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William Lloyd Garrison on Slavery **Digital History ID 348**

Author: William Lloyd Garrison

Date: 1830

Annotation:

William Lloyd Garrison, the symbol of immediate abolition, had first-hand knowledge of poverty. His father, a sailing master, had abandoned his family when Garrison was three years old. Having little formal schooling, Garrison educated himself while he worked as a printer's apprentice. He then supported himself as a journalist and editor of a weekly reform newspaper. Garrison's former master described his apprentice as "a diligent student" with "an ardent temperament and warm imagination" and "unshaken courage," but also "hasty, stubborn, and dogmatic."

This letter by Garrison refers to his imprisonment for criminal libel. In the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, an antislavery newspaper, Garrison had accused a merchant of transporting 75 slaves from Baltimore to New Orleans, and declared that the man should be "SENTENCED TO SOLITARY CONFINEMENT FOR LIFE." In Baltimore Garrison was found guilty and fined \$50 plus court costs. Unable to pay, Garrison was confined in prison for seven weeks, before Arthur Tappan (1786-1865), a New York merchant and philanthropist, provided the money for his release.

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I have found the minds of the people strangely indifferent to the subject of slavery. Their prejudices were invincible--stronger, if possible, than those of slaveholders. Objections were started on every hand; apologies for the abominable system constantly saluted my ears; obstacles were industriously piled up in my path. The cause of this callous state of feeling was owing to their exceeding ignorance of the horrors of slavery. What was yet more discouraging, my best friends--without an exception--besought me to give up the enterprise, and never to return to Baltimore! It was not my duty (they argued) to spend my time, and talents, and services, where persecution, reproach and poverty were the only certain reward. My scheme was visionary--fanatical--unattainable. Why should I make myself an exile from home and all that I held dear on earth, and sojourn in a strange land,

among enemies whose hearts were dead to every noble sentiment?--&c. &c. &c. I repeat--all were against my return. But I desire to thank God, that he gave me strength to overcome this selfish and pernicious advice. Opposition served only to increase my ardor, and confirm my purpose.

But how was I to return? I had not a dollar in my pocket, and my time was expired. No one understood my circumstances. I was too proud to beg, and ashamed to borrow. My friends were prodigal of pity, but of nothing else. In the extremity of my uneasiness, I went to the Boston Post office, and found a letter from my friend [Benjamin] Lundy, enclosing a draft for \$100, from a stranger--yourself, as a remuneration for my poor, inefficient services in behalf of the slaves! Here Providence had again signally interfered in my behalf. After deducting the expenses of travelling, the remainder of the above named sum was applied to discharging a few of the debts incurred by the unproductiveness of the Genius.

As I lay on my couch one night, in jail, I was led to contrast my situation with that of the poor slave. Ah! dear sir, how wide the difference! In one particular only, (I said,) our conditions are similar. He is confined to the narrow limits of a plantation--I to the narrow limits of a prison-yard. Farther all parallels fail. My food is better and more abundant, as I get a pound of bread and a pound of meat, with a plentiful supply of pure water, per diem. I can lie down or rise up, sit or walk, sing or declaim, read or write, as fancy, pleasure or profit dictates. Moreover, I am daily cheered with the presence and conversation of friends;--I am constantly supplied with fresh periodicals from every section of the country, and, consequently, am advertised of every new and interesting occurrence. Occasionally a letter greets me from a distant place, filled with consolatory expressions, tender remembrances, or fine compliments. If it rain, my room is a shelter; if the sun flame too intensely, I can choose a shady retreat; if I am sick, medical aid is at hand.--Besides, I have been charged with a specific offence--have had the privilege of a trial by jury, and the aid of eminent counsel--and am here ostensibly to satisfy the demands of justice. A few months, at the longest, will release me from my captivity.

Now, how is it with the slave? He gets a peck of corn (occasionally a little more) each week, but rarely meat or fish. He must anticipate the sun in rising, or be whipped severely for his somnolency. Rain or shine, he must toil early and late for the benefit of another. if he be weary, he cannot rest--for the lash of the driver is flourished over his drooping head, or applied to his naked frame; if sick, he is suspected of laziness, and treated accordingly. For the most trifling or innocent offence, he is felled to the earth, or scourged on his back till it streams with blood. Has he a wife and children, he sees them as cruelly treated as himself. He may be torn from them, or they from him, at any moment, never again to meet on earth. Friends do not visit and console him: he has no friends. He knows not what is going on beyond his own narrow boundaries. He can neither read nor write. The letters of the alphabet are caballistical to his eyes. A thick darkness broods over his soul. Even the "glorious gospel of the blessed God," which brings life and immortality to perishing man, is as a sealed book to his understanding. Nor has his wretched

condition been imposed upon him for any criminal offence. He has not been tried by the laws of his country. No one has stepped forth to vindicate his rights. He is made an abject slave, simply because God has given him a skin not colored like his master's; and Death, the great Liberator, alone can break his fetters!

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