

THE CHRISTIANA RIOT

Its Causes and Effects, from a Southern Standpoint

In order to write history well, it is necessary that we shall do something more than merely record accomplished facts and deeds of note; we must let the reader understand the conditions that then existed, the environment of the time and place, the beliefs and prejudices, the customs and habits of the people that may have had vital influence upon or been the very causes and formed the ends of these notable deeds and achievements.

Therefore, to properly value and appreciate the full meaning of the little tragedy that took place at Christiana on September 9, 1851, and to know why it became a great national event of such importance, surrounded by, and as it were set, in greater and more momentous things that filled the stage of our national existence, and one of those that soon after led to that terrible tragedy of the Civil War, of which the Christiana riot was but a shadowy prelude, we must present those side views and environments.

That a man or two was killed or a few slaves should have escaped and fled, or the actors therein have been tried and failed of conviction, gives little enlightenment to the inquiring mind that asks why such trifles drove a great people into rebellion and fratricidal war.

If we would study and know broadly and understandingly we must go far outside of this little whirlpool, and get a true knowledge of the preceding and surrounding facts and conditions in the land of slavery.

There was, of necessity, two sides to it. My hearers of the Lancaster County Historical Society, in the main, have heard but one, or, if they have heard the other, it has been darkly and through glasses of long-standing contrary beliefs, so dark and thick that the full light could not enter.

I have, therefore, set for myself the task of putting before you the side of the slave holder, the Southern man, to this controversy; and I shall try to do it fairly and without prejudice. You, no doubt, may feel that I have overdrawn the picture in favor of the Southerner's position; I can assure you it will not be half so strongly put as were the real beliefs, feelings and doctrines that possessed the minds of those whose property and interests were most vitally affected by the underground railway, and its resultant corollary, the Christiana riot.

Therefore, let us go back to the earlier days of slavery first, and see why the institution did not seem to them the exceedingly reprehensible institution that many Northerners held it to be.

They could quote to you innumerable passages of Holy writ, in which slavery was apparently sanctioned and approved, and in no instance was it too strongly condemned therein, and never was it classed as a vice to shun nor held a virtue to abolish it. Nor had the terrible arraignment of it sometimes made by historians, poets and orators of the ancient Greeks and Romans so copiously quoted against the practice by Thaddeus Ste-

vens and other Abolitionists on the floor of the House any weight or force with them, for the very forcible reason that the slavery therein condemned was the slavery enforced upon an educated and accomplished people of races and nations usually equal to and often superior to that of their owners, into whose hands they had fallen as captives in the wage of battle, similar to the fate of the hero of a recent notable fiction, "Ben-Hur."

Such slaves, on account of previous cast and condition, and former life and habits, to whom slavery meant loathing humiliations and eventual death, could not for a moment be compared to the African slave rescued from the jungle and a life of barbarism, and transported into the midst of an enlightened, civilized and Christian land.

Nor yet could they be moved by the specious argument and long orations about the love of liberty in every man's breast, etc., etc., the liberty that was sought at Lexington and Bunker Hill, suffered for at Valley Forge, and finally accomplished at Yorktown; all such comparisons and effusions fell on deaf ears, and were only rated as so much bosh and silly buncombe; empty and meaningless; for full well they knew the negro slave did not, and could not, have a conception of such liberty, could not even grasp its meaning remotely, and it would be of no service to him if he possessed it. To be set free only meant to the black slave of the South freedom from obedience, from labor; and one grand, great holiday.

The colored man did not have then, nor has he learned by fifty years of freedom, the noble art of free government; nor has he to this period, with all the aid so freely given him, been

able to establish successfully a government of his own anywhere. Therefore, oratory and arguments of this kind were as so much chaff to the Southerner when applied to a race who had known no civilization and only reached its highest development in slavery. What were the actual facts and circumstances which brought the African black man to this country? What had he been in his own land? And what was his condition here in slavery; and what is it now? All of these are potent facts to be known and considered in any intelligent study of the slave owner's side of this question.

