

Crisis No. 1 or Thoughts on Slavery

THE CRISIS

NO. 1.

OR

THOUGHTS ON SLAVERY

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THE CRISIS, &c.

Auri sacra fames.

THE most important question, ever brought before any Legislature, is now depending. I shudder, when I reflect, that this question is to be determined by a human, and consequently by a fallible tribunal; some members of which, from the habitual exercise of unrestrained power, may forget "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, *liberty*, &c." A single vote under such a bias, stimulated perhaps by self interest, may commit the happiness of millions of the human family, in a country of boundless extent, not only for the present, but for the time which is hereafter to be revealed. Is there any at this enlightened period, so hard, as to deny the declaration of our independence? Talk even with the advocates for the extension of slavery to the new and uncultivated regions of the west, and they will acknowledge that it is a great calamity.

It is a disgrace to the American name. It is a blot on the human character. We may apply to the African slavery of this country what has been said of the slave trade by the author of the Edinburgh review, that "it is an evil, the most pernicious, if only because the most criminal, that ever degraded human nature. It may be termed, "a war waged by men" against the rights of man; "carried on, not by ignorance and

barbarism, against knowledge and civilization; not by half famished multitudes against a race blessed with all the arts of life, and softened and effeminates by luxury; but as some strange nondescript in iniquity, waged by unprovoked strength against uninjuring helplessness, and with all the powers which freedom and equal laws had enabled the assailants to develop, in order to make barbarism more barbarous, and to add, to the want of political freedom, the most dreadful and debasing personal suffering. Thus, all the effects and influences of freedom are employed to enslave; the gifts of knowledge to prevent the possibility of illumination; and powers, which could not have existed but in consequence of morality and religion to perpetuate the sensual vices, and ward off the emancipating blow of Christianity.”

That African slavery originates in treachery, violence, bloodshed and murder, is proved beyond a possibility of doubt, by the volumes of testimony adduced before the British Parliament on the various questions respecting the slave trade, and particularly for its abolition. the victims of slavery are seized in their native land, chained together and stowed in the gloomy, infected caverns of the slave or prison ships, from whence, those who do not die by the extremity of suffering, are brought out and sold in open market, like cattle for the shambles; by which process, they and their posterity are doomed to toil, to labor, and spend their lives for the exclusive benefit of others; scourged and driven to their daily task, by some wretched negro driver, or cruel master, whose power extends, not merely to correction, but to torture and to life. “If aristocracy,” (said Mr. Wilberforce,) “had been thought a worse form of government than monarchy, because the people had many tyrants instead of one, how objectionable must be that form of it, which existed in our colonies; arbitrary power could be bought there by any one who could buy a slave. The furiousness of it was doubtless restrained by an elevation of mind in many, as arising from a consciousness of superior rank and consequence; but alas! it was too often exercised there by the base and vulgar.”

In the volumes of testimony above referred to, innumerable instances of cruelty to slaves are proved, which will compare with that of the master, who commanded the surgeon to amputate the leg of his slave, because he had attempted to escape from the scourge of the tyrant. The surgeon hesitated and he deliberately broke the leg of the unfortunate man, and then told the surgeon, that he must amputate it to save his life; or with that of the overseer who murdered a slave by throwing him into a cauldron of boiling sugar, for which no punishment was inflicted.

“It has been shown,” (said another British senator) “but never disproved, that the colonial laws were inadequate to the protection of the slaves; that the punishments of the latter were most unmerciful; that they were deprived of the right of self-defense against any white man; and in short, that the system was totally repugnant to the British constitution.”

I doubt not that there are many slave holders who aim to treat their slaves with humanity, and kindness; but these, being commonly gentlemen of education, and fortune, who do not perhaps reside on, or superintend their estates, delegate their power to others, who frequently abuse the authority put into their hands.

After all the palliatives that can be suggested, still slavery is slavery, and it cannot be said of it that its

“yoke is easy,” or that its “*burthen is light*.”

