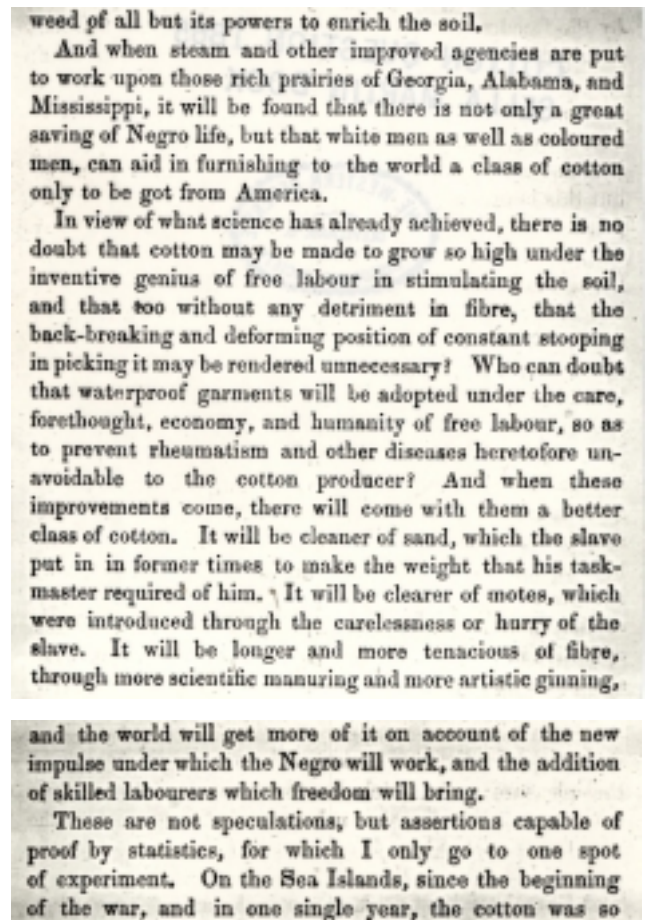
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weed of all but its powers to enrich the soil.

And when steam and other improved agencies are put to work upon those rich prairies of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, it will be found that there is not only a great saving of Negro life, but that white men as well as coloured men, can aid in furnishing to the world a class of cotton only to be got from America.

In view of what science has already achieved, there is no doubt that cotton may be made to grow so high under the inventive genius of free labour in stimulating the soil, and that too without any detriment in fibre, that the back-breaking and deforming position of constant stooping in picking it may be rendered unnecessary? Who can doubt that waterproof garments will be adopted under the care, forethought, economy, and humanity of free labour, so as to prevent rheumatism and other diseases heretofore unavoidable to the cotton producer? And when these improvements come, there will come with them a better class of cotton. It will be cleaner of sand, which the slave put in in former times to make the weight that his task-master required of him. It will be clearer of motes, which were introduced through the carelessness or hurry of the slave. It will be longer and more tenacious of fibre, through more scientific measuring and more artistic ginning, and the world will get more of it on account of the new impulse under which the Negro will work, and the addition of skilled labourers which freedom will bring.

These are not speculations, but assertions capable of proof by statistics, for which I only go to one spot of experiment. On the Sea Islands, since the beginning of the war, and in one single year, the cotton was so



improved in every respect, and so increased in quantity by the freedmen employed by the United States' Government, that it realized £120,000 by Free Negro labour; and the Negroes themselves there, purchased one-third of the estates that were sold by the government, on account of the unpaid taxes. I am sorry to say that this is true only of these Sea Islands and a few other localities; but this is no fault of the Negroes or the Federal Government. On account of the South being so devastated by war, and the war ending too late to plant crops this season, little cotton has been planted, indeed, little of all things has been planted; so that while I have the honour to speak to you to-day, many poor whites, and still more of the Negro race, are dying of starvation, exposure, and lack of medical attention.

