

# TO THE REV. HENRY WARD BEECHER.

By John Mitchel.

From *The Citizen*, January 28, 1854.

REVEREND SIR: - You will be surprised to see a letter addressed to you by one whom you supposed to be dead. In your Anti-Slavery Lecture, as reported in the *Tribune*, I find that you announced my decease to a large congregation; and, with Christian meekness, repressed the loud hisses of your hearers in consideration of the respect due to the deceased. This morning I have read my own epitaph in the *Tribune*, and even an account of the coroner's inquest - which must have greatly affected my friends, if I have any left.

I find myself therefore in the position of Partridge the almanac-maker, who had to come before the public to prove himself alive, notwithstanding the obituary notice of Dean Swift - and had even much trouble in establishing the fact. It is a hard necessity: - you may be difficult to convince; and may choose even to regard this communication as a *de profundis clamari*, or voice from the tombs; - but I will try to satisfy your reverence.

The New York *Tribune*, first - next a small fry of newspapers whose names I forget - and lastly your facetious reverence, in your paper, the *Independent*, - all have poured out on me a torrent of virtuous indignation, simply because I refused to brand as criminals a large proportion of the citizens of this Republic, and about one-half of all the human beings who have ever lived in the world besides. You and the *Tribune*, and the "Benevolists" of this enlightened century, have found out a new crime - as if there had not been enough before - and when any man hesitates to load his fellow-creatures, his fellow-citizens, and forefathers, with this lately invented sin, over and above all their other sins, you cry out that he is a "caitiff," a "thistle," a "hideous hag," and a dead man. You write his epitaph, and find a verdict of *felo-de-se* upon his corpse.

It seems, also, that I have disappointed you and the *Tribune*, which is painful. But what if the disappointment is owing not to my fault, but to your stupidity? For here is your reasoning – I tried to destroy British dominion in Ireland; but I decline to say that half of the American citizens are vile criminals; - therefore “there *could be no principle* in my struggle with England” (I quote from your article in the *Independent*.) And the *Tribune* makes no scruple to say,

“...that if liberty for Ireland and the Irish is sought in the spirit evinced, and on the principles avowed, by ‘THE CITIZEN,’ it can hardly be necessary to say that the effort will be fruitless, and the hopes of its champions a mockery. Alas! for the aspirations of the oppressed and exiled, if their incitement to struggle for liberty is the horrible desire of buying, selling, and lashing each other.”

I confess that I can make no sense out of such language. Benevolence is good, but a little logic also would be no harm. Let us see how it would apply to another case. General Washington, the father of his country, saw no crime and no peccadillo in holding slaves, and in making them work on his farm. Gen. Washington wished to possess, and did possess till he died, and always took good care of, a plantation stocked with negroes, not in Alabama, but in Virginia. Nay, he wished to possess *more* plantations; otherwise he certainly never would have offered 8,500 dollars for Mr. Clifton’s. Thomas Jefferson, the greatest of the founders of American democracy, lived and died a slaveholder, and bequeathed his slaves to his relatives. *Therefore* “there could be no principle in their struggle with England;” the “effort ought to have been fruitless, and the hopes of its champions a mockery;” for “their incitement” – Jefferson’s and Washington’s incitement – “to struggle for liberty, was the horrible desire of buying, selling and lashing each other.” If your reverence would boldly speak your mind, you would tell your hearers in the Tabernacle that Washington was a caitiff, and Jefferson a thistle, or a hideous hag.

I know what you will say, - that those illustrious men, though slaveholders, always felt and said that slavery was an incubus, and a curse to the country. Possibly it may be so. That is a subject on which I gave no opinion. But the National Debt is an incubus and curse to England – and yet many good men, believing it to be so, hold

debentures, and even go so far as to buy stock in the three and a half per cents.

