

INTRODUCTION.

JUST what this country has in store to benefit or to startle the world in the future, no tongue can tell. We know full well the wonderful things which have occurred or have been accomplished here in the past, but the still more wonderful things which we may well say will happen in the centuries of development which lie before us, is vain conjecture, it lies in the domain of speculation.

America will be the field for the demonstration of truths not now accepted and the establishment of a new and higher civilization. Horace Walpole's prophecy will be verified when there shall be a Xenophon at New York and a Thucydides at Boston. Up to this time the most remarkable contribution this country has given to the world is the Author and subject of this book, now being introduced to the public—Frederick Douglass. The contribution comes naturally and legitimately and to some not unexpectedly, nevertheless it is altogether unique and must be regarded as truly remarkable. Our Pantheon contains many that are illustrious and worthy, but Douglass is unlike all others, he is *sui generis*. For every other great character we can bring forward, Europe can produce another equally as great; when we bring forward Douglass, he cannot be matched.

Douglass was born a slave, he won his liberty; he is of negro extraction, and consequently was despised and outraged; he has by his own energy and force of character commanded the respect of the Nation; he was ignorant, he has, against law and by stealth and entirely unaided, educated himself; he was poor, he has by honest toil and industry become rich and independent, so to speak; he, a chattel slave of a hated and

cruelly wronged race, in the teeth of American prejudice and in face of nearly every kind of hindrance and draw-back, has come to be one of the foremost orators of the age, with a reputation established on both sides of the Atlantic; a writer of power and elegance of expression; a thinker whose views are potent in controlling and shaping public opinion; a high officer in the National Government; a cultivated gentleman whose virtues as a husband, father, and citizen are the highest honor a man can have.

Frederick Douglass stands upon a pedestal; he has reached this lofty height through years of toil and strife, but it has been the strife of moral ideas; strife in the battle for human rights. No bitter memories come from this strife; no feelings of remorse can rise to cast their gloomy shadows over his soul; Douglass has now reached and passed the meridian of life, his co-laborers in the strife have now nearly all passed away. Garrison has gone, Gerritt Smith has gone, Giddings and Sumner have gone,—nearly all the early abolitionists are gone to their reward. The culmination of his life work has been reached; the object dear to his heart—the Emancipation of the slaves—has been accomplished, through the blessings of God; he stands facing the goal, already reached by his co-laborers, with a halo of peace about him, and nothing but serenity and gratitude must fill his breast. To those, who in the past—in *ante-bellum* days—in any degree shared with Douglass his hopes and feelings on the slavery question, this serenity of mind, this gratitude, can be understood and felt. All Americans, no matter what may have been their views on slavery, now that freedom has come and slavery is ended, must have a restful feeling and be glad that the source of bitterness and trouble is removed. The man who is sorry because of the abolition of slavery, has outlived his day and generation; he should have insisted upon being buried with the “lost cause” at Appomattox.

We rejoice that Douglass has attained unto this exalted position—this pedestal. It has been honorably reached; it is

a just recognition of talent and effort; it is another proof that success attends high and noble aim. With this example, the black boy as well as the white boy can take hope and courage in the race of life.

Douglass' life has been a romance—and a fragrance—to the age. There has been just enough mystery about his origin and escape from slavery to throw a charm about them. The odd proceedings in the purchase of his freedom after his escape from slavery; his movements in connection with the John Brown raid at Harper's Ferry and his subsequent flight across the ocean are romantic as anything which took place among the crags and cliffs, the Roderick Dhus and Douglasses of the *Lady of the Lake*; while the pure life he has led and his spotless character are sweet by contrast with the lives of mere politicians and time serving statesmen. It is well to contemplate one like him, who has had "hair breadth escapes." It is inspiring to know that the day of self-sacrifice and self-development are not passed.

To say that his life has been eventful, is hardly the word. From the time when he first saw the light on the Tuckahoe plantation up to the time he was called to fill a high official position, his life has been crowded with events which in some sense may be called miracles, and now since his autobiography has come to be written, we must understand the hour of retrospect has come—for casting up and balancing accounts as to work done or left undone.

It is more than forty years now that he has been before the world as a writer and speaker—busy, active, wonderful years to him—and we are called upon to pass judgment upon his labors. What can we say? Can he claim the well done good and faithful? The record shows this, and we must state it, generally speaking, his life has been devoted to his race and the cause of his race. The freedom and elevation of his people has been his life work, and it has been done well and faithfully. That is the record, and that is sufficient. No

higher eulogium can be pronounced than that Longfellow says of the Village Blacksmith:—

“Something attempted, something done,
Has earned a night's repose.”

