

Plantation Life After the Civil War

Edward King



OVERVIEW

Edward King, a reporter for New England newspapers, traveled in the South during Reconstruction. In 1875 he published a book that described the conditions he found there. Here are some of his observations.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following:

- How does the overseer seem to view the African American workers?
 - What progress had African Americans made since being freed?
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During my stay in Natchez, one of the many gentlemen interested in cotton planting on the west, or Louisiana, side of the river invited me to accompany him on a tour of inspection. . . .

After an hour or two of journeying over rough roads, we came to one of the plantations. A host of Negroes were busily filling a breach in a dike which the treacherous water might sweep away if rains came to swell the already ominous floods of the Mississippi.

. . . Entering the house of the overseer, we found that functionary smoking his pipe and reposing after a long ride over the plantation. He was a rough, hearty, good-natured man, accustomed to living alone and faring rudely. I asked him what he thought of the Negro as a free laborer.

"He works well, mostly, sir. . . . They make some little improvements around their cabins, but mighty little, sir. If politics would only let 'em alone, they'd get along well enough, I reckon."

"Do the Negroes on this plantation vote?"

"I reckon not (*laughing*). I don't want [them] to have anything to do with politics. They can't vote as long as they stay with us, and these Alabama boys don't take no interest in the elections here."

The women and children on the cotton plantations near the Mississippi River do not work in the fields as much as they used. Rude as are their surroundings in the little cabins which they now call their own, they are beginning to take an interest in their homes, and the children spend some time each year at school. The laborers on the plantations in Louisiana have sometimes been paid as high as \$30 per month, and furnished with a cabin, food, and a plot of ground for a garden; but this is exceptional. . . .

There is still much on one of these remote and isolated plantations to recall the . . . days of slavery. The tall and stalwart women, with their luxuriant wool carefully wrapped in gaily colored handkerchiefs; the picturesque and tattered

children, who have not the slightest particle of education and who have not been reached, even since the era of Reconstruction, by the influences of schools and teachers. . . . The thing which struck me as most astonishing . . . was the absolute subjection of the Negro. Those with whom I talked would not directly express any idea. They . . . would beg to be excused from differing verbally and seemed to be much distressed at being required to express their opinions openly.

. . . I could not discover that any of the Negroes were making a definite progress, either manifested by a subscription to some newspaper or by a tendency to discussion. . . . The only really encouraging sign in their social life was the tendency to create for themselves homes and now and then to cultivate the land about them.