

ANONYMOUS

A Dream

‘Time obliterates the fictions of opinion, and confirms the decisions of nature.’—DR. JOHNSON.

I was reading, the other day, some very curious reasonings upon *time*, which, as well as space, the author annihilates without any ceremony. ‘I have proved elsewhere,’ says he, ‘that the idea of duration offers nothing absolute. Let us suppose, placed in space, intelligences who see, in the same instant, the earth in all the points of its orbit, as we ourselves see a lighted coal, at the same instant, in all the points of the circle which it is made to describe. Is it not evident that, if these intelligences can observe what passes upon earth, they will see us, at the same instant, tilling the ground and gathering the harvest!’ After reading these somewhat whimsical speculations, and building thereupon some of my own not less strange, my waking fancies passed, by an imperceptible transition, into the vagaries of a dream. On casting a look out of my window, I saw, with some astonishment, that a young tree which I had planted in the morning, was now full grown, and cast a venerable shade over the surrounding lawn. My surprise was but momentary. On recurring again to my speculations upon time, I perceived that the thing was perfectly natural. For, in fact, I reasoned, the time of planting, of the growth, and the maturity of the tree are one and the same, if the mind of the observer is capable of perceiving them at once, at which desirable state my mind appears now to have arrived. And, thought I, since there is usually in nature a conformity of one thing to another in these matters, why may

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I not behold other equally remarkable appearances as this of my tree? I felt an irresistible desire to go out and make discoveries. As I was hastening out of the room for this purpose, a card of invitation, upon the table, caught my eye. The name of the inviter was new to me, but I did not on that account hesitate to proceed to the appointed place.

A momentary surprise again crossed my mind, when, on entering a splendidly lighted room, I perceived that nearly one half the company were of the negro race, and that blacks and whites were mingling with perfect ease in social intercourse. Ah! this too, said I, is one of the effects of that same non-existing but wonder-working *time*. I was introduced as a stranger, and presently found myself in the train of a lively young lady of sable hue, whom the surrounding group of gentlemen, of both colors, showed to be the reigning belle.

‘A wonderful change, indeed,’ an elderly gentleman was replying to some remark, ‘and, having been absent from my country since I was a boy, I must say, to me perfectly unaccountable. May I ask the favor of some account of the manner in which it has been brought about?’

‘Nay,’ replied the lady, ‘you should ask some one better able to give you information than I am, some of our great statesmen for instance.’

‘But it would dwell longer in my memory, and, therefore, be far more instructive, as well as agreeable, could I hear it from the lips of the fair.’

‘*Fair* is not the word of compliment now in vogue,’ said the lady, apparently much diverted by the mistake.

No way abashed, however, he recovered his ground admirably.

‘Allow me then to say, that whatever is uttered in that most musical voice, cannot fall upon inattentive ears.’

This compliment did not appear displeasing to the lady, whose voice struck me as being the softest and sweetest I had ever heard, a peculiar attraction which is in fact not unfrequently possessed by persons of African extraction.

‘May I ask the subject of discussion?’ said I.

‘Oh, how it has come to pass,’ said she with an air of mock humility, ‘that we, poor degraded slaves, have now an equal station in society with our quondam masters.’

'I give my vote,' said a young white beau, 'that the attractions of female loveliness first made the tyrants ashamed of their prejudices.'

'But to speak seriously, upon what is indeed a subject for serious joy and gratitude,' said a black gentleman, Mr. A., 'our emancipation, and subsequent restoration to the rights and dignity of men, were conducted throughout upon Christian principles, upon principles of justice and humanity; and this, I think, is the true account of the total overthrow of former prejudices. And a *speedy* overthrow, I think we must call it, considering how strong and deeply rooted those prejudices were.'

'Miss B.,' said the elderly gentleman who had first requested information, 'I thought you had promised us your views of this wonderful revolution.'

'I was not upon the scene,' she replied, 'when the emancipation of the slaves took place; but, as I have been informed, some bright geniuses made the discovery that black men have rights as well as whites, and are no more fond of having their rights trampled upon. Well, the discovery was denied to be a discovery, and was argued against with great zeal and skill.'

'And pray by what sort of arguments?'