Douglass found his people enslaved and oppressed. He has given the best years of his life to the improvement of their condition, and, now that he looks back upon his labors, may he not say he has “attempted” and “done” something? and may he not claim the “repose” which ought to come in the evening of a well spent life?

The first twenty-three years of Douglass' life were twenty-three years of slavery, obscurity, and degradation, yet doubtless in time to come these years will be regarded by the student of history the most interesting portion of his life; to those who in the future would know the inside history of American slavery, this part of his life will be specially instructive. Plantation life at Tuckahoe as related by him is not fiction, it is fact; it is not the historian's dissertation on slavery, it is slavery itself, the slave's life, acts, and thoughts, and the life, acts, and thoughts of those around him. It is Macauley (I think) who says that a copy of a daily newspaper [if there were such] published at Rome would give more information and be of more value than any history we have. So, too, this photographic view of slave life as given to us in the autobiography of an ex-slave will give to the reader a clearer insight of the system of slavery than can be gained from the examination of general history.

Col. Lloyd's plantation, where Douglass belonged, was very much like other plantations of the south. Here was the great house and the cabins, the old Aunties and patriarchal Uncles, little picanninies and picanninies not so little, of every shade of complexion, from ebony black to whiteness of the master race; mules, overseers, and broken down fences. Here was the negro Doctor learned in the science of roots and herbs; also the black conjurer with his divination. Here was slave-breeding and slave-selling, whipping, torturing, and beating to

death. All this came under the observation of Douglass and is a part of the education he received while under the yoke of bondage. He was there in the midst of this confusion, ignorance, and brutality. Little did the overseer on this plantation think that he had in his gang a man of superior order and undaunted spirit, whose mind, far above the minds of the grovelling creatures about him, was at that very time plotting schemes for his liberty; nor did the thought ever enter the mind of Col. Lloyd, the rich slaveholder, that he had upon his estate one who was destined to assail the system of slavery with more power and effect than any other person.

Douglass' fame will rest mainly, no doubt, upon his oratory. His powers in this direction are very great and in some respects unparalleled by our living speakers. His oratory is his own and apparently formed after the model of no single person. It is not after the Edmund Burke style, which has been so closely followed by Everett, Sumner, and others, and which has resulted in giving us splendid and highly embellished essays rather than natural and not overwrought speeches. If his oratory must be classified, it should be placed somewhere between the Fox and Henry Clay schools. Like Clay, Douglass' greatest effect is upon his immediate hearers, those who see him and feel his presence, and like Clay a good part of his oratorical fame will be tradition. The most striking feature of Douglass' oratory is his fire, not the quick and flashy kind, but the steady and intense kind. Years ago on the anti-slavery platform, in some sudden and unbidden outburst of passion and indignation he has been known to awe-inspire his listeners as though *Ætna* were there.

If oratory consists of the power to move men by spoken words, Douglass is a complete orator. He can make men laugh or cry, at his will. He has power of statement, logic, withering denunciation, pathos, humor, and inimitable wit. Daniel Webster with his immense intellectuality had no humor, not a particle. It does not appear that he could even see the point of a joke. Douglass is brim full of humor at

times, of the dryest kind. It is of a quiet kind. You can see it coming a long way off in a peculiar twitch of his mouth; it increases and broadens gradually until it becomes irresistible and all-pervading with his audience.

Douglass' rank as a writer is high, and justly so. His writings, if anything, are more meritorious than his speaking. For many years he was the editor of newspapers, doing all of the editorial work. He has contributed largely to magazines. He is a forcible and thoughtful writer. His style is pure and graceful, and he has great felicity of expression. His written productions in finish compare favorably with the written productions of our most cultivated writers. His style comes partly, no doubt, from his long and constant practice, but the true source is his clear mind, which is well stored by a close acquaintance with the best authors. His range of reading has been wide and extensive. He has been a hard student. In every sense of the word he is a self-made man. By dint of hard study he has educated himself, and to-day it may be said he has a well-trained intellect. He has surmounted the disadvantage of not having an university education, by application and well-directed effort. He seems to have realized the fact that to one who is anxious to become educated and is really in earnest, it is not positively necessary to go to college, and that information may be had outside of college walls; books may be obtained and read elsewhere, they are not chained to desks in college libraries as they were in early times at Oxford; Professors' lectures may be bought already printed; learned doctors may be listened to in the Lyceum; and the printing press has made it easy and cheap to get information on every subject and topic that is discussed and taught in the University. Douglass never made the great mistake (a common one) of considering that his education was finished. He has continued to study, he studies now, and is a growing man, and at this present moment he is a stronger man intellectually than ever before.

