

## Background:

### Harriet Beecher Stowe's explanation of Slave Law development.

#### Page 247, volume 1

It has been a problem to many, how the system of slavery in America should unite the two apparent inconsistencies of a code of slave-laws more severe than that of any other civilized nation, with an average practice at least as indulgent as any other; for, bad as slavery is at the best, it may yet be admitted that the practice, as a whole, has been less cruel in this country than in many. An examination into history will show us that the cruelty of the laws resulted from the effects of indulgent practice. During the first years of importation of slaves into South Carolina, they enjoyed many privileges. Those who lived in intelligent families, and had any desire to learn, were instructed in reading and writing. Liberty was given them to meet in assemblies of worship, in class-meetings, and otherwise, without the presence of white witnesses; and many were raised to situations of trust and consequence. The result of this was the development of a good degree of intelligence and manliness among the slaves. There arose among them grave, thoughtful, energetic men, with their ears and eyes open, and their minds constantly awake to compare and reason.

When minds come into this state, in a government professing to be founded on principles of universal equality, it follows that almost every public speech, document, or newspaper, becomes an incendiary publication.

Of this fact the southern slave states have ever exhibited the most singular unconsciousness. Documents containing sentiments most dangerous for slaves to hear have been publicly read and applauded among them. The slave has heard, amid shouts, on the Fourth of July, that his masters held the truth to be self-evident, that all men were born equal, and had an inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; and that all governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed. Even the mottoes of newspapers have embodied sentiments of the most insurrectionary character.

Such inscriptions as "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God" stand, to this day, in large letters, at the head of southern newspapers; while speeches of senators and public men, in which the principles of universal democracy are asserted, are constant matters of discussion. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to induce the servant, who feels that he is a man, to draw those lines which seem so obvious to masters, by whom this fact has been forgotten. Accordingly we find that when the discussions for the admission of Missouri as a slave state produced a wave whose waters undulated in every part of the Union, there were found among the slaves men of unusual thought and vigor, who were no inattentive witnesses and listeners. The discussions were printed in the newspapers; and what was printed in the newspapers was further discussed at the post-office door, in the tavern, in the bar-room, at the dinner-party, where black servants were listening behind the chairs. A free colored man in the city of Charleston, named Denmark Vesey, was the one who had the hardihood to seek to use the electric fluid in the cloud thus accumulated. He conceived the hopeless project of imitating the example set by the American race, and achieving independence for the blacks.

## Background:

Edward Clayton and his sister Anne, have been teaching their slaves to read and write. A local group of gentlemen visit their home to persuade them to quit in a friendly manner, before they seek legal action to force them to quit.

#### Page 313-323, volume 2

"Mr. Clayton," at length said Judge Oliver, "we are really sorry to be obliged to make disagreeable communications to you. We have all of us had the sincerest respect for your family, and for yourself. I have known and honored your father many years, Mr. Clayton; and, for my own part, I must say I anticipated much pleasure from your residence in our neighborhood. I am really concerned to be obliged to say anything unpleasant; but I am under the necessity of telling you that the course you have been pursuing with regard to your servants, being contrary to the laws and usages of our social institutions, can no longer be permitted among us. You are aware that the teaching of slaves to read and write is forbidden by the law, under severe penalties. We have always been liberal in the interpretation of this law. Exceptional violations, conducted with privacy and discretion, in the case of favored servants, whose general good conduct seems to merit such confidence, have from time to time existed, and passed among us without notice or opposition; but the instituting of a regular system of instruction, to the extent and degree which exists upon your plantation, is a thing so directly in the face of the law, that we can no longer tolerate it; and we have determined, unless this course is dropped, to take measures to put the law into execution."

"I had paid my adopted state the compliment," said Clayton, "to suppose such laws to be a mere relic of barbarous ages, which the practical Christianity of our times would treat as a dead letter. I began my arrangements in all good faith, not dreaming that there could be found those who would oppose a course so evidently called for by the spirit of the Gospel, and the spirit of the age."

"You are entirely mistaken, sir," said Mr. Knapp, in a tone of great decision, "if you suppose these laws are, or can ever be, a matter of indifference to us, or can be suffered to become a dead letter. Sir, they are founded in the very nature of our institutions. They are indispensable to the preservation of our property, and the safety of our families. Once educate the negro population, and the whole system of our domestic institutions is at an end. Our negroes have acquired already, by living among us, a degree of sagacity and intelligence which makes it difficult to hold an even rein over them; and, once open the floodgates of education, and there is no saying where they and we might be carried. I, for my part, do not approve of these exceptional instances Judge Oliver mentioned. Generally speaking, those negroes whose intelligence and good conduct would make them the natural recipients of such favors are precisely the ones who ought not to be trusted with them. It ruins them. Why, just look at the history of the insurrection that very nearly cut off the whole city of Charleston: what sort of men were those who got it up? They were just your steady, thoughtful, well-conducted men, -- just the kind of men that people are teaching to read, because they think they are so good it can do no harm. Sir, my father was one of the magistrates on the trial of those men, and I have heard him say often there was not one man of bad character among them. They had all been remarkable for their good character. Why, there was that Denmark Vesey, who was the head of it: for twenty years he served his master, and was the most faithful creature that ever breathed; and after he got his liberty, everybody respected him, and liked him. Why, at first, my father said the magistrates could not be brought to arrest him, they were so sure that he could not have been engaged in such an affair. Now, all the leaders in that affair could read and write. They kept their lists of names; and nobody knows, or ever will know, how many were down on them, for those fellows were deep as the grave, and you could not get a word out of them. Sir, they died and made no sign; but all this is a warning to us."

