

DR. OSGOOD'S LETTERS.—No. 3.

TO THE REV. RALPH EMERSON, D. D.

*Professor in the Theological Seminary at
Andover.*

Dear Brother—I once more return to your 5th letter, which contains matter of the greatest importance; and if the sentiments there advanced are correct, then, as I before said, the abolitionists are wrong in the measures they have adopted. You say, "If the north is ever to resume her moral influence on the South, it appears to me indispensable, that the South should again bear that same clear, harmonious, unbroken voice;" i. e. the voice "of every son of freedom at the north." "And the return of that voice I should expect the more speedily, if every society that wears either the name or the imputed character of anti-slavery, were disbanded and forgotten." In my former letter I showed, as I think, that the strength of this moral influence of the north over the south, on the subject of slavery, must have been very small; for notwithstanding its continual operation, as you assert, slavery has been increasing. Not a single revolting feature of the system has been softened or smoothed down. It has grown stronger by the tears and blood by which it is cemented. The piercing cry of suffering humanity, "so shrill and clear," is wasted on every breeze that blows over the cotton fields and the sugar plantations of the south. If our distance prevents us from hearing this cry, there are those, who are entitled to unbounded credit, who tell us that they have often heard it. But you do not expect to see the anti-slavery societies "disbanded." If I do not greatly mistake the

spirit which *begins* to be roused, at the north, many more of these societies will be formed, and thousands and tens of thousands, who have hitherto felt a great degree of indifference to the subject of slavery, will give in their names and become efficient helpers in the cause. I have occasionally been called to address an assembly of my fellow citizens in the towns adjacent to my own place of residence, and with the feeble powers of persuasion which I possess, I have not failed, in a single instance, of bringing some calm and considerate men to feel it their duty to join our ranks. In some instances the number has been doubled and quadrupled in the associations which already existed. I do not believe that the present state of feeling would ever have been produced without combined action; and if slavery is ever abolished in this country, it will be owing to the influence put forth by anti-slavery societies. In what way has slavery been abolished in the British West Indies? You will say by the action of Parliament. True, but what led Parliament to take this step? I answer, the voice of the People, (to use your own eloquent language) "that voice long so shrill, so clear, so unbroken, and in power like the sound of many waters," has at length been heard above the din and clamor with which interested men endeavored to drown it. But what has induced the people of the great Empire to utter this voice so unitedly? I answer the organized societies of the abolitionists. There was a period when a death-like silence as to the wrongs and woes of the slaves reigned in Great Britain. But a few warm-hearted Christian Philanthropists, such as Wilberforce, Clarkson, Andrew Thompson, Buxton, Stevens, McCauley and others of the same spirit formed themselves into a society. They denounced the system of Colonial slavery as unjust and oppressive. They collected a mass of evidence respecting the atrocities of the sys-

tem in the colonies, and spread this evidence before the public, until some feelings of commiseration were excited which led to further enquiry, and finally brought out the majority of the nation against the abominations. The same process was pursued there which is in operation here. They had the same difficulties to encounter that meet us in this country. There was an immense amount of interest embodied against them in the mother country. The friends of the slave were bitterly denounced as troublers of the land; their names were cast out as vile; affidavits were procured from the planters and magistrates in the islands to prove that most of the atrocities which were brought to view, were 'abolition lies'; in a word, sir, every thing was done which interest and selfishness and pride could effect, to keep the nation quiet, and destroy the efforts of the Philanthropists. If there had been no organization, the pro-slavery party would have triumphed. A half dozen individuals would have been driven from the field and silenced. There would not have been any public meetings, if there had not been associations. There would have been no opportunity to spread the most appalling and heart-rending facts before the community in a form which defied the base assaults of interested men. These *prime movers*, as they are called, wanted to know on what they could depend; they wished for an expression of the public mind; and they obtained it by their public meetings. I think that the same objection against anti-slavery societies which you bring forward, might have been urged against temperance societies. Indeed, they were urged by the opposers. And now I would ask, if you can suppose that such effects would have been produced in the community if there had been no associations. Did not ecclesiastical bodies pass strong resolutions in favor of temperance, and did not they sound

