

ABOLITION OF SLAVERY.

Speech of HON. THOMAS B. SHANNON, OF CALIFORNIA.

DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

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Mr. SHANNON said—

MR. SPEAKER, I am not addicted to boaring this House with set speeches, and nothing save the deep conviction I feel of the importance of the question now pending would induce me on this occasion to occupy time in these closing days of the session. But, sir, I would not do justice to the constituency I represent were I not to place upon the record my protest and their protest against this rebellion and its unholy cause.

It will not, I trust, be necessary in this, the fourth year of our struggle, to press upon this House proof that slavery is alone responsible for this war. No man who has read carefully the history of the past eighty years, whatever may be his political bias, will, I think, differ with this opinion. It is now our province to inquire whether that curse can be perpetuated with safety to American freedom and national unity, and if we find that it cannot, it will then become our duty to see to it that for the future it shall not exist as an element of disruption and disintegration in our midst.

Sir, the apothegm "liberty regulated by law" expresses my idea of the spirit of American institutions. It is that condition of the people wherein each is at liberty to regulate his own domestic affairs according to his own judgment or caprice, only being careful that those laws which protect the rights of his neighbor from infringement must not be violated. Slavery is inconsistent with this condition; it makes the many subject to the few, makes the laborer the mere tool of the capitalist, and centralizes the political power of the nation. Yet, sir, this centralization is not such as that which gave Russia her solidity and despotic greatness; it is that cheaper article from which "petty lords and feudal despots" spring. It draws around the slave-owning nabob all the petty trappings of the feudal system, and does not hesitate to assume like political powers. Its slaves are numbered as people to be represented, yet considered before the law as soulless beasts of burden. The man who owns five hundred slaves figures in the tables of representation as the equal of three-hundred non-slaveholders. In plain Saxon, Mr. Speaker, the half-witted heir to a plantation stocked with five hundred negroes, located in a slave State, has just the same voice in this Hall as have three hundred of your constituency, even though my friends on the opposite side should move into your district.

Much was said a few years ago on this floor and elsewhere about higher law, and men were branded with every opprobrious epithet who believed that slavery should be amenable to a law higher than constitutions or human enactments. Sir, the statesman of the North was not responsible for that doctrine; the Commonwealth of Kentucky has adopted it as a part of her organic act. The constitution of that State, adopted in 1850, contains this remarkable sentence :

“That the right of property is *before and higher* than any constitutional sanction ; that the right of the owner of a slave to such slave and its increase is the same, and as inviolable, as the right of the owner of any other property whatever.”

Now, sir, any gentleman who will turn to article thirteen, section three, of that instrument will see that I do not misquote the people of Kentucky when I assert that with them slavery assumes to exist by a “higher law” than the constitutions of our fathers. “He that is not for us is against us.” Slavery is by its own declarations in antagonism to our Constitution, and for that reason, if for no other, I would oppose its continuance.

Sir, slavery rolls back the car of civilization, and brings us once more to the feudal age, giving us that system with all its iniquities, and yet without its claims to respectability. Can such a system be legitimate fruit growing upon the tree of liberty planted by our patriot fathers, and watered by their blood? Is it not rather a poisonous parasite which clings to the sides of the tree, sucking up its sap, smothering its foliage, and sure in the end to destroy it? For my own part I could never understand why the owner of slaves should be entitled to more political weight than the man who earns his daily bread by his daily toil.

I conceive, sir, that that nation is greatest the largest proportion of whose people are educated, possessed of the comforts of life, and are endowed with citizenship. Let the voting masses of any country be composed of an independent yeomanry the majority of whom are freeholders of moderate yet sufficient estate, let them be fairly schooled, intelligent, each one bearing a fair share of the responsibilities of the Government, and that nation will be healthy ; more, sir, it will be great in a nobler sense than Rome was great.

Small farms, small towns, manufacturing communities and villages, rather than cities or large estates, are among the conditions of true national greatness. To each of these slavery is in antagonism. It revels in extensive plantations, seeks to deprive those who are not citizens of education, independence, and the comforts of life, and by increasing the proportion of slaves reduces the number of its citizens to the smallest possible point. With it the statesmanship that labors to secure “the greatest good to the greatest number” is inverted, and the greatest good to the smallest number is substituted.

Slavery and barbarism are identical. There was no enormity perpetrated in the darkest age or among the rudest people which it does not sanction. Every form of incest is common in this, that assumes to be a paternal relation. Even polygamy is degraded by it to promiscuous prostitution. Now, sir, I love the white race too well willingly to see

their blood miscegnating with the African, and must protest against any institution, however patriarchal, under which such things are profitable, and too generally, on that account, called respectable.

