

Transcribed Excerpt from "Why Disfranchisement is Bad," 1904

I.

Can disfranchisement settle the question for the negro? I do not think it can; I am sure that it will not, for the simple and sufficient reason that the negro will not consent to such a settlement—a settlement which virtually decitizenizes him, and relegates him to a condition of practical servitude in the republic. He has tasted freedom, he has tasted manhood rights, he has tasted civil and political equality. He knows that his freedom, his American citizenship, his right to vote, have been written into the Constitution of the United States, and written large there in three great amendments. He knows more: he knows that he himself has written his title to those rights with his blood in the history of the country in four wars, and he is of the firm belief that his title to them is a perfect one.

No party, no State, no section, can, therefore, deprive him of those rights without leaving in his mind a sense of bitter wrong, of being cheated of what belongs to him, cheated in defiance of law, of the supreme law of the land, and in spite of his just claim to fairer treatment at the hands of his fellow-countrymen. He will understand that this enormity was committed against him on account of his race and color. He will see that it was done by the white race—a race that has ever wronged him, that has never failed to take from him, because it had the power, whatever he cared most for in the world. Nothing could possibly make him, under such cruel circumstances, love such a race, such an enemy. He will learn to hate the white race, therefore, with all the strength of rancor of centuries of accumulated outrages and oppressions.

The relation of the two races in the South could not, then, be one of mutual respect, confidence and good will. It would become, on the contrary, one of mutual fear, distrust and hatred. The whites would fear, distrust, and hate the negro, and that increasingly, because they had so deeply wronged him; and the negro would return this fear, distrust and hatred with a measure heaping up and running over, not openly, like the whites, to be sure, but covertly, cunningly, because of his weakness. He would live his life, his deeper life, more and more apart from the whites, live it in an underworld of which no white man would be able to get more than a glimpse, and that at rare intervals. It would be an underworld in which his bitter sense of wrong, his brooding miseries, his repressed faculties of mind, his crushed sensibilities, his imprisoned aspirations to be and to do as other men, his elemental powers of resistance, his primitive passions, his savage instincts, his very despair, would burn and rage beneath the thin crust of law and order which separates him from the upper world of the white race, his implacable foe and oppressor. Through this thin crust of law and order there will perforce break at times some of that hidden fire, some of that boiling lava of a race's agony and despair. There will be race feuds, race conflicts, as certainly as winds will blow, but no one will be deeply enough versed in the movements of these stormy, these fiery currents and visitations from the abysses of that underworld of the negro, to be able to discover their formation, to foretell their coming, or to forecast their extent and duration.

So far as the negro is concerned, then, to disfranchise him will not settle the negro question. It will do anything else better than that. For it will make trouble, and no end of it. It will certainly make trouble if he rise in the human scale in spite of the wrong done him. Does any one think that he will ever cease to strive for the restoration of his rights as an American citizen, and all of his rights, if he rise in character, property and intelligence? To think the contrary is to think an absurdity. But if he fall in the human scale

in consequence of the wrong done him, he will surely drag the South down with him. For he and the South are bound the one to the other by a ligament as vital as that which bound together for good or bad, for life or death, the Siamese twins. The Enceladian struggles of the black Titan of the South beneath the huge mass of the white race's brutal oppressions, and of his own imbruted nature, will shape peace out of the land and prosperity out of the Southern States, and involve, finally, whites and blacks alike in common poverty, degradation, and failure in the economic world, in hopeless decline of all of the great social forces which make a people move upward and not downward, forward and not backward in civilization.