But though liberty has come to the Negro at this fearful cost, and, though English as well as American charity is taxed for his present relief—to which, thank God, both nations are nobly responding—though, I repeat, his liberty may be leaner than his slavery for the present, the members of this Association have this reason for rejoicing, that henceforth the stoppage of cotton will not chill the energy of the manufacturer, nor starve the household of the operative in Lancashire, through slavery trying to prove its shamelessness and tyrannical boast that Cotton is King, even at the expense of involving the nations in war.

In turning to the aspect of this paper that concerns the Negro as a free labourer, no one can understand the pleasure with which I make the statement which I am now about to make, unless he has been a slave.—MY LORD,—the American Slave is free: the Negro,

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as to his social existence, has risen from the degradation of chattelhood to the privileges and responsibilities of manhood. And the question which it will require the next few years to solve, is: Does this change involve a blessing or a curse to his race?

Is he inherently and irretrievably inferior as a man? And if so, is he, therefore, unfit to grapple with the difficulties of freedom, or to disprove his natural adaptedness to slavery, or to overcome its terrible traces upon him? There is no reason to account him naturally inferior, except on the Darwinian theory, that all races, at some period of development, are inferior. But even though that theory were allowed to be true, it would prove too much, since it would take away the only claim for the Negro's enslavement, that, namely, of *inherent* inferiority. For, if the Negro is in a transition state from the brute to the man, he is simply where all races have been at some point of their history; and if any other race has finally risen to superiority, so may the Negro race eventually rise. But refusing to accept this theory for the white race, I reject it in the case of the Negro; and until some one catches and exhibits a specimen of speaking ourang-outangs, or of a speechless race of men, or till I am shown a gorilla with a thumb that is not as long as its fingers, I shall continue to reject it.

Nay, while we have black men like Solouque of Hayti, who can be as despotic as white men; and like Benson of Liberia, who are as able in statesmanship; and men amongst us as brilliant as Frederick Douglass and as dull as Dogberry, I must be excused for adopting the

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opposite theory.

But admitting the Negro to be inferior, how does that justify enslaving him, especially if we mean to hold our theory about the superiority of the white race, and to reap the results of it, since the inferiority of the Negro necessitates an inferior form of labour, an inferior social fabric, and inferior political appliances, from all of which the white man must suffer even more than the Negro? Brutality may be restrained when driving a mere brute; but when the labourer has not only the feelings of a brute to be excited, but the determination of a man to resist, the driver must himself become a brute through the constant necessity of coercion. Further, the form of labour applied to such a being must in itself be inferior. If the labourer does not progress in the arts, the employer cannot progress in the science of labour. The form of labour must therefore remain stationary, which, in our time, is the same as being retrograde in character.

It may be right to deny marriage to a semi-brute, but it cannot be right to adopt a form of social existence that tempts the superior race to disregard marriage themselves, and to show that disregard in connection with semi-brutes in having progeny by them. For, if the negro woman is not a brute, it is a strange thing to say that she is one, seeing that members of the superior race are often the fathers of her children; and if she is a brute, for them to be the fathers of her children is a thing stranger still. Then, too, if the superior race may become thus inferior without perceiving it, a shrewd suspicion may be allowed that the race accounted inferior

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Still further: to plead the inferiority of the victim of Slavery is to stand in the way of all political advancement. For if the Negro can be made and kept happy only at the expense of hampering the progressive tendencies of free government for white men—if a white man who is opposed to the negro's enslavement must be driven away from his enterprise and his residence when he would improve the law for white men—if, in short, the life of a white man is not worth as much as the life of a negro's, where slavery exists, provided the white man refuses to be degraded by yielding to the terms of slavery, then, I say, the inferiority of the Negro is recognized and practised upon at fearful expense. For the white man is thus made inferior as the Negro: if not so inherently, he is practically, and with a curse greater than even the Negro fears or feels.

I submit that the Negro has no right to be happy and contented as a bondsman, at such fearful expense to the superior race.

I am prepared now for the rejoinder that this alternative is not necessary, since the Negro may leave the vicinity of the white people. But this yields the whole argument. If the Negro may go away from the white people, he may be free; and if he may be free, white superiority does not require negro inferiority to set it off. My argument does not interfere with the question of where he *may go*, but only with that of where he *shall stay*.