Soon after Douglass' escape from Maryland to the Northern

States, he commenced his public career. It was at New Bedford as a local Methodist preacher and by taking part in small public meetings held by colored people, wherein anti-slavery and other matters were discussed. There he laid the foundation of the splendid career which is now about drawing to a close. In these meetings Douglass gave evidence that he possessed uncommon powers, and it was plainly to be seen that he needed only a field and opportunity to display them. That field and opportunity soon came, as it always does to possessors of genius. He became a member and agent of the American Anti-Slavery society. Then commenced his great crusade against slavery in behalf of his oppressed brethren at the South.

He waged violent and unceasing war against slavery. He went through every town and hamlet in the Free States, raising his voice against the iniquitous system.

Just escaped from the prison-house himself, to tear down the walls of the same and to let the oppressed go free, was the mission which engaged the powers of his soul and body. North, East, and West, all through the land went this escaped slave delivering his warning message against the doomed cities of the South. The ocean did not stop nor hinder him. Across the Atlantic he went, through England, Ireland, and Scotland. Wherever people could be found to listen to his story, he pleaded the cause of his enslaved and down-trodden brethren with vehemence and great power. From 1840 to 1861, the time of the commencement of the civil war, which extirpated slavery in this country, Douglass was continuously speaking on the platform, writing for his newspaper and for magazines, or working in conventions for the abolition of slavery.

The life and work of Douglass has been a complete vindication of the colored people in this respect; it has refuted and overthrown the position taken by some writers that colored people were deficient in mental qualifications and were incapable of attaining high intellectual position. We may reason-

ably expect to hear no more of this now, the argument is exploded. Douglass has settled the fact the right way, and it is something to settle a fact.

That Douglass is a brave man there can be little doubt. He has physical as well as moral courage. His encounter with the overseer of the eastern shore plantation attests his pluck. There the odds were against him, everything was against him—there the unwritten rule of law was, that the negro who dared to strike a white man, must be killed, but Douglass fought the overseer and whipped him. His plotting with other slaves to escape, writing and giving them passes, and the unequal and desperate fight maintained by him in the Baltimore ship yard, where law and public sentiment were against him, also show that he has courage. But since the day of his slavery, while living here at the North, many instances have happened which show very plainly that he is a man of courage and determination; if he had not been, he would have long since succumbed to the brutality and violence of the low and mean spirited people found in the Free States.

Up to a very recent date it has been deemed quite safe even here in the North to insult and impose on inoffensive colored people, to elbow a colored man from the sidewalk, to jeer at him and apply vile epithets to him, in some localities this has been the rule and not the exception, and to put him out of public conveyances and public places by force, was of common occurrence. It made little difference that the colored man was decent, civil, and respectably clad, and had paid his fare, if the proprietor of the place or his patrons took the notion that the presence of the colored man was an affront to their dignity or inconsistent with their notions of self-respect, out he must go. Nor must he stand upon the order of his going, but go at once. It was against this feeling that Douglass had to contend. He met it often; he was a prominent colored man traveling from place to place. A good part of the time he was in strange cities stopping at strange taverns—that is, when he was allowed to stop. Time and again has he been

refused accommodation in hotels. Time and again has he been in a strange place with nowhere to lay his head until some kind anti-slavery person would come forward and give him shelter.

The writer of this remembers well, because he was present and saw the transaction,—the John Brown meeting in Tremont Temple in 1860, when a violent mob composed of the rough element from the slums of the city, led and encouraged by bankers and brokers, came into the hall to break up the meeting. Douglass was presiding; the mob was armed; the police were powerless; the mayor could not or would not do anything. On came the mob surging through the aisles over benches and upon the platform; the women in the audience became alarmed and fled. The hirelings were prepared to do anything, they had the power and could with impunity. Douglass sat upon the platform with a few chosen spirits, cool and undaunted; the mob had got about and around him; he did not heed their howling nor was he moved by their threats. It was not until their leader, a rich banker, with his followers, had mounted the platform and wrenched the chair from under him that he was dispossessed, by main force and personal violence (Douglass resisting all the time) they removed him from the platform.

It affords me great pleasure to introduce to the public this book, "The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass." I am glad of the opportunity to present a work which tells the story of the rise and progress of our most celebrated colored man. To the names of Toussaint L'Overture and Alexander Dumas is to be added that of Frederick Douglass. We point with pride to this trio of illustrious names. I bid my fellow country men take new hope and courage; the near future will bring us other men of worth and genius, and our list of illustrious names will become lengthened. Until that time the duty is to work and wait.

Respectfully,

GEORGE L. RUFFIN.