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978-1-108-07564-0 - The Anti-Slavery Cause in America and its Martyrs

Eliza Wigham

Excerpt

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THE
ANTI-SLAVERY CAUSE IN AMERICA
AND ITS MARTYRS.

CHAPTER I.

EARLY ABOLITION MOVEMENTS.—CALL OF WM. LLOYD GARRISON;—
HIS FIRST IMPRISONMENT.—STARTING OF THE LIBERATOR.

EVERYTHING associated with America at the present time must necessarily be of interest to British readers, especially everything bearing on the fearful aspect of matters prevailing in that country, and on the cause of the fratricidal war now waging there. The war has originated in a determination on the part of the South to maintain, perpetuate, and, above all, to *extend* the infamous institution of slavery; and the interests of freedom throughout the world are affected by the success or overthrow of this manifestation of overweening tyranny and despotism. This determination on the part of the South has been brought to a crisis by a growing sentiment at the North against the extension of slavery, and whatever mixture there may be in the motives of the North in repelling the outburst of the South, we cannot doubt that the cause of the slave will become more and more a prominent element in the

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struggle, and that out of this state of things will come his final deliverance. Therefore, all who are interested in the cause of humanity must watch the contest with intense earnestness, fervently desiring its speedy termination, which can only be righteously effected by the emancipation of the most oppressed of the human race.

The slave in America, and the tried friends of the slave, must ever have the sympathy of the lovers of freedom in Britain, many of whose fathers suffered and died for their own civil and religious liberty, and who have themselves laboured so nobly for the abolition of British colonial slavery. Under this conviction, we venture to present a brief summary of the leading events that have marked the anti-slavery enterprise in America,—an enterprise which has enlisted in its ranks some of the most persevering and most disinterested men and women who have performed a part in the history of the world; fearlessly they endured calumny, the loss of reputation and worldly wealth, persecutions, imprisonments, death, for the sake of the despised and down-trodden slave. It is fitting that their names should be recorded in our grateful memories; and although history may not deem them worthy of a place, they may hereafter be hailed in the great day of account with the gracious words, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto *Me*.”

The first abolition society was formed in Philadelphia in 1775, by a few benevolent persons of different religious denominations, the majority of whom were members of the Society of Friends, to which body be-

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longed Anthony Benezet, the most active anti-slavery worker of the period. He was the friend and correspondent of Granville Sharpe and the Abbé Raynal, and, in after times, of Thomas Clarkson, and many others. The child of wealthy Huguenots, who escaped from France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes when Anthony was an infant, he inherited the love of civil and religious liberty, which in his matured philanthropy he extended towards all the nations of the earth. Benjamin Lay and Ralph Sandiford preceded him in this work, but Benezet was the first effectually to call public attention to the wrongs of the negro, and to enlist the most eminent philanthropists in England and America in the struggle which eventually overthrew the slave-trade, and, as far as England's colonies were concerned, slavery itself. With the co-operation of that faithful, humble follower of his Lord and Master, John Woolman, he laboured earnestly with his brethren in religious profession, to awaken them to a just sense of the sin of slaveholding. The result of these efforts was, that in 1774 all the slaves held by "Friends" in Pennsylvania were emancipated. In other states the example was gradually followed, till, in 1787, no slave was any longer held in bondage by any member of that religious society, and slaveholding has ever since been an offence visited by disownment from their fellowship. Had this course, which was also that of the Scottish Covenanters from their first settlement in America, and in later years that of a very few smaller religious bodies, been faithfully pursued, we should not now have the sad spectacle, in the midst

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of the nineteenth century, of brother going to war against brother for the right to maintain, extend, and perpetuate the atrocious system of American slavery. If the American Church, we repeat, had been faithful in this matter, slavery would long ago have vanished under the ban of a church worthy to take the name of Him who came to preach deliverance to the captives. On the American Church, therefore, mainly rests the guilt of fostering slavery, and consequently the burden and responsibility of this war.

