

THE RANSOM.

LETTER TO FREDERICK DOUGLASS, WITH HIS REPLY.

DONCASTER, Dec. 12th, 1846.

DEAR FREDERICK:

This is the first letter of advice I ever wrote to you—it is the last. I like to bear the responsibility of my own existence. I like to see others bear theirs. I say what I am about to say, because I think it is my right and duty to say it; at the same time, not wishing to interfere with your right to follow my advice, or not, as you shall see fit. That Certificate of your freedom, that Bill of Sale of your body and soul, from that villain, Auld, who dared to claim you as a chattel, and set a price on you as such, and to demand and take a price for you as such, I wish you would not touch it. I cannot bear to think of you as being a party to such a transaction, even by silence. If others will take that paper, and keep it as an evidence of your freedom, you cannot prevent them; but I wish you would see it to be your duty, publicly to disown the deed, and never to recognize that hateful Bill!—nor to refer to it, as of any authority to establish the fact that you are a Freeman, and not a Slave—a Man, and not a Chattel.

The moment you entered a non-slave State, your position ceased to be Frederick Douglass, versus Thomas Auld, and became Frederick Douglass, versus the United States. From that hour, you became the antagonist of that Republic.

As a nation, that confederacy, professing to be based upon the principle, that God made you free, and gave you an inalienable right to liberty, claims a right of property in your body and soul—to turn you into a chattel, a slave, again, at any moment. That claim you denied; the authority and power of the whole nation you spurned and defied, when, by running away, you spurned that miserable wretch, who held you as a slave. It was no longer a contest between you and that praying, psalm-singing slave-breeder, but a struggle between you and 17,000,000 of liberty-loving Republicans. By their laws and constitution, you are not a freeman, but a slave; you are not a man, but a chattel. You planted your foot upon their laws and constitution, and asserted your freedom and your manhood. You arraigned your antagonist—the slave-breeding Republic—before the tribunal of mankind, and of God. You have stated your case, and pleaded your cause, as none other could state and plead it. Your position, as the slave of that Republic, as the marketable commodity, the dehumanized, outraged man of a powerful nation, whose claim and power over you, you have dared to despise, invests you with influence among all to whom your appeal is made, and gathers around you their deep-felt, absorbing, and efficient sympathy. Your appeal to mankind is not against the grovelling thief, Thomas Auld, but against the more daring, more impudent and potent thief—the Republic of the United States of America. You will lose the advantages of this truly manly, and, to my view, sublime position; you will be shorn of your strength—you will sink in your own estimation, if you accept that detestable certificate of your freedom, that blasphemous forgery, that accursed Bill of Sale of your body and soul; or, even by silence, acknowledge its validity. So I think. I cannot think of the transaction without vexation. I would see you free—you are free—you always were free, and the man is a villain who claims you as a slave, and should be treated as such; and the nation is a blasphemous hypocrite, that claims power over you as a chattel. I would see your right to freedom, and to a standing on the platform of humanity, openly acknowledged by every human being—not on the testimony of a bit of paper, signed and sealed by an acknowledged thief, but by the declaration of a penitent nation, prostrate at your feet, in tears, suing to you and to God for forgiveness, for the outrages committed against God and man, in your person.

