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From the Southern Workman, Sept 1897

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From the Southern Workman, September, 1897

The Friday afternoon session was held in Academic Hall, which was crowded by members of the conference whose interest seemed augmented rather than decreased by long sessions they had already attended. It was opened by Rev. Francis J. Grimke, D. D., of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, Washington, whose paper is printed below. The speaker gathered up his slender, well-knit frame as if to throw the disk, and hurled his maledictions on shoddy work and pulpy character with such stern intensity that a visitor remarked in a whisper, 'That man is the Savonarola of his people.'

SOME THINGS THAT LIE ACROSS THE PATHWAY OF OUR PROGRESS.

There are two classes of obstacles that confront us in our efforts to rise. The first are those that lie outside of ourselves, that are set up by others; the second are those that lie within ourselves, and that we ourselves set up. It is of the latter class that I desire to speak, as by far the most serious, and to us the most important. The fact that lawlessness is increasing in the South, that the spirit of injustice towards us is more pronounced now, perhaps, than ever before; that the white people of the North, to a very large extent are either indifferent to these outrages or are in sympathy with them; that capital and labor in the North are both unfriendly to our employment; that the press of the country is hostile to us; and that the pulpit of the land is silent when it comes to the matter of our rights, gives to the future a very sober aspect; but such things are not nearly so depressing as those which fall under the second head. It is when we come to study the Negro himself, to look at him from within, that the most serious aspect

of the problem confronts us; so much so that it becomes extremely difficult, at times, to say whether the gathering darkness is to be temporary or permanent, whether the end is to be success or failure, victory or defeat. If the Negro will give careful thought and attention to himself, to the things which tend to build him up, to make him strong, physically, intellectually, morally, spiritually, no obstacles that can be thrown up from without can permanently obstruct his way, or impede his progress; he is bound to go forward. And so vice versa, if he neglects himself, if he allows himself to run to weeds, to fizzle out, there is no power in the universe outside of himself that can hold him up and push him forward. He is bound to go down. The important thing for us as a people, therefore, is to know what these obstacles are that lie within us, and to address ourselves seriously and earnestly to their removal. Hence, with a view of helping us to an intelligent understanding of what the real task is that lies before us, I desire at this time to call attention to a few of these obstacles.

And first may be mentioned, a lack of cohesiveness, or the disposition to hold together and to pull together. Two things are perfectly clear to my own mind touching our future in this country. The first is that for years to come we are to remain separate and distinct, having little or no social relation with the whites. It is sometimes said the wisest policy for us to pursue in this country is to lose sight of the fact that we are Negroes, but this is impossible. Everywhere we go the fact of our color is thrust upon us. At every step we are reminded of the fact that we are Negroes. If we attempt to travel, or enter a restaurant or hotel, or a place of worship, or are in search of employment we are confronted with the fact of our color. Go where we will it is the same. In the South, especially, this sentiment in favor of separation is rapidly crystalliz-

ing into law. Marriages between the two races have been forbidden in nearly all the old slave-holding states; and the movement toward separate cars for whites and blacks is also rapidly spreading. While in the North there are no separate cars, and no laws against the inter-marriage of the races, the lines in other respects are just as closely drawn. So far as I can see, there is no disposition to recognize the Negro socially, on the part of the whites, as a class, but the feeling against such contact and association, instead of diminishing is increasing. So that whether the Negro wants to remain a separate and distinct people in this country or not, the simple fact is that he cannot help himself. He is separate, has been, and is likely to be for years to come. In no part of the United States will you find white and colored people mingling on terms of social equality except in very rare and exceptional cases, of particular individuals, in particular localities. Nor will you find any disposition, anywhere in this country, to encourage such social contact. The trend is the other way. The decree of separation between the two races in this country is just as firmly fixed, for the present at least, as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