Whether or not he is an inferior race, the lowest of the five, we do not assert or discuss, but leave it to the fair judgment of all. But, certain it is, when snatched from his native land in the wilds of Africa he was a semi-barbarian, born and living in the crudest form of human existence, without any trace of training or civilization, no form of government deserving the name, a prey to stronger tribes and wild animals, and often famine and disease were his unhappy lot; any existence anywhere would seem to be a happy change from this condition, even viewed from a purely animal standard, to say nothing of a humanitarian or Christian viewpoint.

It may have been a crime to have carried him away in captivity and eventual slavery from this condition, but if it was, it was a crime that the Southern man had not been guilty of; and certainly the slave-holder in 1850 could not be held responsible for it morally, nor justly be made to suffer a loss financially therefore. The importation of slaves had ceased in all States long before the Christiana riot, and Virginia was one of the first to propose a law against their importa-

tion into the State; and when the riot took place but few of the original Africans were still living. If any such had been living, it is fair to presume not one of them would have been willing to return to freedom and his native land. But this traffic had been carried on mainly by foreigners under a foreign flag a half-century and more before, and, so far as any citizens of the United States were engaged in it, it is an admitted fact that it was done largely from the Northern ports of Boston, New York and Philadelphia.

Another matter to which due weight is seldom given is this: Why was it that slavery gained and held its firmest foothold in the Southern States? My brothers of the North can claim no superior virtue on the score, primarily, that but few slaves found homes north of the Mason and Dixon line; greater virtue and higher instincts on their part had nothing to do with it.

It was caused entirely by the laws of nature, modified to some extent by accident. As is well known, of the original thirteen States those of the South were settled and peopled almost exclusively by the English, a people of a temperate zone, and there was never a time afterwards when any other nationality in appreciable numbers entered this land as immigrants. At that early day, as at this, an Englishman could not stand or perform steady labor in the Southern clime; the heat and toil under a Southern sun made it impracticable, if not impossible, for the people who settled in any section south of the southern line of Virginia to perform hard manual labor, and even the cooler clime of that State was exceedingly trying on his constitution. Accident, as it were, early brought them the African slaves; who were, by birth and nature, especially adapted to that

clime; and who, at the same time, would suffer and eventually perish in the cold and snows of the north. The laws of nature inexorably ruled, that if African slave labor was to exist in this country it must be only in the South; for the white man could not labor in the South, and the black man, fresh from Africa, could not live in the North.

No other available labor was obtainable there, and none came to its ports. The Irishman and the peasantry of North Europe, especially the Saxon or German States, flocked into the North, and in the early days bore the heat and burthen of labor in city and country, and the North needed no other. The hard-working, energetic Irishman, and the patient, industrious German spurned the aid of a slave, because he and his lusty sons could do all the labor required in this temperate clime; under such conditions no slave was needed.

Next for an insight into the condition of life and servitude into which the vast majority of these eight million slaves existed.

I can candidly say that the true condition was never really understood, for it was systematically and grossly misrepresented by writers and speakers who made it their business to fight for the abolition of slavery. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in its main parts may have been true, and most likely was where it pictured the happy home of Eliza and Tom with their first master; but the balance, if true, was a rare exception to the rule.

Yet the general public North accepted these stories as representative of the true conditions, and acted accordingly.

It is safe to say that nine-tenths of the slaves who sought freedom by the underground railway of Lancaster

county were from the States of Maryland and Virginia; and I speak from personal knowledge of conditions prevailing there. But first there are a few basic facts which will throw much light and help very materially in arriving at a true conclusion as to what the general facts were, which I would fain call to your attention. The slave was property, and represented just so many dollars to his owner, for hire for his services, or for his labor on the farm of the owner. He was an exceedingly risky property. There was risk of permanent disease and death; there was risk of his running away; there was the ever-present increasing age and risk of injury or incapacity.