The anti-slavery movement, thus commenced, spread gradually, till at length chattel slavery was abolished in seven of the thirteen original states of the American Union, and the distinction between the free and the slave states took place. It is probable the system might have gradually died out altogether, had not the gins been invented, by means of which cotton wool is much more easily prepared for market, so that the cultivation of cotton began to be very profitable, the value of slaves became proportionally increased, the Southern planters kept therefore a tighter hold on their valuable *property*, and to propitiate them in order to promote their own profitable commerce with the South, the Northern merchants attempted to gloss over the iniquity of slavery, whilst the ministers and churches lent themselves to this matter; they received slaveholders to their communion, accepted their contributions for missionary and other benevolent objects, and threw the mantle of church-fellowship and sanction over the slaveholder and his deeds. Thus the progress of emancipation was arrested, the hold of

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slavery on the nation grew stronger and stronger; apathy prevailed in regard to this leprosy, which speedily tainted the whole civil and religious society of America; and prejudice against colour exercised its cruel influence to keep in a degraded condition those who, by great and heroic efforts, had freed themselves, and were respectably striving to procure maintenance and instruction in an honest and honourable way, and whom, shortly afterwards, the Colonization Society sought to banish from the country.

Things were in this state when an influence arose which so disturbed them, that quiet on the question of slavery has not since been known in America. About the year 1828, the soul of William Lloyd Garrison was suddenly touched by the horrors of slavery, and, fired by the determination to devote his life to its overthrow, he thenceforth became the pioneer in a fresh crusade against this fearful iniquity. This remarkable man was born on the 10th of December, 1805. His father was a sea captain, but it was from his mother he inherited the adherence to principle and determination of character which so remarkably distinguish him. Her name was Fanny Lloyd; she was very beautiful and very gay, but in her youth she was arrested in the midst of frivolity by convictions of sin, which came to her one day when, with foolish companions, for a frolic, she attended a meeting of Baptists, then a despised and persecuted sect. The words she that day heard became as nails fastened in a sure place; she received impressions which never deserted her. Before long, these con-

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victions led her to renounce her gay associates and the pleasures of the world, and to unite with the despised Baptists, although her doing so involved expulsion from her father's house, and the contempt of all her former acquaintances. Persecution only strengthened her religious faith, which supported her through the many and sore trials she was called to bear. Left by her husband with five young children, she struggled to maintain them, and while doing so, by acting in the capacity of sick-nurse at Baltimore, she continued to be the guide of her son William, then six hundred miles off at Boston. William, after receiving a humble education, and having tried two different trades, had that of printer suggested to him by a kind friend who had been as a father to him—Deacon Ezekiel Bartlett. Here the young Garrison, then thirteen years of age, was quite in his element; he had found a vocation which was so much to his taste, that he has been heard to say that the handling of types was perfectly delightful to him, and his editorial articles in after days were frequently transferred immediately to the types, without the intermediate process of pen and ink. At the age of sixteen, he made his first attempt at authorship, in the shape of anonymous letters to the editor of the paper which employed him as a printer. These letters were so good, that it was long before his master detected their author in his apprenticeship. When he did so, instead of resenting the liberty that had been taken, he associated young Garrison with him in the editorship of the paper till the expiry of his apprenticeship. After

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this period he had many changes of circumstances, in one of which he was editor of a paper devoted to *total abstinence*, called the *National Philanthropist*, which was the first paper ever issued to promulgate this cause. Through all these changes his character was ripening for the career which was shortly to open before him.

A philanthropist named Benjamin Lundy had started, in Baltimore, the first journal in America devoted to the defence of the negro's rights; it was called the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. Garrison read this paper, his heart was aroused at once to see a new purpose and aim of his existence, and he vowed henceforth to consecrate his life, as far as possible, to the deliverance of his enslaved fellow-countrymen. About this time he was employed at Bennington, in the state of Vermont, as editor to a paper, called *The Spirit of the Times*, which was started mainly to promote the election to Congress of John Quincy Adams, —but the editor likewise advocated temperance, peace, moral reforms, and the abolition of slavery in its columns; and he also took measures to procure from the state a petition against slavery, which was very numerously signed. When these efforts became known to Benjamin Lundy, he visited this talented and energetic co-worker, and at once offered him a partnership in his paper, entreating him to help in this great work; and as a ready vent for the hatred of slavery which burned within him, Garrison promptly consented.