But you, crusaders of abolition, are not content to rest the case on grounds of policy. You will have it that those who differ from you, and agree with all the wisest of mankind, are fools or villains. You have a number of exclamations and interjections always ready; and you seem to think people will take them for reasons. “What!” you cry, “can a man be a chattel?” – to which I answer, Why not? The Legislator of the Jews saw no harm in it. “Would you sell a being with an immortal soul!” – Certainly: Moses and the Prophets did the same. “Would you send back a fugitive to his master!” – Assuredly; Paul the Apostle very honestly sent back the absconding Onesimus, and begged of his owner, the worthy Philemon – Paul’s dearly-beloved and fellow-labourer – to forgive his returning slave.

Was Paul a hideous hag? Believe me, it is your reverence who is an old woman. You will never get a new code of morality received among men. We will never consent to believe that you are a better Christian than the Founder of that religion – that you love Liberty better than those immortal Greeks that invented it – that you are a truer Republican than all the Republicans of ancient and modern times, and of both hemispheres. This is undoubtedly a great century, and thinks it knows much; but I have always been accustomed to thank God that I am behind my age. It is a matter of taste.

I do not affect to be ignorant that your little school claim the Founder of the Christian religion as an Abolitionist; not by reason of any positive condemnation or prohibition of Slavery or Slaveholding, but by virtue of what you call the development of the religion, which you suppose to be growing and advancing, as man grows and advances. Especially you dwell upon the great precept, “Do unto others as ye would that other should do unto you” – and you say *here* is abolition in embryo. Though a laic, I shall venture to suggest to you, most learned clerk, a simple explanation of that text, which, perhaps, never occurred to you before. It means, do unto others as you would wish (if they were in your circumstances and you in theirs) that they should do unto you. If you are a creditor, treat your debtor with that forbearance and consideration which, if you were the debtor and

he the creditor, you might reasonably wish and expect him to use towards you. This does not mean, creditors discharge your debtors free. Again, if you are a slaveholder, use your slave with gentleness, humanity, and kindness, rewarding him when he does well, never punishing him wantonly or oppressively – in short, just as you could reasonably wish, were you the slave and he the master, that he would behave towards you. Therefore, the injunction of the New Testament is, not, masters discharge your slaves, but, be merciful to your slaves – slaves be obedient to your masters.

But I said something of slaves being *lashed*. Yes; the very idea of a slave includes the idea of coercion, but does not it all include the idea of cruelty; and when I wished for a plantation of negroes, your reverence, and the *Tribune*, with great candour, proclaim that I want slaves in order to have the luxury of flogging them. Does any man marry a wife that he may have the pleasure of beating his children! Yet he who spareth the rod, spoileth the child. Does any man buy a horse for the sake of whipping him? Did Washington keep negroes merely that he might indulge himself in trashing them? In fact, I wanted to set down the principle as nakedly as possible – that it is not wrong to hold a slave – from this principle it follows, that it is not wrong to make a slave work; and there is no way of making him work (in the last resort) but dread of the lash.

This is an ungracious task I find myself forced to undertake. On my side, in this controversy, everything sounds harsh and looks repulsive. Your reverence has chosen, if not the better, at least, the balmier part. Yours is the privilege, dear to the enlightened modern head, of uttering kind-looking sentences. It comes easy to you (for all the prevailing cants are with you) to assume for yourself and your followers, the credit of benevolence, and philanthropy, and enlightenment, and “progress,” and all the rest of it; while I, to escape the charge of barbarous cruelty and blood-thirsty atrocity, am forced to shield myself under the authority of mere ancients, persons behind the century, persons who had not the advantage of hearing your lectures at the Tabernacle – persons like the Legislators of the Jews, and the wise men of the Greeks and the framers of the Declaration of Independence. It would be easy for me also, and it would be true, to

assert that I am not cruel or tyrannical by nature – that I hate all oppression – that, if I had slaves, I would influence and govern them uniformly by kindness instead of coercion; in short, that I would use them as humanely as Jefferson himself, whose enthusiastic reception by his attached negroes on his return to Monticello, forms so agreeable a picture in Tucker’s life of that illustrious man. It would be easy; but I do not condescend to treat the question in this personal and restricted manner. My position was, and is, the naked assertion, “that slaveholding is not a crime;” and that nobody ever thought it a crime until some time towards the close of the last century.

