

**The Negro Cotton-Mill
Failure**

When the recent failure of the Charleston cotton-mill which employed negro labor was announced, there were many comments in the press upon the unreliability of negro labor, which was alleged to have caused the breakdown. An ably edited Southern newspaper, however—the Charlotte “Observer”—sent a member of its staff to interview the manager of the suspended mill, and learns through him that the supposed unreliability of negro labor had little or nothing to do with the failure. The mill in question was built in 1882, and was started with white labor in every department. The original owners failed, and their successors, who invested more capital, again employed white labor, and with them also the mill was a failure. Two companies have since tried to operate the mill with colored labor, and these, too, have failed; but the later failures no more demonstrate the incapacity of negro labor than the previous failures demonstrate the incapacity of white labor. The “Observer’s” correspondent, Mr. H. E. C. Bryant, points out very forcibly that if the incapacity of negro labor had been the cause of the failure, the mill, instead of being dismantled and having its machinery removed to the uplands of the State, would have continued to be operated at Charleston, with white labor substituted for black. The manager of the mill, in conversation with Mr. Bryant, said that while there was somewhat more irregularity among his negro hands than there would be among a corresponding number of white employees, the difference was merely one of degree. “We had as good lappers, speeders, spindle attendants, and weavers as you could find anywhere.” The mill was unsuccessful, he said, chiefly because there were few houses for the employees near at hand, and they could not be sure of regular service from those living at a distance. In Charleston, he explained, the working people, both white and colored, find it easier and more profitable at some seasons of the year to get their living from oyster-fishing and from farming than from employment in the mills. In the Piedmont section, or the uplands, where this manager operates a successful mill, the character of the soil is such that there is no temptation for the hands to leave the mill to go

back to the farms, and to this physical characteristic he attributes the fact that the cotton-mills are successful in the Piedmont district while unsuccessful in Charleston. As this manager’s testimony is supported by that of the officials of the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company, which employs negro labor chiefly, it should put an end to the loose generalizations about the hopeless unreliability of negro labor. The line between reliable and unreliable laborers is not one of race, and the negro laborers, like the Italian, the Irish, and the Anglo-Saxon, must be judged individually and not collectively.