All these were to be guarded against if the owner should consult at all his own interest, even though he may have been devoid of any humanitarian or Christian feeling in the matter. That man would be short-sighted, indeed, who would risk the loss or diminution of the value of that property by overwork, lack of proper food or clothing, physical abuse or wanton injury to his slave by himself. How much less would he allow another who had hired that slave from him for a time to inflict any such injury to his property. Whippings, starvings, overwork or other wanton abuse were most likely to cause the ever ready runaway and a total loss of the property. In the case of a grown-up man or woman it would seldom bring good results, but rather breed sullenness, stubbornness, hatred and final revenge. Then why, under any dictation of sense or reason, would it be resorted to? As a matter of fact, it seldom was, and only in extreme cases of insubordination was it of any use, and in all my recollection I never saw a man or woman over eighteen years of age

whipped, with one exception. The usual punishment inflicted by law for larceny was a flogging of so many lashes, and that was done by a public official, and that was the case I saw.

The younger negroes were often whipped by the mistress of the house, just as in those good old days the maxim prevailed, "spare the rod and spoil the child," and white and black got it alike. Again, the slave owner was a small minority compared with the slave employer, the slave being a risky and uncertain property, and men of smaller means, the regular farmer who perhaps needed but from two to five servants on his farm and house, did not generally invest any of his capital in slaves for their loss would mean his financial embarrassment. He hired him from his owner, who was most likely a large slave owner. It is difficult to fix a price for the sale of a full-grown man, but it ran all the way from \$300 to \$1,000, the latter, however, an extreme price, and the average being perhaps \$350 to \$400, and the price of a woman varied much more, according to their accomplishments as cooks, housekeepers or lady's maids; but many women also worked in the fields, which labor they usually preferred. The hired wage for a year was from 15 to 20 per cent. of the value, and the employer was bound to furnish a certain standard of wholesome food, two suits of clothing, one each for winter and summer, the latter very cheap, the former rough, but warm; one hat and two pair of shoes, and the employer had to take all risk of sickness or runaways during the term.

Therefore, in the first place, the owner, for the good of his slave, insisted on and demanded good treat-

ment, plenty to eat and good clothing; while the employer was bound by his contract to furnish this he also had a selfish motive in getting the best service from his slave by feeding him well, fair-dealing and good treatment, and care for his health and strength. Indeed, it was no unusual thing, but rather the custom, for the employer to hire, year after year, the same help, and try to retain it by kindness and consideration. We, therefore, can readily see that, from a purely selfish motive, the colored slave was insured fair treatment by both owner and employer; but, over and above that, comes the human, Christian, charitable side.

The South, as is well known, was settled mainly by the better class of English population; scions, often of nobility, not being the eldest son, had to seek fortune in another land under the crown; soldiers of fortune, likewise of noble birth or breeding, whose first service was to their country in war or in the civil list, later got their reward in grants of land in the colonies and made for themselves homes all over Virginia and the South of baronial importance and extent; and their descendants clung faithfully to their ancestral homes, customs and habits, as they divided and subdivided these vast acres among themselves. So that the people of the South formed homes most frequently of education and refinement, and these homes were synonymous of love and romance, chivalry, refinement and honor. This is readily shown by the fact that novelists usually sought it for the scenes of their romances, and it is safe to say that until recent years 75 per cent. of all popular novels had their scenes laid in the South in slavery days. None was complete without its set-

ting of negro quarters, the faithful body servant, its black mammy, under whose faithful and loving care the belles grew to beautiful womanhood.

It is seldom you could find man or woman who was not proud to own their obligation to these old servants, and remember them kindly to their dying day. During the Civil War every advanced Southern officer had his black body servant as his orderly, and, though hardly a week would pass that this slave could not have readily crossed the lines into the enemy's territory to freedom in the North, yet it was but seldom such desertions took place. On the other hand, instances are legion in which he carried that master to safety when he had fallen desperately wounded, and either nursed him back to health as he guided his tottering footsteps homeward, or, if fate so willed, he reverently and tearfully helped to lay him in his last resting place, and hastened away, cherishing the last dying words, to carry them to a mourning mistress and family back home.

