THE ESSENCE OF THE RECONSTRUCTION QUESTION.

It is easy to see from the discussion which is going on on the question of reconstruction, that there is not in any quarter any opposition worthy of note to the abstract right of the negroes to the franchise. Nobody, whose opinion is of any consequence, maintains any longer that their claim to political equality is not a sound one. The agitation that is now raging is not about the principle of the thing. The question which is debated is whether President Johnson has any power to meddle in the matter, and if so, whether it would be expedient for him to exercise it. The pagan doctrine which Judge Taney propounded, and of which Mr. Douglas made himself so conspicuous an exponent, that this Government was formed for the benefit of white men exclusively, or in other words, that one portion of the inhabitants of a country can set up a political fabric which need not furnish to the rest even the poor boon of protection for person and property, is now never heard of from the lips of anybody but a few of the worn out and decrepit veterans of the old pro-slavery army.

The view the President takes evidently is, that it is not necessary in the work of reconstruction that he should undertake to fix the political status of the negroes in the restored States. In the absence of any authoritative declaration to the contrary, we are justified in inferring from the plan which he is now carrying out, that his refusal to touch it is not due to doubts of his power to do so. It will hardly be pretended that he considers the provisions of the old State constitutions of 1861 binding on him, in view of the fact that he is exacting qualifications from the voters for the coming conventions which these instruments did not prescribe; that if the State constitutions spring into force by the mere fact of the termination of the war, his interference with State affairs now is illegal as well as anomalous; and that by calling what he is now doing an “experiment,” he plainly reserves to himself the power to annul everything that the conventions so constituted may decide upon. In short, there is not a single feature of the scheme which is bringing back the revolted States to the Union so rapidly, which does not contain evidence that the authority to carry it out is, in the President’s own estimation, derived from the necessities of the case. He is, in fact, doing whatever he considers essential to the securing to the various States a republican form of government and protection from domestic violence, with just as much regard to constitutional form as he thinks advisable and no more. The pretense that he may disfranchise two-thirds of the white population for an offence of which they have not been legally convicted, as he is now actually doing, and yet cannot take upon himself to consider the freedmen as a portion of “the people” of the State in which they live, will deceive nobody, and it is but just to him to say that he has never put it forward.

The negroes are evidently being shut out from the polls, as traitors are being shut out, on grounds of expediency. These are, partly, the fear of doing too great violence to the feelings of the “loyal” whites, and partly, the fear that the ignorance and want of training of the blacks will cause them to abuse the franchise after they have got it. The first of these was the Protestant argument in Ireland against the emancipation of the Catholics; it is at Rome the Catholic argument for oppression of the Jews, and in Constantinople the great Mussulman reason for allowing true believers to kill, cut, and rob the non-believers, and is usually the reason given everywhere for having a weak and helpless class at the mercy of those who hate or despise it. The feelings of any large body of men, even of defeated rebels, are certainly entitled to consideration at the hands of any government laying claim to statesmanship, but only in so far as this consideration works no substantial injury to other people.

The argument drawn from the ignorance of the blacks would be forcible if it were not capable of general application. A proposal to exclude from all share in the government of the South those who are unable from want of education to form an intelligent judgment on measures or men, would be worthy of consideration. Were we satisfied, as everybody is, that the rebellion was the fruit of ignorance, and that the declaration we now hear against the guilt of the leaders, is in reality a round-about way of expatiating on the mental darkness of the masses. Davis, Toombs, Wise, Cobb, and Company have been able to do what they have done simply because the vast majority of the Southern whites were unable to read the newspapers. We would therefore willingly avoid trying over again the experiment which resulted in the civil war; and we believe for our part, that part of the remedy for the Southern troubles would be found in the exclusion of everybody from the polls who was unable to read as well as the disloyal. This, however, has not been suggested by those who are most alarmed by the negro’s want of education; though they have as yet not offered to explain in what the ignorance of a poor white differs from the ignorance of a poor black, or to tell us what worse consequences to the State could possibly result from the voting of half-a-million of enlightened Africans than have already resulted from the voting of a million of belligerent Caucasians. If greater calamities can come on a State than the “superior race” recently brought on the South, we do not know what they are.