It has been asserted, and even in some cases by divines otherwise respectable, that this thing, slavery, was of divine origin. I shall not stop, nor have I patience, to discuss those texts in holy writ which are said to favor this view ; but I shall content myself with remembering the one great test by which the divinity of all doctrines must be weighed : “ By their fruits ye shall know them.” Who will dare make, in this enlightened age, the assertion that the fruits of slavery are divine ? What divinity, pray, in that condition of affairs where men and women are compelled to labor illy fed, more illy clothed, and unpaid, to the end that one, no better before God, should live in ease and without labor ? What divinity in whipping women for protesting when their virtue is assailed ? What divinity in tearing from the mother’s arms the sucking child, and selling them to different and distant owners ? Where is there one fruit of this tree that any man will dare to call divine ?

Mr. Speaker, I have no respect for clerymen who so far forget the sacredness of their high calling as to give utterance to such a dogma. The man who preaches such stuff and believes it, if there is one such, I cannot help looking upon as a fool ; the more intelligent the man who gives it utterance, the less do I respect him ; for a fool may be pitied, a hypocrite must be despised. Slavery divine, indeed ! Is its divinity attested by its unbridled licentiousness, or by its degradation of labor ; by its destruction of every family tie, or its prostitution of both races in prohibiting its victims from acquiring that knowledge which would enable them to read God’s holy word ?

Where then are the fruits of its growing which proclaim it as emanating from on high ? Shame on the blasphemy which would saddle such an accursed institution upon the God of love and mercy ! Man could heap no greater contumely upon his maker than to attribute so unholy a thing to Heaven.

But, sir, some of these learned churchmen who find it profitable to advocate the divinity of slavery may conceive that this thievish rebellion is a bud of hope suggestive of a coming confederacy that shall prove to be a divine fruitage. Perhaps, sir, the grand dream of a confederacy whose citizens should be above the vulgar necessity of toil, and who should, every man of them, luxuriate in the enjoyment of a fat office, or rejoice in the possession of a princely revenue, would prove the disease which gave birth to the utopian dream, as being born of Heaven.

A. H. Stephens declared that the confederacy had slavery for its corner-stone. Mad brains had conceived the idea that a nation could be builded up all of whose citizens—not all of its people—should be free gentlemen and ladies, free not only to act as their own refined instincts might dictate in their intercourse with each other, but the male portion, at least, free to follow those same instincts into the descending cycle where the dusky damsels who are an integral part of this corner-stone might pander to their laziness and lust. It was to be a government whose citizens should not degrade themselves with the vulgar cares of life ; they were to leave such things to their slaves, and they rule. Some would be soldiers, that

is, wear the shoulder-straps ; some would fill the various official positions of civil government ; others would condescend to grace the various liberal professions by their presence. There should be no non-producers who were not slaves in fact, no producers among the governing class. The poor white man should be made a common soldier, a sailor, a petty officer, or a patrolman, whose duty it should be to keep the slave population in proper subjection. For, Mr. Speaker, it is a fact which those who believe slavery divine and the normal condition of the black man must wonder at, that these so-called happy slaves have so poor an appreciation of the joys of their condition as to be constantly pining for freedom to that extent that they will skedaddle from their comfortable quarters to seek refuge among the abolition barbarians of the frigid North whenever they chance upon an opportunity, and instances are not wanting where they have even risen upon their kind and indulgent masters and struck with terrible courage for that liberty so sweet to all men. The poor whites, however, were to protect their wealthy neighbors from all such terrible contingencies. This employment of the poor white would leave no poor idle, hence no dangerous class in the community ; it would all be absorbed and its interest made identical with the interest of the wealthy class. The conditions of master and slave were alone to exist, the third class being a mere adjunct of the latter.

This institution necessarily establishes three conditions of society where it prevails : the master, the slave, and that most degraded condition of all, the middle-man, or the poor white trash, whose vocation is pander and pimp, to the vices of both master and slave, and ultimately dependent on both, having no recognized condition, and enjoying none of the privileges of the governing or governed class, but an outcast from both and despised by both.

Now let it never be forgotten that our mission also is to elevate and disenthral that most injured and dependent class of our fellow white men from their down trodden and degraded condition, that they too may be men, and enjoy the independence and rights of manhood. And, Mr. Speaker, that Utopia was much nearer its realization three years ago than most of us dreamed. Why, sir, subsisted by these slaves, every well man among the citizens of the slave States has been able to become a soldier. In the North two thirds of the able-bodied men are required in the production of food and all those articles required for the subsistence of our wives, our children, and our armies. Our enemies leave all this work to the slaves, and the slaves are all productive ; male and female, old and young, all go into the field. The planter and producer is not, as with us, limited to the number of able-bodied men upon the plantation. With him a woman is a full hand. She does, and is expected to do, the same work with the men. Little children are not required to attend school, as school bills for colored children form no part of the plantation expenses. The little fellows of six summers are quarter hands, at twelve are required to do half the work of a man, and at sixteen are full hands. Decrepit age and tender youth alike are made to produce subsistence for the armies and the people of the South. It is this system which calls out all the bone and sinew of the South in aid of their cause which has made the once celebrated anaconda system of warfare a failure. Sir, all the cries