For the sake of undeceiving your disciples at the Tabernacle, I think it right now to inform them (and I do it with regret), that you are in the habit of giving so erroneous an account of slavery among the Hebrews, that Moses himself would not know his own laws if he heard them described in one of your reverence’s lectures. You say that the Mosaic law did not indeed prohibit slavery, but surrounded the system with such restrictions as to make it very inconvenient, and finally to abolish it. The very ingenious authoress of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”, in her “Key” to the same, has asserted, quoting a Mr. Barnes for it, that although Hebrews might buy slaves they could not sell them. And again, that there was an enactment requiring Hebrew slaveholders to liberate their slaves every fiftieth year. These are statements which you and your school seem take on trust from Mrs. Stowe and Mr. Barnes; but you will have find that it is unsafe to rely for facts of this kind, upon pamphleteers or lady-novelists. Undoubtedly, some of your hearers, and some of the readers of “Uncle Tom,” will be surprised to hear that there were no such enactments at all; except in reference to that class of slaves who were children of Israel.

The Mosaic Law commanded the Israelites to buy slaves, “of the heathen who were round about,” these slaves it commanded them to take as an inheritance for ever.

“Ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them for a possession; they shall be your bondmen *for ever*. But over your brethren the children of Israel, ye shall not rule over one another with rigour.” (Levit. xxv. 46.)

In the year of jubilee, liberty was to be proclaimed throughout the land, “to all the inhabitants thereof;” but, is it possible for a learned theologian like your reverence, not to be aware that foreign slaves were never spoken of as inhabitants of the land, but as strangers and sojourners. It is in this very same chapter that the foreign slaves are declared to be their inheritance and their possession, and their children’s possession for ever. “Moses,” says the learned commentator Michaelis<sup>1</sup>, “specified two periods at which *the Hebrew servant* was to regain his freedom – the 7<sup>th</sup> year and the 50<sup>th</sup>” – that is to say, as he explains it, at the end of seven years from the date of the slave’s falling into slavery (the sabbatical year had nothing to do with it); and, at any rate, in the jubilee year whether he had been then seven years in slavery or not. *But nothing of all this applied to the slaves purchased from foreigners or taken in war, or to the children of such slaves.*

It is precisely as if there were a law in America whereby all American citizens, who might have fallen into the state of slavery, were to be set free at two stated periods in each century.

If you know of any commentator worth attention who takes a different view of the matter, produce him.

And it is not true, nor is there the smallest foundation for the statement, that a Hebrew slaveholder was not permitted to sell his foreign slave. On the contrary, there is one very peculiar and exceptional case (Deut. xxi. 14), in which a master is forbidden to sell a female captive whom he had taken to wife – he shall not make merchandise of *her*. And this exceptional prohibition leads to the belief that of all other slaves he might make merchandise. Again, it is said,

“If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and maketh merchandize of him or selleth him, then that thief shall die.” (Deut. xxiv. 7.)

Which seems to me to prove that there were regular slave-markets in Israel – otherwise the kidnapper could not “make merchandize” of his stolen brethren, and could have no temptation to steal him for sale. And, lastly, in providing for the moderate punishment of slaves with rods, the law declares that even if the slave

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<sup>1</sup> Michaelis. Commentary on the Laws of Moses. Book III., c. 9.

die of his beating after a day or two, yet his master shall not be punished; for, saith the text, “he is his money.” The learned commentator I cited before remarks on this passage – “In any nation where slavery is established, a master must have a right to chastise his slaves. If they are obstinate, and provoke him into a passion, his blows may prove fatal, contrary to his inclination; but a predetermination to kill a slave will not be imputed to him” – for he is his money.

Now, if a man’s slave was his inheritance, and his children’s inheritance, and his money, and if, in the whole Mosaic law, there is to be found but one enactment against selling, that is forbidding a man to sell his wife, if she was also his slave – forbidding it not because she was his slave, but because she was his wife – then clearly we are entitled to assume that slaves were a marketable commodity among the Jews, as they were amongst all other nations of antiquity.<sup>2</sup>

I hope, therefore, you will tell your hearers at your next lecture that you have been misrepresenting Moses all this time; and that, in fact, the Mosaic law imposed no restrictions upon slavery at all, except in the case of Israelitish slaves; a class of restrictions which are here happily unnecessary, as no American citizen can sell himself into slavery, or become a slave even for debt, as a Hebrew citizen might.