That slave-breeding nation has dared to claim you, and 3,000,000 of your fellow-men, as chattels—slaves—to be bought and sold; and has pledged all its power to crush you down, and to keep you from rising from ignorance to knowledge—from degradation to respectability—from misery to happiness—from slavery to freedom—from a Chattel to a Man. As an advocate for yourself, and your 3,000,000 brethren, you have joined issue with it—and, in the name of God and humanity, you will conquer! The nation must and shall be humbled before its victims,—not by a blasphemous bill of sale, alias Certificate of freedom, for which £150 are paid, but by renouncing its claim, blotting out its slavery-sustaining constitution, acknowledge itself conquered, and seek forgiveness of the victims of its injustice and tyranny. The plea, that this is the same as a ransom paid for a capture of some Algerine pirate, or Bedouin Arab, is naught. You have already, by your own energy, escaped the grasp of the pirate Auld. He has no more power over you. The spell of his influence over you is forever broken. Why go to him? Why ask the sacrilegious villain to set a price upon your body and soul? Why give him his price? The mean, brutal slaveholder—daring to price your freedom, your soul, in dollars and cents, and with cool, consummate impudence, and villany unsurpassed, saying, 'I'll be satisfied with 750 dollars—I'll give up my right of property in your person, and acknowledge you to be a freeman, and not a slave,—a man, and not a beast—for £150.' 'Satisfied,' forsooth! You cancelled his villainous claims, when you turned your back upon him, and walked away. But the nation claims you as a slave. It does! Let it dare to assert that claim, and attempt your re-enslavement! It is worth running some risk, for the sake of the conflict, and the certain result.

Your wife and children are there, it is true, and you must return to them; but the greater will be your power to grapple with the monster; the shorter and more glorious will be the conflict; the more sure and complete the victory, if you go as the antagonist of a nation that claims you as a slave, as a chattel, a man turned into an article of merchandise. You would be armed with an irresistible power, when, as a self-enslaved captive, you arraigned that pious Republic before the world. You would be sheltered and sustained by the sympathies of millions. The advantages of your present position should not be sacrificed to a desire for greater security.

But I will go no further. You will think that what I have said has more of indignation than of reason in it. It may be so. Feeling is often a safer and a wiser guide than logic. Of all guilty men, the American slaveholder is the most guilty, and the meanest, the most impudent, most despicable, and most inexcusable in his guilt; except, it may be, those, who, in the non-slave States, and in Scotland and England, stand sponsors for his social respectability and personal Christianity, and who thus associate our Redeemer in loving fellowship with men who are the living embodiment of the sum of all villany.

Before concluding, I wish too add, that, in what I have said, I would not arraign the motives of those who have, as they believe, sought to help you in this matter. I believe Anna Richardson, and all who have taken part in this transaction, have been actuated by the purest motives of kindness to you and your family, and by a desire, through the purchase of your freedom, to benefit the American slaves. But they have erred in judgment, as it appears to me. Forgive this, if it needs forgiveness. I delight to see you loved and honored by all, and to see you made an instrument, by the God of the oppressed, of humbling in the dust, that gigantic liar and hypocrite, the American Republic, that stands with the Bible and Declaration of Independence in its hands, and its heel planted on the necks of 3,000,000 of slaves.

Thine sincerely,  
H. C. WRIGHT.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S REPLY.

22, St. Ann's Square, Manchester, 22d Dec., 1846.

HENRY C. WRIGHT:

DEAR FRIEND:—Your letter of the 12th December reached me at this place, yesterday. Please accept my heartfelt thanks for it. I am sorry that you deemed it necessary to assure me, that it would be the last letter of advice you would ever write me. It looked as if you were about to cast me off for ever! I do not, however, think you meant to convey any such meaning; and if you did, I am sure you will see cause to change your mind, and to receive me again into the fold of those, whom it should ever be your pleasure to advise and instruct.

The subject of your letter is one of deep importance, and upon which, I have thought and felt much; and, being the party of all others most deeply concerned, it is natural to suppose I have an opinion, and ought to be able to give it on all fitting occasions. I deem this a fitting occasion, and shall act accordingly.

You have given me your opinion: I am glad you have done so. You have given it to me direct, in your own emphatic way. You never speak insipidly, smoothly, or mincingly; you have strictly adhered to your custom, in the letter before me. I now take great pleasure in giving you my opinion, as plainly and unreservedly as you have given yours, and I trust with equal good feeling and purity of motive. I take it, that nearly all that can be said against my position is contained in your letter; for if any man in the wide world would be likely to find valid objections to such a transaction as the one under consideration; I regard you as that man. I must, however, tell you, that I have read your letter over, and over again, and have sought in vain to find anything like what I can regard a valid reason against the purchase of my body, or against my receiving the manumission papers, if they are ever presented to me.