I feel that I knew them and their character well, as all of my earliest days were spent among them, and saw them at every turn, and in every condition of servitude, not only on my father's plantation, but in long visits made to young chums on many other plantations, and am glad to bear testimony to the virtues they possessed. Their fidelity to their masters was remarkable; and their happiness and contentment were known on every hand. No higher proof of both of these could be asked or given than the fact that throughout the war, when almost every able-bodied man was away in the army, for the last draft in the South took them as was said "from the cradle to the grave," had they chosen to

have arisen in rebellion or outbreak they would have outnumbered the men at home ten to one; yet not a single instance is recorded that anywhere, in all the South, did any such outbreaks occur, or by any action, either concerted or individually, did they show violence towards the women and children at home, left practically in their charge and at their mercy.

They were faithful to the end, and when Lee laid down his arms the great bulk of them welcomed home their defeated masters, and continued their service upon the same old plantations. I doubt if anywhere in this world's history such fidelity under such circumstances has ever been found. Still another most striking example is found in the fact that when John Brown made his raid on Harper's Ferry, and proclaimed and made known his purpose to the slaves of all that vicinity to set them free and arm them from the United States arsenal, to rise against their masters and fight for their liberty, not one slave responded to his call for freedom, but all were loyal then, as they were faithful afterwards, in their master's cause.

I need not tell this or any audience that the sweetest songs ever written in any land, are songs depicting the happiness of the negro slave in his Southern home. While the world of song shall live in America there cannot perish from its pages such melodies as "Suwanee River," "Old Black Joe," "My Old Kentucky Home," "I Am Going From the Cotton Fields," "Massah's in the Cold, Cold Ground," "I'se Working on the Levee," and a hundred minor melodies of a like tenor, and no men sing those songs with greater unction and music than this same black man of the South.

And, to a man who has heard the Southern slave singing in his quarters, in his little log church and his loved campmeeting, on the way to his work, the unequalled melody of that voice will, while memory lasts, give the everlasting lie to all stories of whippings, cruelty, oppression and wrongs which had been so freely poured forth by the writers and talkers of that day on this side of the line.

Such music does not, can not, come from a heart bending under oppression, cruelty, wrong and outrage. The word and theme of their own songs and composition, though often crude and quaint, never was of the sad or plaintive kind, but always joyous and triumphant. Deeply religious in their make-up, even to superstition, the promises of God, the love of the Saviour, fills their melodies. In this religious turn they were always given full sway and encouragement by their masters.

Their apparent confidence in salvation was like the faith of children of a larger growth, sure that it would come without good works.

Their most common transgressions were: Lying, to excuse a fault, and stealing something good to eat; of more serious crimes they were seldom guilty, profanity was seldom heard and drunkenness never, violent altercations, stabbings or fatal assaults among themselves were almost unknown.

Could that small and misguided band of people who felt it their duty in defiance of all justice and right to their Southern compatriot, as well as in defiance of the laws of the land, have known and felt the true conditions South, it seems impossible to believe that they would have continued in such acts, knowing as they did

it was at the eminent risk of violence and murder, and its final result a fratricidal war?

Some may not believe this was the condition, but I know whereof I am speaking. There undoubtedly were exceptions to the general conditions as above described, just as we of this county have innumerable divorces, cruelty and crimes at every Quarter Sessions Court; and yet we remain and are known as a righteous and law-abiding people.

It is true there was occasionally a "bad nigger" who committed crime of a gross nature, as there were also cruel and vicious masters who disregarded the rights of his slaves and his neighbors and served as a terrible example for the Abolition orators of the North to inflame the passions of the people; yet the great bulk of slaves and slave owners did lead a happy, contented and a virtuous life and dwelt in peace and harmony together.

Therefore, to draw our lesson from these facts, remembering that, as pictured above, the Southern slave owner saw the conditions, and it is neither strange or to be wondered at that he considered the Northern man who would help his slave to escape and give him aid, comfort and assistance on the way, was, as he actually was, a law-breaker, and his enemy. Naturally, the man South who preached secession got many hearers, for under these conditions the slave owner felt that justice was not to be had by him north of Mason and Dixon's line.