The second thing that is perfectly clear to my mind, touching our future in this country, is that as a race, we are to sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish together. We can't get away from each other. Never mind what progress I as an individual may make, never mind how intelligent or wealthy I may become, the social laws and customs that operate against the Negro as a class will operate against me. His fate will be my fate. We are all classed together, and are treated alike, whatever our condition--rich or poor, high or low, educated or uneducated. The one has just as much difficulty as the other in getting a meal at a restaurant, or accommodations in a hotel, or a shave in a barber-shop, or in renting a house. Both are forced to ride

in the same dirty, filthy cars in the South, and to sit in the equally dirty and filthy sitting rooms at the depot. There is no more disposition to recognize the one socially than the other. Whatever class distinctions we may make among ourselves, in the eyes of the white man we are all one. The educated Negro (is no better received than the uneducated Negro,) the wealthy Negro than the poor Negro, the light-complexioned Negro than the pure, unadulterated Negro. The knowledge of the fact that we have one drop of Negro blood, however white we may be, shuts us out just as completely. Whatever our condition, whatever our complexion, we are all bound together. Our fate is one. We rise or fall together. Such being the case, our duty is to recognize that fact, and in the light of it pull together for the common good. The spirit of co-operation, in all those things which tend to build us up as a people, to give us power and influence and respectability, we should carefully foster. Even if it were possible, in our present condition, social contact with the whites is not desirable. If that contact is to be a healthy one, and is to be mutually beneficial, we must come together as equals in fact, as well as in theory, which is not true at present. We are not the equal of the white man; nor does he recognize us as such. Not until we have lifted ourselves to his level in wealth, in intelligence, in social position, and this equality is by him recognized, can we afford to lose sight of the fact that we are colored, or cease to hold together as a class. When we are both on the same level, and this is recognized by both, then, and not till then, are we prepared to come together in a way that will be of permanent value to either, and in which each may preserve his self-respect.

The duty which lies immediately before the Negro, therefore, is the duty of self-development, the duty of making the most of himself and of his present opportunities. And in order to do this certain

things are necessary, and among them unity of action, the power of combination, of uniting our forces for the accomplishment of definite ends and objects. The weaker we are, the more necessary it is that we unite our forces, that we cultivate this power of cohesiveness, of coalescence. The strong can afford to stand apart, it may be, but not the weak. Their salvation consists in holding together, and working together. United they stand, divided they fall. In matters of business, this is especially true. If the Negro is ever to make any headway in this direction, there must be co-operation, he must be sustained through the patronage of his own people, and his own people must sustain him not simply because they may be interested in him as an individual, but because it is a race enterprise, involving larger interests than the immediate profits that may accrue to the individual running the business. The success of the enterprise means much to the individual owner, but it means vastly more to the race. As these race enterprises multiply, as the Negro merchant takes his place in the business world, as success crowns his efforts through race sympathy and co-operation, the race moves forward, is lifted to a higher level. And this is what we need as a race--the disposition to rally to the support of each other in all such enterprises because of the effect which their success will have upon the general status of the race. We are not to ignore the individual, but at the same time we are also to think of and live with reference to those wider interests that pertain to the race as a whole. In this element, however, we are sadly deficient; and in this deficiency is to be found one of the serious obstacles to our progress. Professor Shaler of Harvard, you will remember, urges this very fact as an evidence of the Negro's incapacity for civilization.. "The Negro," he says, never heartily engages in a partnership of a voluntary character." It behooves us therefore, as a race, to look well to ourselves in this re-

spect, and to endeavor to remedy this defect, by keeping the thought constantly before us, and by seeking to impress ourselves and those who may come under our influence with its importance as a stepping-stone to higher and better things.

Another discouraging element in the problem, is the tendency of the Negro towards the light and trivial, instead of towards the more serious and weighty matters of life. That this should be so among the masses of our people is not surprising. They have not yet developed the capacity or the taste for higher things. In their present condition, it is but natural that they should find their greatest delight in feasting and dancing, in frivolous amusements and the like; but among those who have had superior advantages, and who have risen above the rank and file, we certainly have a right to expect better things.