Let me, in the first place, state the facts and circumstances of the transaction which you so strongly condemn. It is your right to do so, and God forbid that I should ever cherish the slightest desire to restrain you in the exercise of that right. I say to you at once, and in all the fulness of sincerity, speak out; speak freely; keep nothing back; let me know your whole mind. 'Hew to the line, though the chips fly in my face.' Tell me, and tell me plainly, when you think I am deviating from the strict line of duty and principle; and when I become unwilling to hear, I shall have attained a character which I now despise, and from which I would hope to be preserved. But to the facts.

I am in England, my family are in the United States. My sphere of usefulness is in the United States; my public and domestic duties are there; and there it seems my duty to go. But I am legally the property of Thomas Auld, and if I go to the United States, (no matter to what part, for there is no City of Refuge there, no spot sacred to freedom there,) Thomas Auld, aided by the American Government, can seize, bind and fetter, and drag me from my family, feed his cruel revenge upon me, and doom me to unending slavery. In view of this simple statement of facts, a few friends, desirous of seeing me released from the terrible liability, and to relieve my wife and children from the painful trepidation, consequent upon the liability, and to place me on an equal footing of safety with all other anti-slavery lecturers in the United States, and to enhance my usefulness by enlarging the field of my labors in the United States, have nobly and generously paid Hugh Auld, the agent of Thomas Auld, £150—in consideration of which, Hugh Auld (acting as his agent) and the Government of the United States agree, that I shall be free from all further legal liability.

These, dear friend, are the facts of the whole transaction. The principle here acted on by my friends, and that upon which I shall act in receiving the manumission papers, I deem quite defensible.

First, as to those who acted as my friends, and their actions. The actuating motive was, to secure me from a liability full of horrible forebodings to myself and family. With this object, I will do you the justice to say, I believe you fully unite, although some parts of your letters would seem to justify a different belief.

Then, as to the measure adopted to secure this result. Does it violate a fundamental principle, or does it not? This is the question, and to my mind the only question of importance, involved in the discussion. I believe that, on our part, no just or holy principle has been violated.

Before entering upon the argument in support of this view, I will take the liberty (and I know you will pardon it) to say, I think you should have pointed out some principle violated in the transaction, before you proceeded to exhort me to repentance. You have given me any amount of indignation against 'Auld' and the United States, in all which I cordially unite, and felt refreshed by reading; but it has no bearing whatever upon the conduct of myself, or friends, in the matter under consideration. It does not prove that I have done wrong, nor does it demonstrate what is right, or the proper course to be pursued. Now that the matter has reached its present point, before entering upon the argument, let me say one other word; it is this—I do not think you have acted quite consistently with your character for promptness, in delaying your advice till the transaction was completed. You knew of the movement at its conception, and have known it through its progress, and have never, to my knowledge, uttered one syllable against it, in conversation or letter, till now that the deed is done. I regret this, not because I think your earlier advice would have altered the result, but because it would have left me more free than I can now be, since the thing is done. Of course, you will not think hard of my alluding to this circumstance. Now, then, to the main question.

The principle which you appear to regard as violated by the transaction in question, may be stated as follows:—Every man has a natural and inalienable right to himself. The inference from this is, 'that man cannot hold property in man'—and as man cannot hold property in man, neither can Hugh Auld nor the United States have any right of property in me—and having no right of property in me, they have no right to sell me—and, having no right to sell me, no one has a right to buy me. I think I have now stated the principle, and the inference from the principle, distinctly and fairly. Now, the question upon which the whole controversy turns is, simply, this: does the transaction, which you condemn, really violate this principle? I own that, to a superficial observer, it would seem to do so. But I think I am prepared to show, that, so far from being a violation of that principle, it is truly a noble vindication of it. Before going further, let me state here, briefly, what sort of a purchase would have been a violation of this principle, which, in common with yourself, I reverence, and am anxious to preserve inviolate.