“Arbitrary power” (said Mr. Whitebread) “would spoil the hearts of the best.—Hence would arise tyranny on the one side, and a sense of injury on the other. Hence the passions would be let loose, and a state of perpetual enmity would follow.

“He needed only to go to the accounts of those who defended the system of slavery, to show that it was cruel. He was forcibly struck last year by the expression of an honorable member, who was an advocate for the trade, who, when he came to speak of the slaves, on selling off the stock of a plantation, said, that they fetched less than the common price because they were damaged. Damaged! what, were they goods and chattles? What an idea this to hold out of our fellow creatures! We might imagine how slaves are treated if they were spoken of in such a manner. Able then to do but little, they were sold for little; and the remaining substance of their sinews was to be pressed out by another, yet more hardened than the former, and who had made a calculation of their vitals accordingly.

“As another proof, he would mention a passage in a pamphlet, in which the author, describing the happy situation of the slaves, observed, that a good negro never wanted a character; a bad one would always been detected by his weals and his scars. What was this but to say, that there were instruments in use, which left indelible marks behind them; and who would say that these were used justly?

“An honorable gentleman, Mr. Vaughan, had said, that *setting aside slavery*, the slaves were better off than the poor in this country. But what was it that we wished to abolish?—Was it not the *slave trade*, which would destroy in time the cruel distinction he had mentioned? The same honorable gentleman had expressed his admiration of their resignation; but might it not be that resignation which was the consequence of despair?”

Yes, ye philanthropists of the east, hear the language of the republicans of the west; and blush at what ye hear. In North Carolina, in 1801, Boon was indicted and found guilty of wil-fully and maliciously killing a slave; and when brought up to receive judgement, Hall, Judge, observed, “We have seen, that a villein is called the king’s subject; that the king had a right to exact services from him; the lord’s power over him was not absolute: a villein could not sue his lord, but could bring all manner of actions against every other person; he might have appeal against his lord for the death of this father, &c. Litt. sec. 189: he might be an executor and in that capacity sue his lord.” sec. 191.

“Slaves in this country possess no such rights; their condition is more abject; 2. Sal. 666: they are not parties to our constitution; it was not made for them. What the powers of a master were over his slave, in this country, prior to the year 1774, have not been defined; I have not heard that any convictions and capital punishments took place before that period, for killing of negroes. By an act of assembly passed in April, in the year 1741, cap. 24. sec. 54. it is declared that if in the dispersing of any unlawful assemblies of rebel slaves, &c. apprehending runaways, &c. in correction, &c. any slave shall happen to be killed or destroyed, &c. the court of the county, &c. shall put a valuation upon such slave.” After noticing the next section, which secures to the owner or owners the same right of action which they before had, against any person or persons who shall kill his, her, or their slave or slaves, contrary to the provisions of the

former section.—The judge continues—“It does not give the action, which before would not lie, but guards it from such construction as would tend to narrow its operation. If then this action would have been sustained, it must have been on the ground, that slaves were considered as chattles.” And as it was not murder at the common law to kill a sheep or an ox, or any other living chattle, so it was not murder to kill a negro; though done with ever circumstance of cruelty and malice—This monster of cruelty was accordingly discharged, without any punishment; without, as far as the report goes, even a reprimand from the court—further to increase the sufferings, and perhaps to stain his hands in the blood of some other victim of this miserably oppressed and unprotected race. What, is it not more criminal at common law to kill a reasonable, an accountable, and an immortal being, than to kill a brute?—Shame to the courts, and woe to the country where such ideas prevail; and such deeds go unpunished.

the fact that there are within the United States, probably more than two millions of beings who are cut off from every privilege of society, and that their labours, their lives, and everything which appertains to them, is exclusively for the pleasure and emolument of others; and that they are no parties to the constitution, has something in it which is awfully impressive.