"And do you think," said Clayton, "that if men of that degree of energy and intelligence are refused instruction, they will not find means to get knowledge for themselves? And if they do get it themselves, in spite of your precautions, they will assuredly use it against you."

"The fact is, gentlemen, it is inevitable that a certain degree of culture must come from their intercourse with us, and minds of a certain class will be stimulated to desire more; and all the barriers we put up will only serve to inflame curiosity, and will make them feel a perfect liberty to use the knowledge they conquer from us against us. In my opinion, the only sure defence against insur-

rection is systematic education, by which we shall acquire that influence over their minds which our superior cultivation will enable us to hold. Then, as fast as they become fitted to enjoy rights, we must grant them."

"Not we, indeed!" said Mr. Knapp, striking his cane upon the floor. "We are not going to lay down our power in that way. We will not allow any such beginning. We must hold them down firmly and consistently. For my part, I dislike even the system of oral religious instruction. It starts their minds, and leads them to want something more. It 's indiscreet, and I always said so. As for teaching them out of the Bible, -- why, the Bible is the most exciting book that ever was put together! It always starts up the mind, and it 's unsafe."

"Don't you see," said Clayton, "what an admission you are making? What sort of a system must this be, that requires such a course to sustain it?"

"I can't help that," said Mr. Knapp. "There 's millions and millions invested in it, and we can't afford to risk such an amount of property for mere abstract speculation. The system is as good as forty other systems that have prevailed, and will prevail. We can't take the frame-work of society to pieces. We must proceed with things as they are. And now, Mr. Clayton, another thing I have to say to you," said he, looking excited, and getting up and walking the floor. "It has been discovered that you receive incendiary documents through the post-office; and this cannot be permitted, sir."

The color flushed into Clayton's face, and his eye kindled as he braced himself in his chair. "By what right," he said, "does any one pry into what I receive through the post-office? Am I not a free man?"

"No, sir, you are not," said Mr. Knapp, -- "not free to receive that which may imperil a whole neighborhood. You are not free to store barrels of gunpowder on your premises, when they may blow up ours. Sir, we are obliged to hold the mail under supervision in this state; and suspected persons will not be allowed to receive communications without oversight. Don't you remember that the general post-office was broken open in Charleston, and all the abolition documents taken out of the mail-bags and consumed, and a general meeting of all the most respectable citizens, headed by the clergy in their robes of office, solemnly confirmed the deed?"

"I think, Mr. Knapp," said Judge Oliver, interposing in a milder tone, "that your excitement is carrying you further than you are aware. I should rather hope that Mr. Clayton would perceive the reasonableness of our demand, and of himself forego the taking of these incendiary documents."

"I take no incendiary documents," said Clayton, warmly. "It is true I take an anti-slavery paper, edited at Washington, in which the subject is fairly and coolly discussed. I hold it no more than every man's duty to see both sides of a question."

"Well, there, now," said Mr. Knapp, "you see the disadvantage of having your slaves taught to read. If they could not read your papers, it would be no matter what you took; but to have them get to reasoning on these subjects, and spread their reasonings through our plantations, -- why, there 'll be the devil to pay, at once."

"You must be sensible," said Judge Oliver, "that there must be some individual rights which we resign for the public good. I have looked over the paper you speak of, and I acknowledge it seems to me very fair; but, then, in our peculiar and critical position, it might prove dangerous to have such reading about my house, and I never have it."

"In that case," said Clayton, "I wonder you don't suppress your own newspapers; for as long as there is a congressional discussion, or a Fourth of July oration or senatorial speech in them, so long they are full of incendiary excitement. Our history is full of it, our state bills of rights are full of it, the lives of our fathers are full of it; we must suppress our whole literature, if we would avoid it."

"Now, don't you see," said Mr. Knapp, "you have stated just so many reasons why slaves must not learn to read?"

"To be sure I do," said Clayton, "if they are always to remain slaves, if we are never to have any views of emancipation for them."

"Well, they are to remain slaves," said Mr. Knapp, speaking with excitement. "Their condition is a finality; we will not allow the subject of emancipation to be discussed, even."

"Then, God have mercy on you!" said Clayton, solemnly; "for it is my firm belief that, in resisting the progress of human freedom, you will be found fighting against God."