of starvation we have imagined ourselves to be hearing from our "erring brethren" have been but the cries wrung from the poor creatures engaged in gathering their abundant harvests. And unless those cries are heard and heeded by this Government we can never hope to succeed in crushing the rebellion, and never ought to. We must deprive them of their producers; we must by our action in this Hall demoralize every slave left beyond the reach of our armies by guarantying to him his freedom beyond contingency; for, depend upon it, the action we take upon this bill will be known to every black man and woman in the South in a very short time.

In 1860 a period was reached which had been predicted by very many of the founders of the Republic, and which had been foreseen by that advocate of State rights, Thomas Jefferson. It was a period in which was to be solved a problem of vital importance to the American people. Jefferson wrote in 1798 that the State and General Governments were "co-ordinate departments of one simple and integral whole;" and in a letter to one of his friends said, "The enlightened statesman, therefore, will endeavor to preserve the weight and influence of every part, as too much given to any member of it would destroy the general equilibrium."

And to another friend he expressed the fear that "a conflict would arise between State rights upon the one hand and Federal rights upon the other, the one encroaching upon the other to that extent as to produce a collision. Sir, that collision has come, and now we must decide for ourselves and for those who come after us whether the one or the other shall be maintained; whether the Republic as a whole is worth more than a system of petty nations, each independent of the other, and each powerless to protect its citizens from attacks from without or dissensions within.

The idea of a confederation of States had been tried and the experiment found not worth repeating; hence, on the formation of the present Constitution, it had been decided to "form a more perfect Union" by the action of the people of the States themselves, through their delegates to the Convention. That Convention represented the people of the several States, and their action was afterwards indorsed by a vote of the people of the several States. Sir, the people, acting through that Convention, ordained that this Government should have power to declare war, make peace, regulate the currency, and be in fact a supreme Government, "a more perfect Union;" one in which the people of the several States could find repose undisturbed by foreign attacks, or the machination of factionists within their own borders. The men of 1860, swelled up with the lust of slavery and blinded by its specious reasonings in favor of what it was pleased to call the rights of the States, unfortunately have proved too weak, too unpatriotic, to maintain unsullied the inheritance of freedom left them by their sires. To these men the doctrine of State rights was a cry under which slavery with all its attendant evils was to be fostered.

Slavery had been suffered to remain in our system at first by men who were anxiously counting the days, the time when it could be abolished, as they believed, without peril to the country. They argued that it was weak, and the sense of justice which they believed was inborn in the American heart would soon lead to its final and utter abolition. In fact, our fathers were abolitionists. A provision was incorpo-

rated into the Constitution by which no new additions were to be made to the stock of slaves then in the country, and it was believed that gradually and without a jar to the Federal system it would become extinct. Our fathers were mistaken. Slavery was not waning. Every year but added strength and gave vigor to the accursed tree, and eighty years after it is found to have grown so much as to number more victims than was the entire population of the Republic in the days of the Revolution. Waning, indeed! Why, sir, to-day it claims more territory than our fathers aspired to possess for the whole nation, and fights this war to enable it to wrench more domain from the grasp of freedom. This mistake, leaving to the people of the several States the right and authority to establish and regulate the crime of human slavery, has well-nigh proved a vital one. It is not necessary to trace the progress of the slave power. Every page of our nation's history records it. Every school-boy is familiar with it. From the purchase of Louisiana and from the passage of the Missouri compromise to the breaking out of the rebellion, every year's legislation embodied some new concession to slavery, and the pill was always labeled "compromise." It was continually making aggressions upon freedom, and still claiming that it was only securing to itself rights guarantied to it by the Constitution.

Assuming that the Government was a partnership of the States, the adherents of slavery finally attempted to dissolve it unless the reins of power were delivered into their hands. It would rule, sir, or it would ruin. The issue, then, was reduced to this: we must have the Union with the Government in the hands of the slave oligarchy or submit to its dissolution. We consented to neither, but trusting to the God of battles and the patriotism of our people we dared the fight, and as sure as Heaven is just we will succeed.

Now, sir, what is this institution of slavery that has sought to assume the reins of Government in this land of freedom? What is slavery, sir? It is "the sum total of all villainies." It is the destroyer of every virtue, public as well as private, because it encourages promiscuous and unbridled licentiousness, and renders null the marriage relation. It is the enemy of all religion, insomuch as it has caused to be enacted in every slave State laws making it a felony to teach men and women whose skins are black to read even the Bible, and places restrictions about their assembling themselves together to worship God. It destroys all thrift, energy and good citizenship among the ruling classes, teaching them to depend upon the labor of others for support when God has ordained to men that by the sweat of his brow he should eat his bread. Slavery is paganism refined, brutality vitiated, dishonesty corrupted; and, sir, we are asked to retain this curse, to protect it after it has corrupted our sons, dishonored our daughters, subverted our institutions, and shed rivers of the best blood of our countrymen.