the alarm about the evils and dangers of intemperance? But very little was done to check the sin, until the *voluntary association principle* commenced. Not a fire was quenched under a distillery, nor a grog shop discontinued in a village, until the temperance reformers took high ground and represented the making and vending of ardent spirits, and the drinking of it too, as a beverage, a moral evil. This at first created a great ferment and led men to examine the subject in a new light, and the result has been most happy. I freely admit that there was some show of opposition to slavery before the organization of anti-slavery societies. Ecclesiastical bodies at the north passed resolutions *disapproving* of the system, and the famous declaration of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, to which you refer, went as far as any abolitionist would ask on the subject. If the members of these churches had acted up to the letter and spirit of that declaration, they would have taken the ground before the abolitionists of the north. Thousands of *respectable* men, including many ministers, must have abandoned the system or been disciplined as refractory members. But to what purpose was that declaration? Ministers and lay delegates who composed that body, returned home and added to the num-

ber of their slaves and continued to buy and sell in the market as before. It is evident, sir, that they considered their own declaration as a mere nullity, 'vox et preterea nihil.' Mark how they quarrel with it now, and threaten to nullify, if the assembly shall reassert what they once asserted. They now come out openly in defence of slavery, and no Presbytery within a slave state, dares to act upon that grave declaration of the General Assembly. I put the question to you, and if you shall deign to make a rejoinder to me, you may answer it if you please, would it be any great breach of charity to say that the slave holding members of that General Assembly were either "*insincere or self-deceived*" in that declaration? The consciences of slaveholders were not disturbed in the least by this famous act of the General Assembly. It is probable that not one in a thousand ever heard of it. It is almost certain that the ministers did not undertake to enforce it, neither is it probable that they commented on it in their pulpits. They were satisfied to have it appear upon their minutes, because it would tell well in their favor on the other side of the Atlantic, and in the northern states, where as you say, no pro slavery man could be supposed to exist. If the ministers had brought up that declaration for discussion, every slaveholder in the church would have revolted from their ministry. No, my dear Sir, the consciences of slaveholders were not disturbed until the abolitionists began to spread before the community the sin of holding men as mere chattels. So long as there remained a practical indifference to the subject, in the religious community, they remained at ease. So did Herod under the preaching of John while he confined his discourse to *generals*; but when he attacked his darling lusts, and denounced the judgment of God against him, he manifested his displeasure.

When we tell slaveholders that they are sinning against God by trafficking in human flesh, we summons up a witness in their own bosoms which exceedingly annoys them, and leads them to inquire if these things are so. You may be ready to ask why they have not found out the iniquity of their conduct before this? I ask in return, why good men of the north have not found it out long ago? They were not blinded by interest, and therefore were less likely to remain quiet. The influence of wealth in destroying the sensibility of conscience is known to every observer. Nothing perhaps has a more powerful influence in blinding the mind than slavery. John Newton made three voyages to the coast of Africa and kidnapped three cargoes of human beings and sold them into perpetual slavery, after he became a Christian; and he never once suspected the unlawfulness of the traffic, until he chanced to light upon Clarkson's tract, setting forth the iniquity of the slave trade. I verily believe there are many good men who still hold their fellow beings in bondage and still strive to think it is right. My charity will allow me to go great lengths in reference to these men.— But I believe further, that these men will not long sustain the relation they now hold to their slaves. They are troubled in mind, and the prejudices created by a thousand circumstances begin to give way. They begin to read extensively the discussions which are going on at the north. Irritated and vexed, I admit they may be, and they will join in the abuse which is every where poured forth against the abolitionists, by the apologists for slavery at the north;—but still they will read and ponder, and we have the most satisfactory evidence that numbers of this character, in the slave States, are on our side already, and many more are on the

point of turning to the truth. If Sir, "the
beau ideal" which you say "has been long
before your mind in respect to the mode in
which we may exert the best and strongest
influence in favor of emancipation," had
one half of the *reality*, which you suppose it
has, good men at the south would soon be
wholly on our side, & would raise their voi-
ces 'clear and shrill' against this "monstrous
offspring and curse of sin." I thank you
for the definition; I like it much. This
"beau ideal" shall furnish matter for a fu-
ture letter. With sincere respect, your
friend and brother,
S. OSGOOD.

Courtesy of the Museum of Springfield History, Springfield, MA