1st. It would have been a violation of that principle, had those who purchased me done so, to make me a slave, instead of a freeman. And,

2ndly, it would have been a violation of that principle, had those who purchased me done so with a view to compensate the slaveholder, for what he and they regarded as his rightful property.

In neither of these ways was my purchase effected. My liberation was, in their estimation, of more value than £150; the happiness and repose of my family were, in their judgment, more than paltry gold. The £150 was paid to the remorseless plunderer, not because he had any just claim to it, but to induce him to give up his legal claim to something which they deemed of more value than money. It was not to compensate the slaveholder, but to release me from his power; not to establish my natural right to freedom, but to release me from all legal liabilities to slavery. And all this, you and I, and the slaveholders, and all who know anything of the transaction, very well understand. The very letter to Hugh Auld, proposing terms of purchase, informed him that those who gave, denied his right to it. The error of those, who condemn this transaction, consists in their confounding the crime of buying men into slavery, with the meritorious act of buying men out of slavery, and the purchase of legal freedom with abstract right and natural freedom. They say, 'If you buy, you recognize the right to sell. If you receive, you recognize the right of the giver to give.' And this has a show of truth, as well as of logic. But a few plain cases will show its entire fallacy.

There is now, in this country, a heavy duty on corn. The government of this country has imposed it; and though I regard it a most unjust and wicked imposition, no man of common sense will charge me with endorsing or recognizing the right of this government to impose this duty, simply because, to prevent myself and family from starving, I buy and eat this corn.

Take another case:—I have had dealings with a man. I have owed him one hundred dollars, and have paid it; I have lost the receipt. He comes upon me the second time for the money. I know, and he knows, he has no right to it; but he is a villain, and has me in his power. The law is with him, and against me. I must pay or be dragged to jail. I choose to pay the bill a second time. To say I sanctioned his right to rob me, because I preferred to pay rather than go to jail, is to utter an absurdity, to which no sane man would give heed. And yet the principle of action, in each of these cases, is the same. The man might indeed say, the claim is unjust—and declare, I will not in jail, before I will pay it. But this would not, certainly, be demanded by any principle of truth, justice, or humanity; and however much we might be disposed to respect his daring, but little deference could be paid to his wisdom. The fact is, we act upon this principle every day of our lives, and we have an undoubted right to do so. When I came to this country from the United States, I came in the second cabin. And why? Not be-

cause my natural right to come in the first cabin was not as good as that of any other man, but because a wicked and cruel prejudice decided, that the second cabin was the place for me. By coming over in the second, did I sanction or justify this wicked proscription? Not at all. It was the best I could do. I acted from necessity.

One other case, and I have done with this view of the subject. I think you will agree with me, that the case I am now about to put is pertinent, though you may not readily pardon me for making yourself the agent of my illustration. The case respects the passport system on the Continent of Europe. That system you utterly condemn. You look upon it as an unjust and wicked interference, a bold and infamous violation of the natural and sacred right of locomotion. You hold, (and so do I,) that the image of our common God ought to be a passport all over the habitable world. But bloody and tyrannical governments have ordained otherwise; they usurp authority over you, and decide for you, on what conditions you shall travel. They say, you shall have a passport, or you shall be put in prison. Now, the question is, have they a right to prescribe any such terms? and do you, by complying with these terms, sanction their interference? I think you will answer, no; submission to injustice, and sanction of injustice, are different things; and he is a poor reasoner who confounds the two, and makes them one and the same thing. Now, then, for the parallel, and the application of the passport system to my own case.