What attachment can they feel for a government, in the privileges of which they have no participation? Deprived, by their situation, of the right of self defence; debarred from testifying, and declared incapable of maintaining any action for the most aggravated injury; they are in more ways than can be numbered, exposed to have their feelings wounded, if not rendered callous by their state of bondage; and to personal injury, and abuse from the merest stripling, and vagabond, if his color is white. If this is their situation as it respects strangers; what must it be as it respects those who claim an absolute dominion over them? what are they not exposed to suffer from negro drivers and overseers, from lordly, avaricious and unfeeling masters? Though from the ignorance in which they are kept, their situation may in some instances be comparatively tolerable, yet in many, in very many instances, it must be cruel, and distressing beyond what the imagination can conceive.

This is not all, in Georgia, and perhaps in some other of the slave holding states, there is a law, with penalties, which prohibits their slaves being instructed; they are not allowed to be taught that there is a God in heaven, that they are accountable beings, that they have immortal souls, nor are they permitted to learn or to practice any moral or religious duty. Though in a christian country and under the dominion of those who call themselves Christians, to them in vain the Saviour of the world has appeared! to them the gospel of truth must not be preached! In the other slave holding states, although there is not a positive law, still, custom has established the same almost invariable rule. I have been told, by gentlemen of respectability from other states, that they did permit their slaves to be instructed. Does any one believe that there is a God in heaven, who in righteousness governs the world, and that he will long permit such a denial of his truth, such a perversion of right; and that he will not in wrath visit the land where such oppression is practiced?

I trust there are some, even among the slave-holders who believe that a Saviour has been revealed. I would ask such how they can for a moment tolerate that system of slavery which is opposed to every principle of the christian dispensation. “For what,” it is solemnly demanded of us, “is a man profited if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul;” clearly inculcating that the salvation of one soul is of more

importance than all that the world can give. Here are thousands, nay, hundreds of thousands at this very moment, in the land of revelation and Christianity, who are designedly kept in heathenish ignorance and darkness; they are not permitted to be instructed in the gospel of peace; they are sent to the eternal world like the beast that perish, ignorant of the truth. If such is their number at this present moment millions and millions will be added to the list of these wretched victims, if the present course is pursued. Is there not an awful responsibility, or might I not say there is an awful responsibility, attached to every one who sanctions, who connives at and who does not actually exert his utmost to do away that system of slavery from which such horrid consequences result. How will you meet the testimony of such witnesses in that great day of account, when before the Almighty Judge, they will accuse you, and all who have been accessory to their bondage, as leaving their souls to perish for lack of vision! Come forward then, and use your influence to have the laws repealed prohibiting the instruction of slaves: use your influence to have them instructed; procure laws to be passed permitting conscientious slave holders under proper restrictions, to manumit their slaves, which may procure a gradual abolition, and thus exonerate yourselves from that load of guilt, which hangs like a millstone around your necks; and save your country from the effects of that black and portentous cloud which hangs over us.

Slavery is not only pernicious as it is immoral and unjust but it is totally inconsistent with the principles and security of a republican government.

“It is an eating ulcer on the very vitals of our main resources as to defence, and a slow poison acting on that constitution which is the offspring, and has continued to be the protector of our freedom and prosperity.”

It is remarkable that the United States, which is now perhaps the only real republican government in the world, should be the only government which fosters this bane of political freedom. The governments of the old world, with all their despotic principles, have refused to admit African slavery within their bosoms; and have hardly permitted its existence in their remote islands and colonies. The Judges of England are entitled to everlasting honour, for that firm and unbiassed decision in the case of Somerset, which gives every inhabitant of Great Britain, a right to boast that as soon as a slave sets his foot on British ground he is free. May we not hope that by a gradual emancipation, or by some other means, that is consistent with public safety, the blush of shame may be removed, which now tinges or ought to tinge the countenance of every citizen of the United States, and particularly of every slave holding state, whenever slavery is mentioned. I have heard it stated that the single state of Massachusetts furnished more men and supplies to the United States during the revolutionary war, than all the southern states. If this is true, it must be imputed to the slave population of the latter.