Sir, the time has passed for concessions to the slave power. Slavery has risked all to gain all, and now it must abide by the cast of its own die: and to us there is but one issue, dissolution and a recognition of the confederacy, or the utter and immediate abolition of slavery. There is now no middle ground. I believe now that since the days of Calhoun there has never been a middle ground. We have tried tenderness long enough.

For eighty years we have been compromising ; we have coaxed and petted ; it has availed us nothing. We have given the South the high places in our national synagogue, our kindness has never faltered, but, sir, it has been our ruin. We said to the South, we will not interfere with your pet snake while you keep it in the den you have provided for it ; we will not fight your nefarious institution so long as you keep it at home. Slavery shall not be interfered with in any State where by local law it exists. We would even permit the snake to crawl into and establish for itself a den in Territories common to both ; but because we insisted that it should not invade with its slime our own homes and take to itself every foot of the common inheritance it has rebelled. Why, sir, even as late as 1860 we of the North were a nation of compromisers, and after the ordinances of secession had been passed in several States, it is a question whether we would not have been willing to accede to all the demands of the South. Even the old abolition party had men in its ranks who were willing to make some arrangement by which the widening breach might be bridged.

Mr. Speaker, at that time few men in the North were found so radical as to be unwilling to compromise upon some basis, and a still smaller number who would insist upon no terms short of full emancipation.

But, sir, as the history of the past might have warned us, every pacific overture was rejected, and no alternative was left to the freemen of the North but war. How sternly that war has been prosecuted upon both sides history will bear testimony. And shall we be willing to end the struggle now until sufficient guarantees are secured that our people and their successors shall live for all future time without a constant fear that the smothered flame shall again leap forth and burn with tenfold fury ? No, sir, we must end this war now, end it for all coming time ; and we can only end it as we desire by so amending our organic act that slavery can never again be an element of discord among our people. Members upon this floor who fear that their constituency will not sustain them in voting for this measure should remember that they have a constituency coming after those whom they now represent, a constituency who will hold them to a more strict account of their stewardship than will the partial friends of to-day, and the execrations of that constituency will be heaped upon the man who now hesitates to aid in wiping out this stain and curse that has disgraced us so long. We want no timid men now. Our brothers and sons have poured out their blood upon fields made memorable by their bravery, and shall fear that some of us will not be returned to seats in this House lead us to hesitate in doing justice to our country in this the crisis of her destiny ?

Mr. Speaker, there can be no reunion with slavery—the day when such a thing was possible has passed. Sir, let us for one moment try to realize such a reunion. The first thing to be done under such a condition would be to enforce the fugitive slave law. But, sir, thousands of the slaves we would be called upon to return would be soldiers in the Union Army, men who had been engaged in fighting our battles. Our faith as a people is pledged to those men for freedom. They would be the wives, sisters, mothers and daughters of soldiers, and dare we submit to the rendition of that class ? The fugitives who have followed our armies from the plantations of the South have been the only loyal men and women it

found in its track, and shall we be asked in the day of our triumph to punish these our friends with one hand while with the other we reward the red-handed assassins who have endeavored to strike down our liberties? Sir, I can never bring myself calmly to contemplate the possibility of a reunion with the South which shall tolerate the further existence of slavery, much less one that shall restore it to its former assumed privileges. No, sir, we must either abolish slavery, or consent to see the Union of our fathers destroyed, its hitherto proud name become a hissing and a reproach, and its people no longer free.

Sir, there is but one compensation we can render to this country for the terrible sacrifices she has been called upon to endure in this struggle; that compensation is the entire abolition of the curse of slavery; otherwise the blood of our countrymen is shed in vain. We have seen it lurking and rankling in the veins of our body-politic for eighty years, until it has culminated at last in this terrible war, the most gigantic, and, upon the part of the South, the most brutal the world ever saw. Shall we now be willing to give it a new lease of power, new strength to renew its attacks? No, sir, we cannot, we dare not consent to such a thing. Were we to so far forget the lessons of the past as to entertain so base a proposition, we would be disgraced in our own sight and in the eyes of the world and of God.

But, sir, if we are to make emancipation effective and adequate to our national disease, we must adopt it boldly, resolutely, and at once. We must not only emancipate the slaves in the seceded States, but we must include the slaves of the border States, leaving no root of the accursed tree to spring up for the future to the peril of the country. And, sir, the measure now pending seems to me to be the only one adequate to the emergency.