I wish to go to the United States. I have a natural right to go there, and be free. My natural right is as good as that of Hugh Auld, or James K. Polk; but that plundering government says, I shall not return to the United States in safety—it says, I must allow Hugh Auld to rob me, or my friends, of £150, or be hurled into the infernal jaws of slavery. I must have a 'bit of paper, signed and sealed,' or my liberty must be taken from me, and I must be torn from my family and friends. The government of Austria said to you, 'Dare to come upon my soil, without a passport, declaring you to be an American citizen, (which you say you are not,) you shall at once be arrested, and thrown into prison.' What said you to that Government? Did you say that the threat was a villainous one, and an infamous invasion of your right of locomotion? Did you say, 'I will come upon your soil; I will go where I please! I dare and defy your government!' Did you say, 'I will spurn your passports; I would not stain my hand, and degrade myself, by touching your miserable parchment. You have no right to give it, and I have no right to take it. I trample your laws, and will put your constitutions under my feet! I will not recognize them!' Was this your course? No! dear friend, it was not. Your practice was wiser than your theory. You took the passport, submitted to be examined while travelling, and availed yourself of all the advantages of your 'passport'—or, in other words, escaped all the evils which you ought to have done, without it, and would have done, but for the tyrannical usurpation in Europe.

I will not dwell longer upon this view of the subject; and I dismiss it, feeling quite satisfied of the entire correctness of the reasoning, and the principle attempted to be maintained. As to the expediency of the measures, different opinions may well prevail; but in regard to the principle, I feel it difficult to conceive of two opinions. I am free to say, that, had I possessed one hundred and fifty pounds, I would have seen Hugh Auld kicking, before I would have given it to him. I would have waited till the emergency came, and only given up the money when nothing else would do. But my friends thought it best to provide against the contingency; they acted on their own responsibility, and I am not disturbed about the result. But, having acted on a true principle, I do not feel free to disavow their proceedings.

In conclusion, let me say, I anticipate no such change in my position as you predict. I shall be Frederick Douglass still, and once a slave still. I shall neither be made to forget nor cease to feel the wrongs of my enslaved fellow-countrymen. My knowledge of slavery will be the same, and my hatred of it will be the same. By the way, I have never made my own person and suffering the theme of public discourse, but have always based my appeal upon the wrongs of the three millions now in chains; and these shall still be the burden of my speeches. You intimate that I may reject the papers, and allow them to remain in the hands of those friends who have effected the purchase, and thus avail myself of the security afforded by them, without sharing any part of the responsibility of the transaction. My objection to this is one of honor. I do not think it would be very honorable on my part, to remain silent during the whole transaction, and giving it more than my silent approval; and then, when the thing is completed, and I am safe, attempt to play the hero, by throwing off all responsibility in the matter. It might be said, and said with great propriety, 'Mr. Douglass, your indignation is very good, and has but one fault, and that is, it comes too late.' It would be a show of bravery when the danger is over. From every view I have been able to take of the subject, I am persuaded to receive the papers, if presented,—not, however, as a proof of my right to be free, for that is self-evident, but as a proof that my friends have been legally robbed of £150, in order to secure that which is the birth-right of every man. And I will hold up those papers before the world, in proof of the plundering character of the American government. It shall be the brand of infamy, stamping the nation, in whose name the deed was done, as a great aggregation of hypocrites, thieves and liars,—and their condemnation is just. They declare that all men are created equal, and have a natural and inalienable right to liberty, while they rob me of £150, as a condition of my enjoying this natural and inalienable right. It will be their condemnation, in their own hand-writing, and may be held up to the world as a means of humbling that haughty republic into repentance.

I agree with you, that the contest which I have to wage is against the government of the United States. But the representative of that government is the slaveholder, Thomas Auld. He is commander-in-chief of the army and navy. The whole civil and naval force of the nation are at his disposal. He may command all these to his assistance, and bring them all to bear upon me, until I am made entirely subject to his will, or submit to be robbed myself, or allow my friends to be robbed, of seven hundred and fifty dollars. And rather than be subject to his will, I have submitted to be robbed, or allowed my friends to be robbed, of the seven hundred and fifty dollars.

Sincerely yours,  
FREDERICK DOUGLASS.