It is an alarming consideration that there are now in the bosom of the United States, and intermixed with its free population, a black and mixed, or slave population of probably more than two millions, who are virtually in a state of outlawry, and not under the protection of the civil power; on whom the United States, in case of danger are not empowered to call, and over whom for the purposes of defence they have no controul; but who are subject to the will, and absolute controul of their owners or masters; who may be considered as the heads of these motly clans; thus forming in the heart of our republican government a soul sickning number of separate despotisms; the subjects of each being proportioned to

the domain and means of their respective chieftains. Many, and I think I may be justified in saying, the most of these domestic aristocracies, or despotisms, are the scenes of the most brutal ignorance, and pollution; where the subjects are instructed in no duty, human or divine, nor do they know any law but the will of those from whom they receive their *weals* and their *scars*.

It has been shown, by statements taken from documents which cannot mislead, that the effects of slavery in the United States, is to lessen the ratio of the white, and to increase the ratio of the slave or black population, and that the black or slave population increases generally, in the slave holding states, to that degree faster than the free, or white population that it ought, from motives of public, as well as individual safety and security, to alarm all considerate men; and particularly that it ought to awaken the slave holding states, and the slave holders themselves, from their fatal lethargy.

The reasons why the free or white population does not increase so fast in the slave holding as in the non-slave holding states, are said to be the luxury and indolence produced by a state of slavery, which enervates those not accustomed to labor: and the want of the means of supporting families, under which, a considerable part of the white population are necessarily placed; and from which they cannot extricate themselves, as in consequence of slavery, which makes labor the task of slaves, it is disreputable to labor. There is another, more degrading, more demoralizing cause. This is the promiscuous, the unrestrained, the shameless intercourse which too frequently takes place between the male whites and the female blacks. These poor unfortunates females, debared the means of moral or religious instruction, by their situation, by statute, or by the absolute will of their masters, have little more to guard them against the unruly passions of the other sex, aided by their own natural propensities, than the beasts that perish. Marked by color, debased by bondage, and made to consider the whites as an order of superior beings, they are a prey to the lusts of the youthful wanton, and hoary debauchee. That this shameless and abominable intercourse is indulged in the West-Indies, and more or less wherever slavery is established, to a great extent, especially in warm climates, we have undeniable proof, from the number of mulattoes which swarm in those places: and these do not shew, perhaps, the whole extent of these abominations, which enervate, disincline, and disqualify those, who practice them, from forming more honorable connexions. So far has this practice overcome all sense of morality, or decency in many parts, that those who claim a standing in society as honorable men, boast their preference of colored females: and female blacks are frequently purchased, and kept for the very purposes of this species of prostitution.

There cannot be a more demoralizing practice or example, especially to those in the hey-day of youth. This easy and dangerous indulgence prevents thousands from forming connexions, the nurseries of a creditable offspring, which would prove blessings to themselves, and to society. It reduces all colors and conditions to a level; it destroys all that natural affection which is the bond of the social compact; it is the death-stroke of every finer feeling of the human heart.

Mr. G. from New-England, settled in the West-Indies. Although he had been taught to consider a connexion with a black, as almost bordering on bestiality, yet giving way to custom and example, he took a wench, by whom he had a large family. By a course of successful professional practice, he accumulated a fortune, which went to his collateral kindred, leaving in a miserably destitute situation,

those whom he had been the means of bringing into the world, and whom he could neither emancipate or endow.

I have been informed of the following fact, that a northern young gentleman being at the southward, and questioning a wench, who waited on a young lady to whom he paid attention, how she presumed to come into his chamber, and to his bed before he had risen; was answered that her young mistress sent her. Considering it as an affront, he spoke to the young lady on the subject, who answered that it was very common: meaning that where suitors appeared to be disposed to take liberties, young ladies took this method to secure themselves, and cool the passions.

I cannot say that this is so; but if true, what a horrid idea does it give us of the effect of slavery, which can reduce the taste and moral perception of the best and most refined part of our species, far below the Italian standard, where mothers hire prostitutes for their sons.