"It is n't the cause of human freedom," said Mr. Knapp, hastily. "They are not human; they are an inferior race, made expressly for subjection and servitude. The Bible teaches this plainly."

"Why don't you teach them to read it, then?" said Clayton, coolly.

"The long and the short of the matter is, Mr. Clayton," said Mr. Knapp, walking nervously up and down the room, "you 'll find this is not a matter to be trifled with. We come, as your friends, to warn you; and, if you don't listen to our warnings, we shall not hold ourselves responsible for what may follow. You ought to have some consideration for your sister, if not for yourself."

"I confess," said Clayton, "I had done the chivalry of South Carolina the honor to think that a lady could have nothing to fear."

"It is so generally," said Judge Oliver, "but on this subject there is such a dreadful excitability in the public mind, that we cannot control it. You remember, when the commissioner was sent by the Legislature of Massachusetts to Charleston, he came with his daughter, a very cultivated and elegant young lady; but the mob was rising, and we could not control it, and we had to go and beg them to leave the city. I, for one, would n't have been at all answerable for the consequences, if they had remained."

"I must confess, Judge Oliver," said Clayton, "that I have been surprised, this morning, to hear South Carolinians palliating two such events in your history, resulting from mob violence, as the breaking open of the post-office, and the insult to the representative of a sister state, who came in the most peaceable and friendly spirit, and to womanhood in the person of an accomplished lady. Is this hydra-headed monster, the mob, to be our governor?"

"O, it is only upon this subject," said all three of the gentlemen, at once; "this subject is exceptional."

"And do you think," said Clayton, "that

'-----you can set the land on fire,

To burn just so high, and no higher'?

You may depend upon it you will find that you cannot. The mob that you smile on and encourage when it does work that suits you, will one day prove itself your master in a manner that you will not like."

"Well, now, Mr. Clayton," said Mr. Bradshaw, who had not hitherto spoken, "you see this is a very disagreeable subject; but the fact is, we came in a friendly way to you. We all appreciate, personally, the merits of your character, and the excellence of your motives; but, really sir, there is an excitement rising, there is a state of the public mind which is getting every day more and more inflammable. I talked with Miss Anne on this subject, some months ago, and expressed my feelings very fully; and now, if you will only give us a pledge that you will pursue a different course, we shall have something to take hold of to quiet the popular mind. If you will just write and stop your paper for the present, and let it be understood that your plantation system is to be stopped, the thing will gradually cool itself off."

"Gentlemen," said Clayton, "you are asking a very serious thing from me, and one which requires reflection. If I am violating the direct laws of the state, and these laws are to be considered as still in vital force, there is certainly some question with regard to my course; but still I have responsibilities for the moral and religious improvement of those under my care, which are equally binding. I see no course but removal from the state."

"Of course, we should be sorry," said Judge Oliver, "you should be obliged to do that; still we trust you will see the necessity, and our motives."

"Necessity is the tyrant's plea, I believe," said Clayton, smiling.

"At all events, it is a strong one," replied Judge Oliver, smiling also. "But I am glad we have had this conversation; I think it will enable me to pacify the minds of some of our hot-headed young neighbors, and prevent threatened mischief."

"Now, Clayton," he said, seating himself, "I am going to talk to you in good, solemn earnest, for once. The fact is, you are checkmated. Your plans for gradual emancipation, or reform, or anything tending in that direction, are utterly hopeless; and, if you want to pursue them with your own people, you must either send them to Liberia, or to the Northern States. There was a time, fifty years ago, when such things were contemplated with some degree of sincerity by all the leading minds at the South. That time is over. From the very day that they began to open new territories to slavery, the value of this kind of property mounted up, so as to make emancipation a moral impossibility. It is, as they told you, a finality; and don't you see how they make everything in the Union bend to it? Why, these men are only about three tenths of the population of our Southern States, and yet the other seven tenths virtually have no existence. All they do is to vote as they are told -- as they know they must, being too ignorant to know any better.

"The mouth of the North is stuffed with cotton, and will be kept full as long as it suits us. Good, easy gentlemen, they are so satisfied with their pillows, and other accommodations inside of the car, that they don't trouble themselves to reflect that we are the engineers, nor to ask where we are going. And, when any one does wake up and pipe out in melancholy inquiry, we slam the door in his face, and tell him 'Mind your own business, sir,' and he leans back on his cotton pillow, and goes to sleep again, only whimpering a little, that 'we might be more polite.'

"They have their fanatics up there. We don't trouble ourselves to put them down; we make them do it. They get up mobs on our account, to hoot troublesome ministers and editors out of their cities; and their men that they send to Congress invariably do all our dirty work. There 's now and then an exception, it is true; but they only prove the rule.

"If there was any public sentiment at the North for you reformers to fall back upon, you might, in spite of your difficulties, do something; but there is not. They are all implicated with us, except the class of born fanatics, like you, who are walking in that very unfashionable narrow way we 've heard of."

"Well," said Anne, "let us go out of the state, then. I will go anywhere; but I will not stop the work that I have begun."