So much for authority. And as to the nature of Liberty itself, I believe it is a thing little understood in these times.

“Liberty requires new definitions,” saith Carlyle. “The true liberty of a man, you would say, consisted in his finding out, or being forced to find out, the right path, and to walk thereon; to learn, or to be taught, what work he actually was able for; and thus, by permission, persuasion, and even compulsion, to set about doing of the same. That is his true blessedness, honour, liberty and maximum of well-being.”

Wisely, as it seems to me, the same writer again exclaims:

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<sup>2</sup> They were a “commodity transferable by purchase and sale,” says Michaelis; and he has even a section devoted to an inquiry into the prices usually realized. In war time, he says, when any city was taken, or victory won, the prices fell greatly, because the market was glutted. The same commentator shows clearly that the punishment of death denounced against *man-stealing*, only referred to the stealing of Hebrews, the text of Exodus xxi. being explained and limited by Deut. xxiv.

“Surely, of all ‘rights of man,’ this right of the ignorant man to be guided by the wiser, to be gently or forcibly held in the true course by him, is the indisputablest. Nature herself ordains it from the first. Society struggles towards perfection by enforcing and accomplishing it more and more. It is a sacred right and duty on both sides; and the summary of all social duties whatsoever between the two.”

Thus the ideal of a slaveholder’s position is a true patriarchate. He is the father of a family. And how much higher are his duties and responsibilities than those of a mere employer for money-wages, between whom and his labourer the sole *nexus* is cash payment! If he *do* his duty, how much higher he stands in the scale of God’s creatures than the man who merely pays his workmen their wages on Saturday night, and dismisses them to the grog-shop. If he do *not* his duty, or if he abuse his power, may God forgive him!

Before closing this letter, I shall quote for you a sentence or two from another keen observer of the world, Father Kenyon.

“In general,” he says, “I regard the whole question as one whose importance is much exaggerated by fancy – perchance by fanaticism. We are all slaves, in a thousand senses of the word; slaves to time, to place, to circumstance; to the habits of our great grandfathers on either side, and to the whims of our maternal ancestors in all their nonsensical generations; to fire, air, earth and water, throughout all their analyses; to tailors – a most galling yoke; snuff, washerwomen, quacks, policemen, umbrellas, London merchants, native millers, and royal engineers. If to all these slaveries there be superadded one other – namely, slavery to slave-holders, I cannot see that our position will be very essentially deteriorated.”

Now your reverence is a slave; a slave to certain words and phrases, which have got the mastery over your poor mind, and thus over your body too. You are as one possessed by them. They make you cry out, and gesticulate violently, and toil and sweat and revile passers-by. Who will emancipate you, unhappy congressional pastor! You call these noisy spirits that possess you, *principles*; and you ask me where is my “principle.” You tell me that you thought I had risen up against English dominion in Ireland, “for a principle.” God forbid! I trust that I have no principles of this sort; but who knows his own heart? Who can tell whether he is truly emancipated or not? Yet I do flatter myself that in seeking to throw off the dominion of England, I

was actuated by no other principle than intolerance of insolent and ignorant oppression; my principle was simply that Irishmen were fitted for a higher destiny and sphere, and that they all ought to feel British dominion as intolerable as I did. My principle was, that even if all other Irishmen chose to submit to that mean tyranny, I for my part would choose rather to die.

You see I am but narrow-minded. My thoughts are not worldwide and sky-high, like your reverence's. Yet I submit that you have no right to call me "a pretender," (see the *Independent*) because I never did pretend to anything higher, wider, or deeper than the above. Spare me therefore your righteous indignation: - as I am so far behind the age do not try to drag me on - I can never keep up with you. Your reverence indeed will soon be clear out of my sight; and I wish you a good journey. Adieu.

JOHN MITCHEL,

*New York, January 23<sup>d</sup>, 1854.*

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