A gentleman, for whose veracity I can vouch, was introduced to a man of property, fortune and credit in the West-Indies, by one with whom the latter had long been acquainted. After sitting for some time over a social glass, the West-India gentleman called a little girl into the room, who appeared to be twelve or thirteen years of age. This girl, he informed his old friend, was his child—That many years before, he had purchased a negro woman, by whom he had the mother of this girl: that when the mother of this girl was of proper age, he turned her mother into the kitchen, and took her; and that when this girl came to proper age, he should take her: concluding his account of this incestuous process, by declaring with an oath, that he meant to continue it till he had whitewashed the breed.

In the very republican state of Georgia, not far from Savannah, a man, co-habited with a negro woman, by whom he had a family of children: at a time, when slaves commanded a great price, he shipped this woman, and the whole of these his own children to the Havanna, and sold them as slaves to the Spaniards, and received for them a large sum. He now, perhaps, may be seen riding in his carriage, in the slave holding stile, with a retinue of half naked negroes in his train. What must we say of the state of society, where such things are tolerated? Must we not conclude that *there* the laws of God and nature are of no avail: and L*****dge may be a patriot or a saint.

But I sicken at the recital of the cruel and demoralizing effects of slavery; the half of which volumes would not contain.

“The sufferings of the Africans,” (say those able advocates of the rights of humanity first quoted) “were calculated, no doubt, to make a more rapid and violent impression on the imaginations and bodily sympathies of men; but the dreadful depravity, that of necessity was produced by it on the immediate agents of the injustice; and the further influence of such corruption on the morals of countries, that are in the habits of constant commercial intercourse, and who speak the same language; these, though not susceptible of colors equally glaring, do yet form a more extensive evil—an evil of a more certain, and of a more measurable kind. These are evils in the form of guilt; evil in the most absolute an appropriate sense; that sense in which the sublimest teachers of moral wisdom, Plato, Zeno, Leibnitz, have confined the appellation; and which, therefore, on a well disciplined spirit, will make an impression deeper than

could have been left by mere agony of body or even anguish of mind, in proportion as vice is more hateful than pain; eternity more awful than time. To this may be added, the fatal effects on national morals from the public admission of principles, professedly incompatible with justice, and from the denial of any obligation paramount to that immediate expediency, compare with which even state hypocrisy may not have been without its good effects. Those who estimate all measures, institutions and events, exclusively by their palpable and immediate effects, are little qualified to trace, and less inclined to believe, the ceaseless agency of those subtler causes to which the philosopher attributes the deterioration of the national character. Yet history will vouch for us, if we affirm, that no government ever avowedly acted on immoral principles, without inducing a proportional degradation in the virtue and dignity of the individuals who form the mass of the nation."

That in the above, the British writers refer to the slavery of this country is evident from this passage: "the further influence of such corruption on the morals of countries that are in the habits of constant commercial intercourse, and who speak the same language," and as African slavery is not permitted there or in any part of Europe.

If the existence of this slavery strikes the politician with alarm, and the moralist with horror when thus remote, the effect ought to be tenfold if it existed within themselves.

If merely a commercial intercourse with this country, will have such fatal effects on the national morals of other countries, we must be contaminated indeed.

If this evil thus alarms the reflecting statesmen of Europe, what ought to be our alarm, through whose system this poison is spreading; in whose bosom this viper is nursed; and who are feeding within ourselves, the ulcer which, if continued, will eventually consume the very vitals of our constitutions, the protector of our freedom, our shield of defence.

If this is our situation in this early state of our existence as a nation, what will it be if slavery is suffered to progress, till it produces that consummation of luxury, effeminacy, injustice, oppression, degeneracy, bloodshed, and depravity to which it is approximating. For we have as yet seen by a glimmering of its fatal effects. Instead of being, according to our boasted pretensions, the *asylum* of the oppressed, the guardians of their rights, and the pole star of freedom; we shall be the sink of vice, the abettors and victims of violence, the byword and scorn of nations, and the abhorrence of the world!

