

Letter from L. Maria Child published in "The Independent," New York, February 29, 1866

To the Editor of The Independent:

What think you of the President's captious interview with the delegation of colored citizens, as compared with his very courteous reception of the delegation of Virginia rebels? I have betrayed the impression it made on me by my manner of putting the question. The spirit manifested in the two interviews seems too plain to be misunderstood by the most ordinary capacity. The course pursued by the President suggests a puzzling query in a straightforward mind, viz.: How can an honest man contrive to keep two opposite parties in tow, so that one is ready to aver that he assures them he is true blue, and the other is ready to swear that they know him to be true gray? The inferences would seem to be that the color of his uniform is changeable.

The conversation with the delegation of colored citizens is a curiosity. The rambling iteration of its style reminds one of the address to the colored soldiers. It recalled to my memory an old farmer, who, being asked what he thought of a speech, in which a medley of incoherent assertions were poured out instead of argument, replied, "Well, I reckon 'twas sort of scattering."

It is difficult to discover what bearing some of the statements have on the object the colored delegation had in view, to say nothing of the obvious injustice and one-sidedness of some of the President's remarks. The slaves were accused of entering into a *combination* with the rich planters to oppress the poor whites. As if the helpless creatures could enter into a combination for anything! – even to save their own wives from prostitution, or their own children from being beaten to death! The fact is exactly the other way. The poor whites were the ready tools of the rich planters, to keep the negroes to the most abject degradation. They are gravely told that they must not vote, because they hate the poor whites, and the poor whites hate them. That is an excellent reason for having the poor whites vote *for* them! By the tone assumed in the conversation, one would suppose the negroes were guilty of a great crime in not being able to love a class of men who were ever zealous to flog them and hunt them with blood-hounds. This mutual dislike is urged as a reason why the colored people ought to leave the country; but why is not such reasoning equally applicable to the "poor whites?" Why should not they be advised to leave their country for their country's good, if they cannot consent to leave peaceably in it, under equal laws of protection and restraint? Everybody knows that the colored people are not the aggressors in the numerous outrages that occur at the South. The fact is, there is no need of any class being driven from the country. Slavery has done harm to all their characters, in different ways and degrees; but time, and the operation of just laws, will cure that.

One statement of the President is encouraging. He says: "I repeat what I have formerly said, that, if the colored man could find no more efficient Moses than myself, I would be his Moses, to lead him from bondage to freedom; that I would pass with him from a land where he had lived in slavery to a land of freedom, if it were within our reach."

He then proceeds to suggest to the delegation that the best means to avoid “a conflict of race” is to urge the colored people to emigrate. Having declared his readiness to lead them from a land of slavery to a land of freedom, wherever it could be found, of course, if they follow his advice and colonize themselves to Africa, or elsewhere, he is bound to go with them, as a true Moses should do. The colored population have shown themselves so patriotic that, perhaps, upon mature consideration, they may even overcome their repugnance to colonization for the sake of performing such an important service to the country.

The crisis is a solemn one; and it behooves all true lovers of republican principles to be vigilant and active. Next to God, our reliance is upon the will of the people, as represented by their delegates in Congress. Thus far, Congress has shown itself strong; but I watch it from day to day with painful anxiety, so much do I dread that insidious spirit of compromise, which has been so productive of mischief in the past. Expediency is a wise and good thing, when it is simply applied to finding out and employing the best means for the advancement of principles; but the moment it is substituted in the place of principle, it becomes dangerous, and ultimately ruinous. Such a mistake in the formation of our government was the root of that overshadowing Upas Tree, which poisoned the whole moral atmosphere of the country, and well nigh caused its destruction.

Mr. Cobden said, years ago, that pluck was all the Republican party needed to become strong and triumphant; and surely they have more need of that quality now than ever. The character produced by the influences of slavery is a cross between wolf and fox; and the graduates of that school are now trying to play their old game of domination by a mixture of audacity and cunning. In Kentucky, returned rebel soldiers are murdering negroes, and ordering U.S. officers to depart. Similar accounts, varying in degrees of atrocity, come from all parts of the South; but the President assured the South Carolina delegates that he didn't believe any such stories. I suppose his life-long knowledge of the justice and humanity produced by slavery inspires him with confidence in its chivalry. Dr. McTier, an influential secesh clergyman, announces that “it may as well be known once for all that the South will never allow negroes to sit as jurymen, and never admit to their having the right of suffrage.” Yet they are constantly repeating that they ‘accept the situation!’ Assuredly, a stranger, ignorant of the events of the last four years, looking on the present state of affairs, would suppose the South to be the victorious party, dictating terms to the conquered. And it is wonderful to see how many at the North are ready to fall back into their old habit of yielding to the arrogant demands of those haughty oligarchs. It is recorded of Scythian slaves that they fought their masters valiantly so long as the contest was carried on by the sword, but when their masters were shrewd enough to lay aside their swords and brandish whips, their former bondsmen, yielding to the force of habit, cowered before them, and were re-enslaved. The North has shown that it cannot be made to quail before the sword; it remains for time to show what effect the old brandishing of the whip will have upon their minds.

How is it that the South has been enabled thus to resume her menacing attitude? It is a question for the people to ponder well. The future of our country, for good or ill, depends upon

their standing firmly by the cause of universal freedom and impartial justice now. The test is being applied to them, to prove whether they really and truly believe in the principles they boast of before the civilized world. What a shameful farce, to talk of a republican form of government when millions of citizens are not allowed to vote for the government that taxes them and drafts them into its armies! And where they are forbidden to be jurors in courts that have over them the power of life and death!

The host that Europe pours upon our shores from its alms-houses and penitentiaries are entrusted with suffrage, and the young Republic proves strong enough to carry the weight without slackening its pace. But when it is proposed no longer to withhold that inalienable right from native-born laborers, who have fed us and fought for us, a hue and cry is raised that the Republic will be endangered.

The Hon. G.W. Julian has recently delivered a speech on amending the constitution, which is remarkably logical and concise, powerful and persuasive. At the close of it he says: "What we want, what the nation needs for its own salvation, is a constitutional amendment, or a law of Congress, which shall *guarantee* the ballot to the freedmen of the South. This is not simply his equal political right as a citizen, but his natural right as a man. A voice in the government which deals with property, liberty, and life is not a privilege, but a *right*, as natural and indefensible as life itself."

I have lately received a letter from Gen. Saxton, enclosing an account of the meeting of freedmen in Charleston to bid him farewell. It was planned and managed entirely by themselves, and does them great credit. Their utterance was evidently warm from their hearts, and the generous contributions from their scanty earnings to buy handsome testimonials of gratitude for their protector and benefactor indicate a hopeful degree of moral refinement. Why are men, on whose justice and kindness they have learned to rely – men like Gen. Saxton, Gen. Palmer, and Gen. Devens – removed from them at this perilous crisis? I know nothing of the officers who are to succeed them; but, whatever else they may be, they must be comparatively strangers to the colored people; and there is a good deal of truth embodied to good Father Abraham's homely saying, "It's bad to swap horses when crossing a stream."

As Gen. Devens has been unjustly accused of not efficiently protecting the colored soldiers in his Department of South Carolina, I am glad to find that Gen. Saxton considers his administration wise and impartial, and that he says he has received uniform support and aid from him. From others, who have the means of knowing, I also learn that he has been very just in maintaining the rights of the freedmen, very patient in listening to their troubles, and very kind in relieving their necessities. How could it be otherwise with a man who was willing to tax himself so heavily in atonement from wrong done to Thomas Sims?

This terrible war has developed many noble characters. Let us hope that there be salt enough in the Republic to save it.

L. Maria Child