Our position, then, is this: That freedom is a good thing for all, the Negro included; that his inferiority is no

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sound argument for his enslavement, since it makes his enslaver inferior; that he is not inferior, except from circumstances.

But were these positions false, what then? The negroes are free, and it would cost as much blood and treasure to re-enslave them as it has already cost to free them.

Shall we allow prejudices which have been rebuked by Providence to stand in the way of the white man's advancement, by throwing them as obstructions in the way of the Negro's elevation?

We are told by some that Emancipation may be right, but that the method of accomplishing it in America was wrong. We are told it cost too much blood, suffering, and treasure. Well, that may be. But that was the choice of the superior race, and if their wisdom was not equal to the task without this sacrifice, that only proves that they are not so superior to the Negro after all: for had the method been left to him, he would have laid down his chains without shedding, or causing to be shed, one drop of blood.

We are told again that Emancipation ought to have been gradual and not immediate. Well, all that we can say, seeing such objectors have done *nothing else but say*, —it was not gradual; neither is this any fault of the Negro's. But if this be an evil, there is a partial remedy left for it: especially if those who speak of it desire to cure, rather than to be captious about it. The remedy is this: that go[od] and able men of the superior race should carry or send to these negroes the aids and

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elements of knowledge, and so try to make up by the number of volunteers, and by the amount of aid, for the lack of preparation which attended the Negro's entrance into freedom. Nor is it the fault of the Negro or his friends that Emancipation was not gradual but immediate: for those who approved of his enslavement continued to reject all offers to that end.

It is remarkable that whenever even slave-holders have had to deal with this question by practice rather than by theory, they have discarded gradual emancipation as impractical. In the West India Islands the gradual had to be abandoned for the immediate system. When the District of Columbia had to deal with the question, Emancipation was immediate; and this also was the case in Missouri and Maryland: and in this the people of these States only followed the example set them by the great Creator and Emancipator, in the model act of Hebrew emancipation.

It is further objected that the negroes are lazy, because of the tropical influences that still linger in them, and on account of the habits engendered by slavery. Well, the claim which I set up for his equal humanity, compels me to admit, apart from his tropical tendencies or his slavish habits, that he may be lazy. I have seen so many lazy men among white people, and I have seen them indulge their laziness at such fearful expense to truth, virtue, and uprightness, that I am quite prepared to believe that the Negro may be lazy also. But I have known of so many negroes escaping to the cold and rigorous climate of Canada and the Northern States, where they knew they would have to work even harder than in slavery,—I have seen so many of them, by night-work

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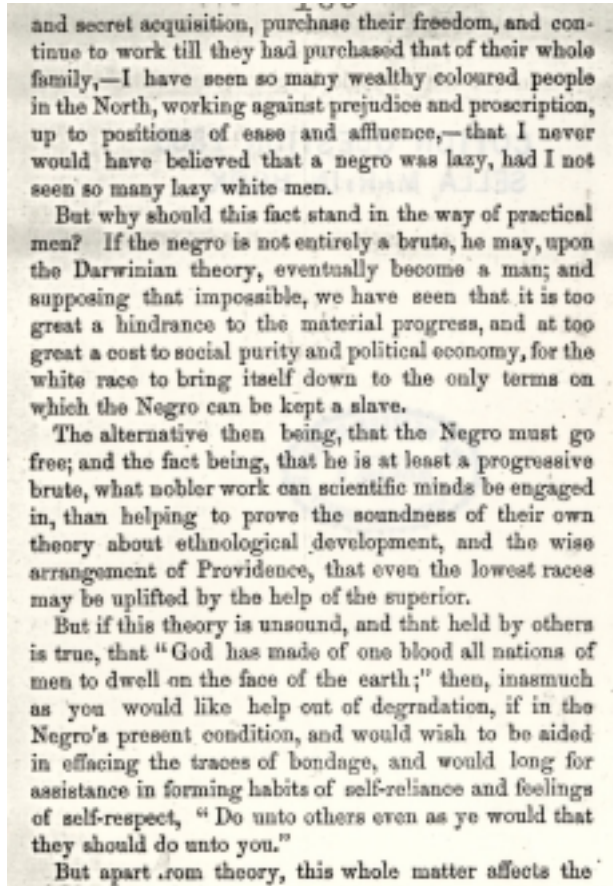
and secret acquisition, purchase their freedom, and continue to work till they had purchased that of their whole family,—I have seen so many wealthy coloured people in the North, working against prejudice and proscription, up to positions of ease and affluence,—that I never would have believed that a negro was lazy, had I not seen so many lazy white men.