This was the temper of the Southern mind largely on that fateful September day in 1851, and, while it is true many slaves did escape and flee North, yet, even in the border States the percentage of escapes were comparatively low. However, these losses

to the individual owner were severe and not easily to be born, for remember his money and his property was in them, and the feeling that he had for the man, men or system that took them from him was about the same as that you would hold for the man who would steal your horse or burn your barn.

As it transpired, Edwin Gorsuch was a kind and indulgent master, of excellent family and standing in the community at that day, as are his descendants at this, and his three slaves had run off because they had stolen some wheat and feared the punishment provided by law in cases of larceny, a public flogging. He had been in communication with them, had sent them money and supplies, and had agreed that if they would return they would not be punished. He had been assured that if he came up for them they would return with him.

Therefore, when on that fatal morn, led on by Castnor Hanway and other of the Christiana riotors, this upright man, law-abiding citizen and man of prominence in his own State, while seeking to get into personal communication with his own slaves, hoping to persuade them to return with him, was shot down in cold blood, and after a trial had of those concerned it became evident that such a crime could be committed in the North, and go unpunished, and that a statute of the United States could be thus flagrantly transgressed and trampled under foot without punishment, the Southern mind became greatly inflamed, and the Christiana riot was largely the beginning of the end that led to the firing on Sumter, and the beginning of a terrible war.

The exact details of the riot or the trial it is not my purpose to discuss; whether the trial was rightly con-

ducted or honestly conducted, or the men were acquitted because of a partial and biased jury, is not my purpose to say; if the trial had been held in Baltimore instead of Philadelphia, it is likely quite a different result would have been had; therefore, it settled nothing.

The fact remains, and the lesson is clear, that this riot became a great factor in determining the course of hot-heads both North and South.

The fanaticism of a few men North who were determined to free the slave at any cost, be it life or treasure, was met by the hot-heads of the South, equally determined that they would leave the Union and destroy their country rather than yield to such methods and live under a government that could not, or would not, enforce its laws when slavery was concerned, and both were given a great weapon by the results of this riot.

The great bulk of the people, both North and South, saw the grave danger for the Ship of State ahead, and were extremely anxious to adjust matters that she might yet sail on serenely, and were steadily striving for that end when suddenly this grave menace arose in the path.

In the South passions were inflamed, and the total failure to punish the participants raised in their breasts a feeling that their rights had been and would continue to be ruthlessly trampled upon in such cases. In the North encouragement was given to those who for years had been aiding in the escape of fugitive slaves, and the work went on all the more industriously. Statesmen and the great political leaders both North and South saw their efforts to adjust and finally settle this great question with justice to the slave owner, freedom eventually to the slave, and the union and

peace of the country preserved, woe fully weakened by the Christiana riot. After it, war and secession loomed up dark and ominous; and after it the task of the statesmen and leaders, and of the wise, cool heads everywhere, became far more difficult.

Under such conditions this fatal outbreak became more than a riot and most serious breach against the peace and dignity of the Commonwealth and its people; it became a crime against the very life of the nation itself, not so willed, perhaps, or intended by those who were the most active participants therein, yet such it was, and the best that can be said of them is: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The political life of every nation is too often marked by such untoward events. Passion and prejudice too often rule where reason and justice should hold sway, and all too often the fairest hopes of the nation are wrecked by such lawless happenings.

Fifty years in our nation's life have softened us and helped us to forget the vengeful feelings of those days and times; the sacrifice of a hundred thousand lives has atoned for the sins and blunders of those hapless years; so let us together thank the Highest Providence, who has ever guided us into the light from darkness, that we can again gather from the North and the South, on that self-same spot, to recall and record the facts of this dark tragedy there enacted, as both have viewed it in a happy reunion, without passion and without prejudice, once again and forever one people, one Union, one nation, united and indissoluble.

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