The points we have to consider at the North, in deciding which course we ought to take in fixing the status of the negro at the South, are really reduced to two—the effect upon his condition of leaving him at the mercy of a hostile and semi-barbarous race, and the effect upon the national rule of shutting him out from all share in the local government. To suppose that he will receive fair play from white legislators, who are not responsible to him, who have no sympathy with him, and who, in their secret hearts, consider him a beast of the field, is to violate every rule of democratic government, and to make an open and shameless declaration of want of faith in our own principles. It is, moreover, to be guilty of cruelty as well as perfidy; for freedom bestowed on a man left in the position in which we have placed the freedmen, only increases the number of points at which he can be assailed and tormented. There is an alternative for those who fear to arm him for his own protection with the franchise, and it is one from which there is no honorable escape, and that is to continue, by some mode or other, to cover him with the sword of the national Government until he is either considered competent to take charge of his own interests, or his white neighbors can offer proof of the possession of humanity or a sense of justice. The community in whose hands we now propose to place him and his family is, it ought not to be forgotten, that in which our prisoners were tortured only six months ago, and in which the St. Albans raid was considered honorable warfare.

Of the probability of our being able to dispense, in the restoration of the Union upon the present plan, with the political support of the colored population, we shall not say much, because on this point the events of each day are speaking volumes. The credulity of those who suppose the effect of defeat in a bloody war has been to convert the Southern people into devoted admirers of the North and its institutions and its rule, and that all the traitorous and disaffected portions of it can be shut out from political influence by wholesale administration of oaths, for one month after the control passes from our hands, is one of the most singular phenomena in the history of either this or any other country.

There is one other objection to the President’s policy which, in our opinion, is also very weighty. In leaving the “negro question” still unsettled, it bids fair to launch the country on another period of long and bitter “sectial agitation.” It is useless to deprecate this, and beg Northern orators and writers not to exasperate the South by their declamation on negro wrongs. If appeals of this sort were of any use, the anti-slavery agitation would have ceased years before the war. As long as there is in any portion of the Union a story of things by which the consciousness of the people is excited, or its fears excited, and that state of things can be changed by legislation, there will be agitation about it, come what may. In a free country there is no way to prevent men from talking loudly over what they feel deeply except to leave them nothing to feel deeply about. The true way to prevent “sectial feeling” and “sectial agitation” is to abolish sectional institutions, to make the bases of society and government the same in all parts of the Union, or in other words to render it thoroughly democratic. We have the chance of doing this now, and we ought to take care that we do not leave it in
the power of posterity to heap on us the worst reproach which statesmen can incur, of having allowed a great opportunity to perish in our hands.

The notion is very prevalent and is very earnestly preached, that with the destruction of slavery all danger of the re-establishment or perpetuation of an aristocratical class at the South has passed away. This is a most mischievous delusion. There is no country in the civilized world in which the social organization is so intensely aristocratical, in which class government is more firmly established, and in which the working population is more powerless and degraded, than England, and yet there has not been a slave on her soil for five hundred years. To establish and maintain an aristocracy, with all its consequences, both political and social, all that is necessary is that the power of government should be lodged in the hands of a single class, strong enough and energetic enough to retain its hold on them; and this is the very thing which a large number of intelligent people in the free States propose that we should now do at the South.

THE GREAT FESTIVAL.

Before this meets the eyes of our readers, the Fourth of July will have been celebrated, as it was never celebrated before, and with good reason, for never before have we had such cause of rejoicing. It is not simply the birth of the nation which we now commemorate, but its regeneration; and even more than its regeneration. We celebrate not only the close of a long and bloody civil war, but the close of the contest which preceded and led to it, that, as it was well called, "irresistible conflict" which for half a century absorbed all the intellect of the country, perverted its understanding, corrupted its morals, and employed most of its moral and mental energy, either in the attack or defence, in the nineteenth century of the Christian era, of one of the worst forms of barbarism—a conflict, too, which, during the last twenty years, began to exercise a paralyzing influence on industry and to poison social intercourse.

We celebrate, in short, not simply the national independence, or the return of peace, but the close of the agitation about slavery, and the extinction of slavery itself. How tremendous an influence this fact is likely to have on our moral and intellectual progress, we can now only conjecture; we for our part believe that the next quarter of a century will have a wondrous story to tell on this point.