It was not very long before a great difference appeared between these two partners. Although they

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were equally earnest for the abolition of slavery, Lundy's cautious mind tended towards *gradual* emancipation, while Garrison very soon saw, both by reason and reflection, that *immediate* and unconditional emancipation was the only remedy and atonement for the guilt of slavery.

It was about the year 1824 that Elizabeth Heyrick, an Englishwoman, published a pamphlet, entitled "Immediate not Gradual Emancipation;" while in Scotland it was suggested by Dr. Andrew Thomson of Edinburgh that gradualism was merely an interminable lengthening out of the sufferings of the slave, and they gave the watchword of IMMEDIATE EMANCIPATION under which the anti-slavery hosts of Britain marched on to victory; and it was the same light, almost at the same time, which had dawned on the young printer in Maryland. Those who remember the struggle for abolition in our own colonies will recollect the outcry which greeted that noble watchword given forth in the old Assembly Rooms of Edinburgh—the slaveholders felt their death-thrust had been sent forth, and with bitter malignity they assailed the friends of the slave. So it was with young Garrison, but the hatred was intensified a hundredfold by the blow being given in the very face of a *present* enemy. Benjamin Lundy, although not agreeing fully with the ardent views of his young partner, allowed him to enunciate them, and immediately the paper was denounced as fanatical and dangerous. Lundy's previous moderation was of no avail, the subscribers fell off on all hands, and the slaveholders determined to crush the paper

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under the forms of law. The opportunity to do this occurred in the spring of 1830. A merchant of Newburyport, named Todd, whom Garrison had known from infancy, sent one of his ships laden with slaves to the Southern market. The circumstance of a New Englandman being engaged in this iniquitous trade so filled with indignation the breast of Garrison, that he denounced the horrible traffic in the terms it merited. Mr. Todd was exasperated, and aided by the Southern slaveholders, he brought an action for libel against Garrison; the latter proved at the court, from customhouse books, &c., that the number of slaves actually conveyed by the vessel exceeded that stated in the paper, and that his charges against Mr. Todd were truth and no libel. But in vain, the judge before whom he was tried, one Nicholas Brice, a notoriously pro-slavery man, was extremely anxious to annihilate Garrison and his paper; the jury was packed, and so it was easy to convict the accused of libel. He was sentenced to pay a fine which was far beyond his means, and was therefore sent to prison, to a cell which had just been vacated by a murderer. Here he continued the same undaunted friend of liberty; he employed his time in writing a sketch of his mock trial, which was afterwards printed and widely circulated, exciting in many minds intense indignation against the administrators, and sympathy with the victim, of such unrighteous judgment.

He also employed many hours in inscribing on the walls of his prison the breathings of his free spirit. Two of these inscriptions we may be allowed to repro-

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duce. The first appears to be addressed to some possible successor in his undeserved imprisonment:—

I.

Prisoner, within those massive walls close pent,
 Guiltless of horrid crime or trivial wrong,
 Bear nobly up against thy punishment,
 And in thy innocence be great and strong.
 Perchance thy fault was love to all mankind;
 Thou didst oppose some vile oppressive end,
 Or strive all human fetters to unbind;
 Or wouldst not bear the implements of war;
 What then? Dost thou so soon repent the deed?
 A martyr's crown is richer than a king's!
 Think it an honour with thy Lord to bleed,
 And glory, midst intensest sufferings!
 Though beaten, imprison'd, put to open shame,
 Time shall embalm and magnify thy name.

II.

THE FREEDOM OF THE MIND.

High walls and huge the body may confine,
 And iron grates obstruct the prisoner's gaze,
 And iron bolts may baffle his design,
 And vigilant keepers watch his devious ways;
 Yet scorns the immortal mind this base control;
 No chain can bind it and no cell enclose;
 Swifter than light, it flies from pole to pole,
 And in a flash from earth to heaven it goes!
 It leaps from mount to mount, from vale to vale;
 It wanders, plucking honeyed fruits and flowers;
 It visits home, to hear the fireside tale,
 Or in sweet converse pass the joyous hours;
 'Tis up before the sun, roaming afar,
 And in its watches wearies every star!

After he had been in prison upwards of a month, he was liberated by the kindness of Arthur Tappan, a wealthy merchant of New York, personally a stranger,