The intercourse between the male whites and the female blacks, gives birth to a race who endanger the peace of society, where their numbers are considerable; as they will never patiently suffer the degradation of their mothers, while they inherit the pride of their fathers: which is commonly their only portion. In cases of disturbance, to which they would not be unlikely to give rise, their color, tho' not absolutely black, would constitute a distinction, and rallying mark, as it would between all the people of color, against the whites.—That this distinction of color would render a proscription more dreadful than it would otherwise be, might be presumed; and is proved by events that are within the recollection of many, but which it is needless to mention. The danger to which the slave holding states, and in fact the Union are exposed from this source, is a painful subject, but the blind, and I had almost said infuriated

zeal of the advocates for the extension of this curse of our country, and consequently the increase of its dangers and horrors, compels to a disclosure.

The following and other considerations, we should suppose, would seal the lips, and impress with paleness, the countenance of every slave holder, and of every citizen of a slave holding state: that they have within their territory and limits, more than two millions of people of the above description; that they are in the neighbourhood of the West-Indies; that St. Domingo, through the ordeal of a tremendous proscription, has settled down under a black government: that Jamaica, with a population of more than three hundred thousand slaves to twenty thousand whites, and other islands tremble lest they may be called to act their part in the revolutionary drama.

We should suppose, that instead of reviling their brethren of the North, and of the non-slave holding states, they would entreat them, in the gentle and friendly accents of conciliation, to unite with them to alleviate, and if possible to exonerate our country from the load of calamity, which they and their predecessors have brought upon us. The language of the slave holding gentlemen, has however, been of a totally different character.

At the former session of Congress, Mr. Coulston of Virginia, accused Mr. Livermore of speaking to the galleries, and by his language, endeavoring to excite a servile war; with the addition of language little befitting a member of that body. Mr. C. of G* charged the mover of the amendment, Mr. Talmadge, with having "kindled a fire, which all the waters of the ocean could not put out, and which seas of blood could only extinguish;" and added, that if they persisted, it would dissolve the union. The agitation and alarm of the gentlemen shows, the fearful apprehensions which they entertain of their own situation. This circumstance ought to alarm every friend to his country. If the mine is ready to be sprung, and slavery has that portentous aspect, that a mere motion to restrict it shall bring on a servile war, and kindle a fire "which all the waters of the ocean cannot put out; and which seas of blood only can extinguish," is it a time to sleep? Especially when they attribute to this monster slavery, the power of dissolving the union. They either meant, that if not indulged, the slave holders would rebel, and thus dissolve the union, or that a servile war would have that effect. They either had rebellion in their hearts, or fearful bodings in their minds.

Mr. Scott from the Missouri Territory, spoke of the *Ides of March*, and warned the gentlemen, who opposed the extension of slavery, to beware of the *fate of Caesar and Rome*. This would appear to imply that he and his abettors carried daggers under their cloaks, as the conspirators against Caesar did, and that they would stab their opponents in the Capitol. Less equivocal, however, is the language attributed to that gentleman, during the present session: it has been stated, that, he declared on the floor of Congress, that unless he and those whom he represented, were gratified in their request, they would take care of and provide for themselves. I am loath to believe that any gentleman would so far forget the respect which he owed to that body before whom he stood, as to utter such language; or that such language would be permitted with impunity. What should we say of a son, who should use such language to a father; and those who are appointed to the supreme rule are the public guardians, and our political fathers. And shall those who are admitted into the family by adoption, on the first exercise of parental power, denounce the union, and publish rebellion within the walls of the capitol? What! in the

senate of a free country, shall a member be permitted to threaten his opponents with assassination, and to throw the gauntlet of defiance in the face of his rulers?

*Mr. Cobb of Georgia.

ERRATA.—Page 6, 13th line from top for “*county*,” read *country*.

— 7, 14th line from bottom for “*did permit*,” read *did not permit*.

The logo for Monticello, featuring the name "Monticello" in a stylized, cursive script above the word "MONTICELLO" in a bold, sans-serif, all-caps font.

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