

"The Birth of a Nation"

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LAST August, while in Atlantic City, in company with the Rev. Matthew Anderson of Philadelphia, I went one afternoon to see "The Birth of a Nation." After sitting through it for nearly three hours, I came out with certain very definite impressions made upon my mind:

I. It is an attempt to revive the spirit of rebellion, and to set it forth in such a light as to take the stigma from it which it rightly deserves. It aims to make the impression, that, after all, the spirit that took the South out of the Union was a noble spirit, a spirit not to be condemned, but rather to be admired. The South, according to the representations here, was actuated by the noblest motives; the men who stood behind the revolt represented the highest type of American manhood. That is the picture which it paints, and that is the impression which it seeks to make. These men were not traitors, but patriots, and patriots of the highest type. It is nothing but a glorification of secession, of the spirit of rebellion.

II. It is an attempt to give respectability to a band of law-breakers and murderers known as the Ku Klux Klan,—an organization that was inspired by hatred of the Negro, and that committed all kinds of outrages upon him. No blacker, fouler record was ever made than was made by this organization. And yet, according to the representations here, it represented the chivalry of the South! Is it not strange that these representatives of southern chivalry should have felt it necessary to disguise themselves, to put on masks, hoods, etc., in order to conceal their identity? Was there, after all, a lurking consciousness that the business in which they were engaged was a disreputable one? This band of masked murderers play a very large and conspicuous part in the drama, and everything is arranged with a view to creating within the audience a feeling of admiration for them, to leading the audience to applaud their so-called chivalrous deeds.

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And, strange to say, that was just the effect which it had upon a part of the audience, at least. It was this part of the drama that elicited more applause than any other. The influence of a play that aims to so present the black record of this organization as to win applause, can be evil, and only evil in its effects.

III. It aims to discredit the Negro, to present him in the most unfavorable light, with, as it seems to me, a fourfold object: (1) Of intensifying race prejudice, of making it all the harder for him to get along in his upward struggle in this country. (2) Of showing that he is unworthy of citizenship, that it is not safe, not wise to entrust him with political power. (3) That he was much happier in slavery, much better off in every way than he is now. (4) That freedom has had only the effect of spoiling him, of filling him with false notions of himself and of his rights, which never can be realized in this country; and that under freedom he has degenerated, has become a less desirable element of the population. Every scene in which he is presented, except where he is seen dancing and making a monkey of himself for the entertainment of his master and his friends, or, as in the scene, where the devotion of the old mammy to the family of the master is brought out, sets him forth in a bad light,—shows him to be a menace or a nuisance.

The last part of the photo-play, as it is now presented, which is an after thought,—the showing of the buildings of Hampton Institute and some of the students at work in the classrooms and the various industries,—doesn't help matters. This was no part of the original play, but was added afterwards, after the protests began to be heard, simply as a blind, to disguise the utterly unworthy purpose of it so far as it pertains to the Negro. I confess I was greatly surprised to find that Dr. Frissell and the authorities at Hampton were willing to lend the weight of their influence in giving countenance to a play that is so manifestly hostile to the Negro. That it is only a disguise, admitted simply for the purpose of getting the endorsement of an institution like Hampton, is evident from the length of time the statement, "THESE PICTURES ARE PRESENTED BY PERMISSION OF DR. FRISSELL," is kept upon the canvas, and the rapidity with which the pictures themselves are crowded on and off. To be able to say, "These pictures are presented with the permission of

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Dr. Frissell" means, or, at least, that is the impression which it is intended to make.—means that Dr. Frissell approves of the play, sees nothing objectionable in it, and, so the weight of his influence, as a known friend of the race, is thrown in its favor, which is unfortunate, to say the least. There is nothing in the play to indicate that the author of it regards slavery as wrong, or that the Negro is a man, entitled to the same rights and privileges as other citizens of the Republic. The very opposite of all this is true. Nothing is clearer than the fact that the man who is responsible for the drama is no friend of the Negro. The whole spirit of the play is distinctly hostile to him. To him, the Negro, as a slave, is all right, but as a freeman, he is either nothing but a low brute, or an upstart, filled with absurd ideas of social equality, intermarriage, and other things, which should be sternly resisted by the great white race.

In these few words, I think I have set forth clearly the spirit of the play, and the purpose of it. Mr. Dixon himself, in an interview with Mr. Cobleigh, associate editor of the Congregationalist and Christian World, said, "One purpose of his play was to create a feeling of abhorrence in white people, especially white women, against colored men." He said also that he "wished to have all Negroes removed from the United States, and that he hoped to help in the accomplishment of that purpose by "The Birth of a Nation."

It is very gratifying to know that some of our white friends have strongly protested against allowing this play to be presented in any part of our country. They recognize its pernicious character as a breeder of race hatred, and have spoken out against it. Outside of New England, however, I am sorry to say, very little has been done by our so called Christian churches. Very few of the clergy have spoken out, or manifested any interest in the matter. It is true, at a meeting of the Presbytery of Washington City recently held, Lieut. Col. George Robinson, U. S. A. retired Chaplain, did rise from his seat and say, speaking of "The Birth of a Nation:" "It is the most damnable thing I have ever seen in my life. It not only misrepresents, but excites racial prejudice against the Negroes," but he is the exception and not the rule. There are so many moral cowards in our pulpits that any bandit or brigand may waylay the Negro and ill-treat him as

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the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho was waylaid and ill-treated by robbers, without bringing to his side many good Samaritans to bind up his wounds and take a friendly interest in him. We are so afraid of doing the unpopular thing.

I am glad, however, that the colored people themselves have not been sleeping in this matter, but have been active and earnest in their efforts to suppress it. And, I am glad to see that even Dr. Booker T. Washington, who has always been rather cautious, rather timid, when it comes to the assertion of our rights, has thrown the weight of his influence against it. Dr. Washington says,—“In each town where there is a possibility of this play being put on, it would be well to have a committee of citizens representing the churches, the schools and business men to take the initiative in lodging a suitable objection.” He also says : “The play is fundamentally wrong in that it attempts to deal with the development of America since the abolition of slavery by ignoring the substantial progress of the Negro race and emphasizing the cruel misunderstanding of the readjustment period in which unfortunate individuals of both races figured. No matter how many other artistic and historic features the play may have, its ultimate result will be to intensify race prejudice and thereby do great and lasting harm to both races.”

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, composed of both races, has also been fighting very vigorously this play, and is still doing everything in its power to drive it from the stage.

Let us hope that “The Birth of a Nation” will soon run its course, and that the spirit that lies back of it,—the spirit of greed and race hatred, may be so execrated by the good people of this land as to render forever impossible, in the future, the production of such plays.

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