There is one other feature of our fête which is too marked to be overlooked or forgotten. It is not simply the triumph of American democracy that we rejoice over, but the triumph of democratic principles everywhere, for this is involved in the successful issue of our struggle with the rebellion. We need have little hesitation in predicting that the effects of the revolution through which we are now passing upon European politics will be still more marked than the effects of the revolution of 1776. It is evident already that the reaction of 1849 has been arrested, and that the tide is turning in favor of liberalism with resistless force. The French democrats already begin to show signs of life and activity, and the English Tories are retiring to their inner line of defence before the persistent assaults of the non-electors on the citadel of privilege. "Cæsarism" has received from our successes, in what it considered its proudest moment, a fatal blow. The wonderful vigor of popular government, the prodigious national vitality which it develops and fosters, received its most splendid illustration in our last campaign. Within a few weeks of the publication of the work which the French Emperor intended to be an elaborate declaration of its failure. There is, in short, no believer in the capacity of the human race for greater happiness and greater virtue than it has yet attained, in the existence of a wider field for its powers, and a nobler goal for its striving than it has yet looked upon, who cannot and will not rejoice with us this week. We utter no idle boast, when we say that if the conflict of ages, the great strife between the few and the many, between privilege and equality, between law and power, between opinion and the sword, was not closed on the day on which Lee threw down his arms, the issue was placed beyond doubt.

Of the extent of the material prosperity which is opened up to us by the final cessation of domestic strife, and the final disappearance from our soil of a form of industry which has in every age blasted all that it touched, and pulled down political fabrics that seemed even stronger and better cemented than our own, thousands of willing tongues will this week tell. The theme is a grateful and a popular one. For our part, we love better to dwell on the possible moral and intellectual and aesthetic results of the wealth which awaits us, of all that it may enable us to do for religion, for art, for literature, and for science. For we are satisfied that democracy has in it, in a still larger degree than any other form of society, in spite of all that has been said and written to the contrary, the seeds of the highest excellence in every field of culture and research. The world has yet to see what a free people can achieve with great wealth, the results that the general diffusion of material comfort can produce in stimulating the pursuit of knowledge, and in intensifying the pleasures of the understanding and of the taste. We have already furnished an indication of what we may accomplish in other and nobler fields by the extraordinary amount of success in the cultivation of one of the most difficult of the sciences—that of war—which has been revealed by the military operations of the last four years. We cannot help believing that the national genius has a still stronger bent and a nicer adaptation for the victories of peace.

If we cared just now to play the part of the slave behind the Con- cession in his chariot in the triumphal progress, we might say much of the risks we still run, of the stumbling-blocks which still beset our path, of the temptations to which we may succumb, or of the thousand sins that will assuredly beset us. We prefer to reserve this less agreeable portion of our task to some season when it will be listened to with more attention, and will not be liable to damp honorable and fatly won rejoicing. There are few who celebrate the Fourth of July this year, who do not find, in the recent history of their own families, or of their friends, reminders enough that the brightest picture has its dark side. For how many thousands who went forth to hasten the great consummation over which the nation is singing psalms, do the bells ring, and the banners wave, and the music swell in vain!

WERE THE STATES EVER SOVEREIGN?

In most of the discussions which have taken place on the question of reconstruction it has been assumed that any admission that the organizations known as the States have been in any locality destroyed by the rebellion, involved also the admission that a State could get out of the Union. It has been maintained, therefore, very stoutly, that the only way of escaping the conclusion that a State could secede, was by affirming that it was indestructible, that it was not only sovereign, but immortal. There is, however, another mode of getting out of the difficulty, which is ably discussed in the subjoined letter, addressed to Mr. R. H. Dana by one of the most vigorous thinkers and ripest scholars the country has produced, and now resident in Europe. We do not adopt all his conclusions, but his argument with regard to State sovereignty possesses at this juncture the highest importance.

"Slavery has always been a veiled, half legalized form of rebellion against the fundamental principles of our Constitution. So long as it was, in a certain degree, quiescent, we were unhappily bound by national compact to tolerate it as a sort of prisoner of war upon parole. There was, in all the negotiations which resulted in the Constitution of 1787-9, an implied understanding, a virtual pledge, on the part of the South, that the institution which the whole nation, with scarce a dissentent voice, acknowledged to be both a crime and a curse, should soon be abolished, and there is little doubt that all parties looked forward to the cessation of the slave trade in 1809 as the beginning of the era of emancipation. But when slavery declared itself to be not a wrong but a right, a divine ordinance above the jurisdiction of earthly legislatures, a social relation more sacred than any clan, possession, or duty sanctioned by human law, or derived from human compact; when it became aggressive and proclaimed a holy war, a Mohammedan jehad, against the principles and the institutions on which not our Union alone but all truly Christian society is based, it violated its parole and forfeited the indulgence which in an hour of extremity had been granted to it. It was thereafter entitled to no courtesy, to none of the privileges of honorable warfare; it wore the wolf's head of the outlaw, and slammed out the righteous self-imposed doom of Cain: Every one that findeth me shall slay me!"

"At the adoption of the Federal Constitution in 1789, we were one