"The Leopard's Spots" and "The Fools' Errand"

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The Rev. Thomas Dixon's recent novel, "The Leopard's Spots," already noticed in these columns, revives the most odious of the characters in "Uncle Tom's Cabin," Simon Legree, the cruel slave driver, and makes him leader of the freed men in order to put as much contempt as possible on the freedmen's part in the reconstruction. But Mr. Dixon's book more fitly calls to mind not "Uncle Tom's Cabin," but a book which twenty-three years ago made almost as great a stir, namely, Judge Tourgee's story, "The Fool's Errand." This novel, and that which has just appeared, are one in scene, North Carolina, one in time, the period of reconstruction, but as contrary as possible in spirit and aim. Whoever accepts either book as just and true will feel outraged by the other and indignant at a hint that the other is needed or that both are largely to the same effect. Tourgee was my classmate in college. We knew that he received a terrible wound in battle, and he himself tells us in the "Invisible Empire," a volume which contains not only "The Fool's Errand," but the data on which it was founded, that he sought a home after the war in the "Old North State" for the very reason that sends his hero there, the hope of recovering from the effects of his wound. Here he practiced law, was seated on the bench, and did the part of an honest Northerner toward settling the affairs of his adopted state under the reconstruction measures. And yet these measures he strongly disapproved. He is now United States consul in Bordeaux, expending on his reports to the department of state the capacity for observation and the literary power which have produced many excellent novels.

Already I have indicated that the two books which form the topic of this article are alike in condemning the reconstruction measures. Tourgee denounces them as devised to secure victory to the Republican party in the then pending presidential campaign, that which first elected General Grant. He saw that these measures thrust upon the freedmen political functions for which they were unfit, and which, as his hero foretells, could not but draw upon them the terrible animosity of their former owners. His book was written to give the public a lively impression of how this prodigious political blunder worked, to warn the public of further dangers, and to prescribe the only possible remedy in universal education. It was because he condemned the reconstruction measures, while his hero loyally accepted them as an actuality and undertook to make the best of the situation, that he called his book "The Fool's Errand." As to the starting point both authors are of one mind. But a difference at once appears. Tourgee looks upon the reconstruction measures as a blunder, Dixon denounces them as an atrocity. Tourgee says they were intended to keep the Republican party in power; Dixon says they were devised to humiliate and oppress the Southern whites. Both authors ascribe the origin of the Ku Klux to the white man's inevitable revolt against negro ascendency, but especially in "The Invisible Empire" Tourgee shows that attacks upon the negro race had begun months before the reconstruction measures were adopted. Dixon tells us that after the first successes of the Klan, younger and lawless members abused their opportunity against the will of the leaders. Tourgee does not see any such distinction.

Both authors agree in their estimate of the consequences of negro organizations into Union Leagues, but while Tourgee fears that this organization will prove dangerous to the blacks, Dixon sternly repudiates it as dangerous to the whites. To Tourgee, who does not dwell much upon it, the league was legitimate but unwise; to Dixon it was criminal in aim and outrageous in action. The different impression made by the two books is here very plain. "The Fool's Errand" is taken up with the atrocities committed by the Ku Klux on freedmen and their white allies of Southern birth, the so-called "Scallawags," much more than upon "Carpet Baggers" of Northern birth, while "The Leopard's Spots" recounts the horrors of which the colored men's league and their white leaders were guilty and represents the violent action of respectable white men as a necessary means of throwing off a shameful and unendurable oppression of them by their former slaves. The sympathy awakened by the one story all goes to the colored race, that aroused by the other story all goes to the white race. And so the outcome of each book is as thoroughly hostile to that of the other as were the rival policies and bitterly rival races of those evil times.

Mr. Dixon brings his story up to date in describing the recent measures by which rascally city officials in North Carolina were abruptly compelled to resign, and the present governor, Aycock, carried into power. This governor, called "that splendid young man," is announced by a publisher's notice as the story's hero, Gaston. But Judge Tourgee predicted the events which have occurred since the date of his story, and introduces now and then, under the name of "Dr. Martin," as his true and only sage—a sage, however, who always seems to need from the hero more enlightenment than he gives—the late president of Rochester, Martin B. Anderson.

But in no other particular are these rival tales so radically opposed as in remedies for the evils deplored by both. Judge Tourgee, seeing only an error, though a fatal error, in the attempt to thrust Northern civilization upon the essentially different Southern people, looks for relief to general education. Mr. Dixon makes his heroic Baptist preacher denounce both book education and education in trades for the black race, his only remedy being deportation, with abandonment meantime of all attempts at elevating the race. The measures which Dr. Curry has fostered in administering the Peabody and the Slater funds, the methods which Booker Washington has followed with general applause North and South, are just what Tourgee would approve, and just what Dixon condemns.

In interest and power over the feelings of a reader who gives himself into his author's hands, it is difficult to say which book is the stronger story. Both are so intent on the rival lessons they would teach that they stop the action to discuss a thesis. And yet these discussions are so eloquent and on points of so overmastering interest that almost every reader must follow them with unrelaxed attention. A marked difference in the method of our two authors is seen in the fact that while Mr. Dixon expresses his indignation with Southern directness, Judge Tourgee represses his passion into the forms of irony. No completer illustration of this could be found than the title of his book, and the name "The Fool," by which he constantly refers to his hero. Yet it would be difficult to say which method proves the more effective in communicating the author's scorn and wrath.

In a word, unlike as are these books, both ought to be read, if a lesson is to be accepted from either, and the new book certainly ought to revive the sale of the old. I think it will be felt that while Mr. Dixon shows unsurpassable intensity of conviction, Tourgee displays a more statesmanlike breadth. But neither writer can be called a whit more honest than the other, nor, what some will refuse to believe, neither means to be less humane than the other, or less patriotic. It cannot be alleged that either overlooks the racial differences which gave occasion to these stories; and if Dixon emphasizes more the political incapacity of the colored race, Tourgee is much more outspoken as to the pride, the masterfulness and what he calls the "kingly" political capacity of the white race in the South. It would be highly inconsiderate to condemn Mr. Dixon for needlessly beating up the dust of an old threshing floor, nor does he need to be defended on the ground that a historical novel, if truthful and interesting, is its own excuse for existing. The issues discussed in these books are of vital and enduring concern to both races in the South, and therefore to the whole nation. Meantime a special felicity in raising these issues just now may be found in the fact that our annexation of Porto Rico and the Philippines has seriously shaken, if not entirely dislodged, the Republican doctrine that every man because he is a man has a right to vote. The South sees the North self-converted to the Southern political faith. If the race problem is revived it will not now be rediscussed on the old lines, or even provisionally settled in traditional ways. The North could not give plainer token of its present way of thinking than was given by President McKinley and the Republican Congress in discouraging any attempt to apply the fourteenth amendment and lower the representation of Southern states in congress in proportion as they withhold the right to vote from any of their male citizens. This certainly means, not merely weariness of old conflicts, not supineness under recognized injustice, but a widespread conviction that substantial justice is now done wherever the suffrage is limited, and that incidental injustice is beyond remedy by the national legislature.