'O, the most logical. "It would be very inconvenient to restore these pretended rights, *ergo* they are not rights." "Those persons are black, and have different shaped heads from ours, *ergo* they are inferior, *ergo* nature intended them for slaves." "We want them to till our ground and raise our sugar, *ergo* we will have them."'

'Admirable! this last argument, I presume, was borrowed from that kingly logician the lion, in his division of the prey.'

'Most probably. But I have not yet exhausted their arguments. One of the most acute still remains. "It is impossible they should be freed till they are educated, and impossible they should be educated till they are free, therefore they must remain as they are."'

'And how could the advocates of emancipation escape this dilemma?'

'By denying the premises, and better still by proving them false, both by educating before they freed, and by freeing and then educating, both of which plans answered perfectly well. Our discoverers proceeded to promulgate the new doctrine,

that blacks have rights, in the usual way; they talked, they wrote, they preached, they published; they reasoned, they entreated, appealed to sympathy, conscience, religion. Gradually, by their efforts and the inherent force of truth, the new doctrines made their way.'

'Aided a little, I suspect,' said Mr. W., 'by the fear that the blacks would begin to reason themselves and use the logical arguments of powder and ball.'

'O, you wrong them; that motive operated only on a few and those the basest minds,' said the lady.

'How fortunate is it,' said Mr. A., 'that this revolution was brought about more by the instrumentality of the whites than our own! Even if it had been possible for our fathers to accomplish it without bloodshed, (which it was not,) I would rather it should be as it is.'

'Why so?' said I.

'Because, in no other way could the seeds of jealousy and ill-will have been so completely destroyed. But now, the good they have done us, and the kind and noble feelings they have shown towards us, have neutralized the effect of former wrongs.'

'And how beautiful a bond of union,' said Miss B., with enthusiasm, 'is formed between us by our common admiration of those great and generous men who exerted themselves most in this cause, the ornaments of their race, the benefactors of ours! How can we but love all their color for their sakes? And how can the whites feel otherwise than kindly towards a race, in whose behalf were called forth the noblest efforts of the noblest minds which our country has produced?'

'Is there never,' said the elderly gentleman, aside, to me, 'is there never any appearance among the blacks of a recollection of their former condition,—any feeling of inferiority?'

Miss B., overhearing him, smiled, certainly with no appearance of conscious inferiority. 'You forget,' said she, 'that none of the present generation have been in the condition to which you allude. Indeed, I think I have quite as often seen slight symptoms of shame on the part of the whites for their former misdoings.'

'But in fact,' said a black gentleman, 'there is scarcely anything of the kind on either side. We are too well familiarized

with the present state of things. We are too completely united into one people and there is as little thought of separate interests and feelings between blacks and whites, as between tall and short, or dark eyes and blue, or between men and women.'

'Custom is a wonderful magician indeed,' said the elderly gentleman. 'Still when I recall the days of my boyhood, I am amazed. For though all the blacks had then been emancipated, I well remember it used to be said, that it was impossible they should ever mingle upon equal terms with the whites. It was considered fixed as the decrees of fate, that they must always continue a distinct and degraded race. So universal was this feeling, that I do not see how custom could have done anything but keep things as they were.'

'And so in truth it might, had it been allowed to,' said Mr. A. 'But the work having been begun, as I said before, upon right principles, those principles did not allow those who held them to stop till it was complete. The Philo-Africans, or rather philanthropists, would not rest satisfied with a scanty measure of justice, but continued to urge our full and free admission to all political and social privileges. Great enthusiasm was excited in the cause, and enthusiasm was successfully opposed to prejudice. Many persons made it a point wherever they could find a tolerably well educated black, to introduce him into society. And now was the time for them to do something for themselves; and, in fact, the talents, learning and energy of individuals, not only made their own way to fame or respectability, but shed some lustre on our whole dark race. Our first black President was a man of such distinguished talents, that none chose to risk their own reputation for discernment by not acknowledging it, and African inferiority was heard of no more. In short, after the amalgamation was once begun, it is vain to attempt to enumerate all the circumstances that contributed to forward it.'

'You should not omit, however,' said another of the company, 'that, in this money loving world, cash sometimes balanced color in the accounts current of society, and proved a passport to gentility. Moreover, a few individuals married into respectable white families.'