But why should this fact stand in the way of practical men? If the negro is not entirely a brute, he may, upon the Darwinian theory, eventually become a man; and supposing that impossible, we have seen that it is too great a hindrance to the material progress, and at too great a cost to social purity and political economy, for the white race to bring itself down to the only terms on which the Negro can be kept a slave.

The alternative then being, that the Negro must go free; and the fact being, that he is at least a progressive brute, what nobler work can scientific minds be engaged in, than helping to prove the soundness of their own theory about ethnological development, and the wise arrangement of Providence, that even the lowest races may be uplifted by the help of the superior.

But if this theory is unsound, and that held by others is true, that “God has made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on the face of the earth;” then, inasmuch as you would like help out of degradation, if in the Negro’s present condition, and would wish to be aided in effacing the traces of bondage, and would long for assistance in forming habits of self-reliance and feelings of self-respect, “Do unto others even as ye would that they should do unto you.”

But apart from theory, this whole matter affects the



and secret acquisition, purchase their freedom, and continue to work till they had purchased that of their whole family,—I have seen so many wealthy coloured people in the North, working against prejudice and proscription, up to positions of ease and affluence,—that I never would have believed that a negro was lazy, had I not seen so many lazy white men.

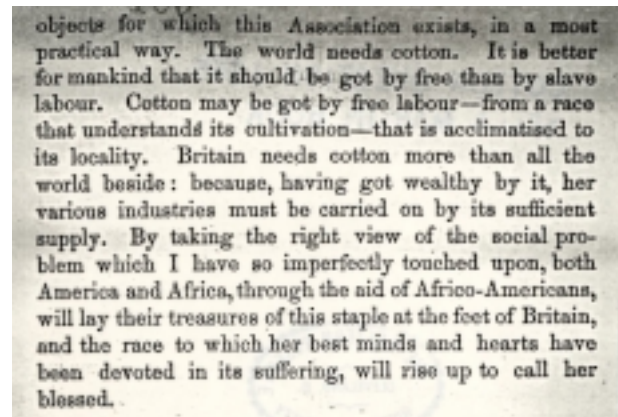
But why should this fact stand in the way of practical men? If the negro is not entirely a brute, he may, upon the Darwinian theory, eventually become a man; and supposing that impossible, we have seen that it is too great a hindrance to the material progress, and at too great a cost to social purity and political economy, for the white race to bring itself down to the only terms on which the Negro can be kept a slave.

The alternative then being, that the Negro must go free; and the fact being, that he is at least a progressive brute, what nobler work can scientific minds be engaged in, than helping to prove the soundness of their own theory about ethnological development, and the wise arrangement of Providence, that even the lowest races may be uplifted by the help of the superior.

But if this theory is unsound, and that held by others is true, that “God has made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on the face of the earth;” then, inasmuch as you would like help out of degradation, if in the Negro’s present condition, and would wish to be aided in effacing the traces of bondage, and would long for assistance in forming habits of self-reliance and feelings of self-respect, “Do unto others even as ye would that they should do unto you.”

But apart from theory, this whole matter affects the

objects for which this Association exists, in a most practical way. The world needs cotton. It is better for mankind that it should be got by free than by slave labour. Cotton may be got by free labour—from a race that understands its cultivation—that is acclimatised to its locality. Britain needs cotton more than all the world beside: because, having got wealthy by it, her various industries must be carried on by its sufficient supply. By taking the right view of the social problem which I have so imperfectly touched upon, both America and Africa, through the aid of Africo-Americans, will lay their treasures of this staple at the feet of Britain, and the race to which her best minds and hearts have been devoted in its suffering, will rise up to call her blessed.



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