'Among minor causes of this most happy revolution,' said Mr. W., 'I think should be mentioned, as having had some influence

in diminishing the absurd prejudices relating to complexion, the happy termination of the Cherokee troubles, when the faith and honor of our nation were in such terrible jeopardy?

‘And when they hardly escaped without a stain,’ said Mr. Y.

‘True,’ replied a person who had just joined our group, ‘even to be in danger is almost a stain in such a case; but let us be thankful that justice and honor prevailed at last.’

To this last speaker, an intelligent looking black gentleman of most dignified aspect, I had presently the honor of being introduced to as the President of the United States.

‘The work of amalgamation and reconciliation was a slow one, however,’ said Miss B. ‘Even when I was a child, I remember one little Charleston miss refused for some time to stand up in the same class with me.’

‘I remember,’ said Mr. A., ‘hearing a very respectable old gentleman, and a clergyman, tell of his having once been invited to a dinner party while on a visit to one of the northern cities in his younger days, and afterwards receiving from his inviter a note of apology and explanation, stating how very much distressed he felt to inform him that his mother, an old lady full of old fashioned prejudices, had absolutely refused to sit at table with a negro, and that therefore it would not be in his power to receive him.’

‘Is that possible?’ said Miss B.

‘Fact,’ said Mr. A.; ‘it took place, I think, before emancipation. I dare say the good lady would have been quite as willing to receive a black bear at her table.’

‘And there are still living,’ said Mr. H. ‘a few old ladies who retain very similar feelings.’

Our conversation was here interrupted by the sound of music. Two ladies, seemingly intimate friends, sang a duet together very charmingly; but she of jet complexion so entirely outshone her fair coadjutor, that if the latter had not been singularly free from vanity, she would not have subjected herself to the comparison. In all the music that followed, the blacks were unquestionably superior, and I remarked that national music at least had gained by the union of the two races. This led to a discussion whether the national character also had not been improved by the peculiar qualities of each supplying the deficiency of the other. It was generally agreed, that in manners

at least the whites had gained a certain ease and dignity, which were still, however, more conspicuous in the blacks. Some of the company also were of opinion, that the pugnacious disposition of the former was softened by intercourse with a milder race, and that the benefit was repaid to the latter by the growth of a more active and enterprising spirit among them.

The company soon after dispersed, and I found myself on my way home. Bright moonlight then changing very conveniently into brighter sunshine, I was exploring the city the next morning, without having passed any intermediate night. With enough that was familiar to make me feel at home in my native city, some things looked strange, but nothing perplexed me more than the new names to old places which continually met my eye—‘LUNDY PLACE,’ ‘BENEZET STREET,’ ‘GRANVILLE STREET,’ and many others which have escaped my recollection. At almost every turn, I came in sight of a monument in honor of some worthy, who had been a distinguished promoter of the union; but the names which I had never before heard remain shrouded in that obscurity, in which the names of a dream are so often left. We are sure we should recognize them; if we could but hear them again.—One monument was to JAMES STEPHEN, considered as indirectly a benefactor of this country, since, as the inscription stated, he was ‘one of the few who took the part of an oppressed race, when nations were the oppressors,—one who, for a length of years reaching through half a century, devoted himself to their cause.’

Presently I joined a knot of politicians, who were discussing the news of the day.

‘What is thought of the proposal for changing the seat of government?’ said one. ‘Will it be carried?’

‘Impossible to say,’ was the reply; ‘many of the black members, indeed the southerners generally, seem to think WILBERFORCE a more eligible situation than Washington, but the northerners oppose it.’

‘What other business is going on this session?’

‘Very little. CLARKSONIA will probably be taken into the Union. With what wonderful rapidity that territory has grown up!’

A faint sound of a bell in a distant part of the city now fell upon my ear, which announced, as I was informed, the

approaching celebration of the anniversary of general emancipation. Then followed the firing of cannon, the noise of which awoke me. I started, and found that my black servant had in a passion thrown to the door with great violence. I looked out of my open window, and his passion was explained and excused. *I saw a drove of negroes driven by, and the sound I had taken for a bell was the clanking of their chains.*

T. T.

(1831)
